

TWO-WAY CHECKBACK

Two-Way Checkback (a/k/a 2-Way NMF) is a replacement for "new minor checkback" and is played by a majority of experts in one form or another. What is presented here is a basic version that covers all of the common situations while being easy on the memory.

Before we consider the details, let's do what we always should do when considering any new convention by answering the following questions: (1) What do we gain by playing this convention? and (2) What do we give up when we play this convention?

In summary, Two-Way Checkback gains by giving responder a way to show a game-forcing hand, an invitational hand, or just a part-score hand. Often, you can invite at the 2-level and stop low when the answer is "no," instead of inviting at the 3-level and going down.¹

What we give up is the ability to play 2♣. In other words, we don't lose much. So let's play it!

Two-Way Checkback applies in two basic situations:

- (1) After a 1-of-a-minor opening, a response of 1-of-a-major, and a 1NT rebid..... e.g., 1♣-1♠, 1NT or 1♦-1♥, 1NT (but not 1♣-1♦, 1NT)
- (2) After 1♥-1♠, 1NT.

The basic structure of Two-Way Checkback is simple. After opener rebids 1NT, responder:

- Bids 2♦ (artificial) to force to game
- Bids 2♣ (artificial) to invite game (or to stop in specifically 2♦)
- Bids 2♥, 2♠, or 3♣ to play in a part-score

¹ In "new minor checkback," it's not clear from the initial checkback bid whether responder is forcing to game or just starting an invitation. This often forces the auction to the 3-level and creates vagueness that can be hard to deal with.

After opener's 1NT rebid, responder takes two steps:

- (1) Evaluate your hand in the context that partner has 11+-14 HCP balanced to decide whether your hand is game forcing, invitational, or just a part-score.
- (2) Start on a bidding path that fits the category of your hand – game force (2♦), invitational (2♣), or part-score – and then proceed accordingly.

The 2♦ Game Force

Remember, opener's 1NT means that he has balanced hand in the range of 11+-14 HCP (yes, there are times when opener might have a singleton in the suit that responder bid, but opener should be very selective about doing that).

In general, responder almost always needs an opening hand of his own to force to game. Here is a good rule of thumb – if responder doesn't have a hand that he would open in first chair, then he probably has less than a game-force over opener's 1NT rebid.

If responder has an opening hand, he usually will say so by bidding 2♦ -- artificial game force – directly over the 1NT rebid. Now, both partners know they are in a 100% game force, and the bidding can proceed naturally and descriptively from there. (Sometimes, responder will have a big distributional hand that merits a jump over 1NT. Those hands will be discussed below.)

Examples (the bidding has started 1♣-1♠, 1NT) –

♠ KJTxx ♥ Qxx ♦ AJx ♣ Qx – Bid 2♦ to set up a game force and find out whether we have a spade fit.

♠ AJTxx ♥ KTxx ♦ Axx ♣ x – Bid 2♦ to set up a game force and find out whether we have a fit in spades or hearts (or both).

♠ AQTx ♥ KQx ♦ x ♣ KJxxx – Bid 2♦ to set up a game force. There is no major-suit fit, but you are going to bid 3♣ next (game forcing!). We may be

able to avoid 3NT when partner has flimsy diamonds, and we may even find a 6♣ slam.

♠ AJxx ♥ QTx ♦ KJxx ♣ Qx – Bid 3NT. There no major-suit fit. You know you are going to 3NT, so just bid it. Don't mess around with a convention when it is not going to help you.

What does opener do after the 2♦ game force? First, she looks at her major-suit holdings. If she has 3-card support for responder's major, she shows that. If she has four cards in an unbid major, she shows that. If she has both of those, she shows hearts first (just like in Stayman).

Examples (the bidding has started 1♣-1♥, 1NT) –

♠ KJx ♥ Kxx ♦ Jx ♣ AJ9xx – Bid 2♥ to show your 3-card support.

♠ KJxx ♥ Jx ♦ AJx ♣ KTxx – Bid 1♠ to show your 4-card suit (and deny 3-card heart support).²

♠ QJ9x ♥ Qxx ♦ KQx ATx – Bid 2♥ to show your heart support. If responder wants to know about spades, she can bid 2♠ next, and you will raise.

If responder lacks a major-suit holding to show, she makes the most descriptive possible rebid. Usually, this is 2NT, but sometimes responder can do something more descriptive. Opener should avoid jumping to 3NT, because this takes away 3-level bidding space that responder may have been planning to use.

Examples (the bidding has started 1♦-1♠, 1NT-2♦) –

♠ Ax ♥ Qx ♦ AT9xx ♣ QJxx – Bid 3♣ to show your second suit and imply diamond length, too. It's also a good idea not to get locked into NT with this iffy heart stopper. Show your suits. You might reach a good slam in a minor or stay out of a doomed 3NT contract.

² After 1♦-1♥, you can bypass a 4-card spade suit and limit your hand when you are very NT oriented – with a hand that looks better for suit play, you can bid 1♠ instead of 1NT).

♠ Kx ♥ Txx ♦ AQJ9x ♣ Kxx – Bid 3♦ to show your excellent 5-card suit. Again, the hearts are questionable for 3NT. Tell partner about your hand, and the partnership will figure it out from there.

After opener has replied to the 2♦ game force, her hand is pretty well defined. If responder wants to probe further, he bids naturally and descriptively..... and opener will continue naturally and descriptively. Both partners are secure in the knowledge that the bidding is not going to stop until game (and sometimes slam) is reached.

The 2♣ Game Invitation

If responder has a game-invitational hand – again keeping in mind that opener has 11+-14 HCP balanced – he will start with the 2♣ game invitation (unless he has a straightforward 2NT invitation).

After you've had a little experience with Two-Way Checkback, you will find that there are two types of invitational hands: (1) those with about 11 HCP that may not be right for 2NT and (2) hands with 9 or 10 HCP that contain extra distributional strength, such as two 5-card suits or 6-4 shape.

When responder starts with 2♣, opener must bid 2♦ – period! Opener doesn't even have to look at her hand – she just bids 2♦ and awaits further developments. In a minute you will see why.

Examples (the bidding has started 1♦-1♠, 1NT) –

♠ KJ9xx ♥ Jx ♦ QJxx ♣ Kx – Bid 2♣, planning to bid 2♠ (invitational) over opener's mandatory 2♦ bid.

♠ ATxx ♥ x ♦ KQxxx ♣ Qxx – Bid 2♣, planning to bid 3♦ (invitational) over opener's mandatory 2♦ bid.

♠ KT9xx ♥ QJxx ♦ Jx ♣ Ax – Bid 2♣, planning to bid 2♥ (invitational with 4+ hearts and therefore 5 spades) over opener's mandatory 2♦ bid.

♠ AQTxxx ♥ x ♦ xx ♣ KTxx – Bid 2♣, planning to jump to 3♠ (strongly invitational with a 6-card suit) over opener's mandatory 2♦ bid. The nice suit

and extra shape justify the jump invitation. With 6-3-2-2 shape, you would bid 2♣, then 2♠ to issue a gentler invitation.

♠ AJ9xx ♥ KQxxx ♦ Jx ♣ x – Bid 2♣, planning to jump to 3♥ (strongly invitational with 5-5 in the majors) over opener's mandatory 2♦ bid. The good suits and extra shape justify the jump invitation. Change the Q of hearts to the J, and you would bid 2♣, then only 2♥ to invite.

♠ KQTxx ♥ Jxx ♦ Qx ♣ Kxx – Bid 2♣, planning to bid 2NT (invitational with 5 spades and a balanced 11 HCP) over opener's mandatory 2♦ bid. Going this route implies that you have 5 spades – otherwise, you would have bid 2NT over opener's 1NT rebid.³

Are you getting the idea that opener absolutely must bid 2♦ over responder's 2♣ bid here? That's right – opener has no choice.

Here's why. The bidding starts 1♦-1♠, 1NT, and responder holds ♠ QTxx ♥ x ♦ QJxx ♣ Kxxx. Responder tried for a spade fit, but it didn't work out. Now, it's clear that 2♦ is a safer contract, especially at IMPs (and especially if a 1♣ opening could be short and a 1♦ opening promises 4+ diamonds). Responder can't bid 2♦ -- that would be an artificial game force. But she can bid 2♣ and require opener to bid 2♦.... which she then can pass! Voila, a nice stop in 2♦ – but only if opener follows the rules and bids 2♦ over 2♣.

Try this one. The bidding starts 1♣-1♥, 1NT, and responder holds ♠ J ♥ KTxx ♦ QTxxxx ♣ xx. The last thing responder wants to do is leave opener stuck in 1NT. Opener has 2-3 diamonds, and a diamond partial should play very nicely. Responder bids 2♣, opener bids 2♦ as required, and responder passes! Another nice stop.

Let's say the auction has progressed to the point where responder has bid 2♣ (requiring a 2♦ bid by opener) and then has made some sort of invitation. Now it's up to opener to decide.

³ This is a lot like the auction 1NT-2♥ (transfer), 2♠-2NT, where opener can sit for 2NT, correct to 3♠, or carry on to 3NT or 4♠.

If opener is accepting the invitation, he usually just places the contract. Every once in a while, opener might hedge, such as by raising a 2♥ or 2♠ invitation to 3♥ or 3♠, leaving the final decision to responder.

If opener is rejecting the invitation, he usually either passes or, if responder has shown two suits, takes a simple preference to one of those suits. In general, it is a bad idea for opener to try to escape to 2NT and, if responder is distributional, opener's jumping to 3NT may not work out very well either. Therefore, over a 2-level invitation, opener's 2NT says, "My hand isn't minimum, and I would be happy if you could carry on to 3NT, but I'm leaving you room to show a distributional hand."

Examples (the bidding has started 1♦-1♠, 1NT-2♣, 2♦-2♠) –

♠ Qx ♥ JTxx ♦ KQTxx ♣ Ax – Pass. Responder has invited with 5+ spades, and opener wants to reject the invitation (no spade fit, minimum values). A 2♠ part-score should play just fine (and opener should reject any urge to correct to 2NT, which shows more than a minimum hand).

♠ xx ♥ AJxx ♦ KQxx ♣ Kxx – Pass. Partner has 5+ spades and an invitational hand. You don't have a spade fit, and your hand is nothing special. One advantage of Two-Way Checkback is being able to invite safely at the 2-level, so take advantage of that by passing now. Few things in bridge are worse than turning down a 3-level invitation and then going down one!

♠ Jxx ♥ Kxx ♦ ATxx ♣ Axx – Pass. You have a spade fit, but your hand is minimum and flat. Be glad you are playing a system that lets you invite at the 2-level and stop there when it's right.

♠ Qxx ♥ Axx ♦ AJxx ♣ Kxx – Bid 4♠. Partner invited with 5+ spades, and you have a fit and a maximum. Change your K of clubs to the Q, and you would bid 3♠, leaving the decision to partner.

♠ Q ♥ Axx ♦ ATxxx ♣ QTxx – Pass. You should have rebid 2♣, rather than 1NT with a singleton. Don't compound the felony by running to 2NT now, because 2NT says you are not minimum.

♠ Kx ♥ QTxx ♦ ATxx ♣ Axx – 2NT. If responder has a normal 11-HCP invitation, he knows you are non-minimum, and he will bid game. If he has a distributional invitation with borderline HCP based on 5-5 shape, he will bid his second suit, and you will let him play it there. Don't punish partner for inviting with a shapely hand.

♠ Qx ♥ KJxx ♦ KQxx ♣ Kxx – 2NT. Same explanation as the hand above. This time, if partner pulls to second suit, it is even clearer to drop him, because your hand is soft and has no aces.

Pulling 1NT to a Part-Score

You are responder, and partner has rebid 1NT. You have looked at your hand and decided you want to play in a part-score.

We have seen already how to escape from 1NT to 2♦ -- just bid 2♣ and then pass opener's required 2♦ bid. When he sees your 2♣ bid, he will think you are going to invite him, but your pass of 2♦ will make things clear.

If you want to play in a major at the 2-level, bid it. Partner will know you are not inviting game at all.

If you have both majors and want partner to pick the better fit, then bid 2♥. Even though you have changed suits, opener will know that you are not trying for game, because you didn't start with 2♣ or 2♦.

If you have lots of clubs and want to play a part-score in that suit, you have to bid 3♣. This is a 100% signoff that says, "I want to stop in 3♣, please." You wish you could bid 2♣ to play, but that bid means something else. This seldom comes up, but if the opening bid was 1♣ and responder holds something like ♠ Axxx ♥ x ♦ Jxx ♣ QTxxx, it's a good bet that 3♣ is safer than 1NT (the singleton heart is sure to be a problem in NT). Similarly, if the opening bid was 1♦ and responder holds something like ♠ x ♥ Qxxx ♦ Qx ♣ QT9xxx, you would rather play in 3♣, where your clubs will take tricks, than 1NT, where your clubs are likely to be stranded without an entry.

Jump Rebids After 1NT

Sometimes it pays to jump after opener's 1NT rebid if the jump gives opener a very nice picture of responder's hand. There is no need to jump to set up a force – responder has a convenient, low-level 2♦ bid for that. The jump shows extra shape, often with slam interest.

We saw above that a jump to 3♣ is to play. If responder has a strong hand that includes clubs, he has to start with 2♦ and then rebid 3♣.

All other jumps are strong and descriptive. Here are some examples (the bidding has started 1♦-1♠, 1NT) –

♠ KQJTxx ♥ Axx ♦ Ax ♣ Kx – Jump to 3♠. This tells opener that “spades are trumps” and suggests slam interest. Opener can bid 3NT or 4♠ to show a mediocre hand. If he bids any suit besides spades, it is a control bid showing a hand that is willing to cooperate toward slam. (Note: Opener may not bid 4NT over 3♠. Responder may have slam interest, but that is not guaranteed.)

♠ AKxx ♥ x ♦ KJxxx ♣ Kxx – Jump to 3♦. Let opener know that there is a big diamond fit, and you have doubt whether 3NT is the best contract (because of your singleton heart).

♠ AKxx ♥ x ♦ KQxxx ♣ Axx – Jump to 3♦. Even if opener tries to stop in 3NT, you are not going to let it go without making a serious try for slam.

♠ AQTxx ♥ KQ9xx ♦ Ax ♣ x – Jump to 3♥. This shows a game forcing hand with at least 5-5 in the majors.

After 1♥-1♠, 1NT

So far, we have focused on auctions that start with a 1♣ or 1♦ opening. The same structure works well when the bidding starts 1♥-1♠, 1NT. Responder can start with 2♦ to set up a game force, 2♣ to invite (or stop at 2♦), or bid 2♥, 2♠, or 3♣ to play. Jumps after the 1NT rebid are natural, game-forcing, and descriptive, often a precursor to a slam try (other than 3♣, which is to play).

What If Responder Is a Passed Hand

If responder is a passed, it is better to keep the Two-Way Checkback structure intact, anyway. It is easier on the memory that way. Some experts modify Two-Way Checkback when responder is a passed hand, and they also play a more complicated structure. Leave that to the experts -- keep it simple, at least until this system has become second nature to you.

Don't Forget to Alert

All of the non-natural bids described above – including the 2♣ and 2♦ bids over 1NT and the 2♦ response to 2♣ – are alertable. The jump to 3♣ as a signoff is also an alert.