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This Week in Bridge

(340) Unbalanced 2-Suited Opening Hands

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Level: 3 of 10 (1 of 6)

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General

As Opener when we have a 2-suited hand it is often far more difficult to describe it to partner. When we hold this type of hand, we must try to communicate both our second suit and our strength (bucket) to partner, but there are still a large variety of strengths (S, M, L, or XL) and a large variety of distributions possible. We cannot distinguish all of these hands from each other in just two bids. This makes these 2-suited opening hands some of the most difficult to handle in all of bridge. Let's take a look at our options for how to describe these different hands.

Possible Shapes

2-suited hands that are unbalanced are defined as having two long suits – one of 5+cards and one of 4+cards.

Higher Longer OR Equal

5-4

5-5

6-4

6-5

7-4

6-6

7-5

8-4

7-6

8-5

Lower Longer

4-5

4-6

4-7

5-6

5-7

5-8

6-7

Note: There are some hands that do not fall into any perfect categories.

- *5422 hand (semi-balanced 2-suiter) is one that can be treated as balanced or as a 2-suiter, based on the location of our honors.*
- *4441 hands are "3-suited". These are some of the most difficult hands in bridge. We tend to treat them as unbalanced hands, but nothing is easy.*
- *5440 hands are both "2-suited" and "3-suited" - these are usually treated as unbalanced hands.*



When bidding with a 2-suited hand our normal bidding process is to start with our higher-ranking suit when that is longer, or when we have equal length suits, and to start with our lower-ranking suit only when it is longer. As we can see from the list above, there are a large number of possible shapes that we can hold and that makes these 2-suited hands difficult to describe.

Longer Higher-Ranking Suit or Equal Length Suits (“Normal” Shape)

Let’s consider the hands with a higher ranking 5+card suit. Generally, we bid this suit first and rebid our second suit later.

Example 1

With a 5-card ♠ suit and a 4-5card ♣ suit, here is how we bid:

1♠ 1NT

___?

- 2♣ Small (12-14 pts) or Medium (15-17 pts).
- 3♣ Large (18-19 pts) or XL (20-21 pts)

A large variety of shapes are possible (5-4, 5-5, 6-4, 6-5, etc.)

As we can see at this point in the auction (no matter if we rebid 2♣ or 3♣) there is still a tremendous variance in Opener’s hand, both in terms of strength and shape. This is an example of why 2-suited hands are generally more difficult to describe.

Example 2 - Small

♠ AQ872

♥ 8

♦ K63

♣ A952

1♠ 1NT

2♣ 2♠

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Here we show both of our suits and when partner makes a “preference” to 2♠, we pass.



Example 3 – Medium

♠ AQ872
♥ 8
♦ AK3
♣ A952
1♠ 1NT
2♣ 2♠
2NT

Here we have enough values that we wanted to jump to 3♣, but were not quite strong enough (a 2.5♣ rebid). We start with a 2♣ rebid and then later show extra values (about 16-17 pts) with our third bid – 2NT in this case.

Example 4

♠ AQJT83
♥ 8
♦ A6
♣ J952
1♠ 1NT
2♠

Here we have a 2-suited hand, but with an excellent 6-card Major and a weak 4-card minor we treat this as a 1-suited hand and rebid our long ♠ suit.

Longer Lower-Ranking Suit (“Reverse” Shape)

When our longest suit (primary) is lower-ranking than our secondary suit then things get even more complicated. Depending on what our suits are and how the auction progresses, to bid our second suit we may need to reverse or jump shift to describe our hand.

Example 5

1♣ 1♦
___?
• 1♠ Small (12-14 pts) or Medium (15-17 pts)
• 2♠ Large (18-19 pts) or XL (20-21 pts)

Here we can bid our second suit (4-card ♠ suit) at the 1- or 2-level. This allows us to show it cheaply with a Small or Medium strength opening and jump to 2♠ with a strong one (Large or XL). This auction shows an unbalanced hand (usually at least 4-5 shape).



Example 6

1♣ 1♠
2♥

Our only way of showing a second suit of ♥ in this auction is to reverse. This shows an excellent hand (usually about 17+points) and at least 4-5 distribution in our suits (with longer ♣).

In the next example, we cannot bid our suit and keep the auction at the 1-level. In fact, since our second suit is higher-ranking than our first, then bidding it at the 2-level drives the auction to the 3-level if partner returns to our ♦ suit. This makes our second bid a reverse and it is why it promises these extra values. Sometimes we do not have enough values to show our second suit and we must find a “lie” with our second bid.

Example 7

♠ 8
♥ KJ94
♦ AQT52
♣ K64
1♦ 1♠
__?

Here we rebid 2♦ because we do not have enough values to reverse into 2♥. In general, we try to lie about minors, not Majors, and thus we rebid 2♦ treating our good 5-card ♦ suit like a 6-card suit.

Problem Rebids

With a 2-suited hand that has a 4-card ♦ suit and a 5-card ♣ suit (and not enough value to reverse) we can have a problem rebid if we start the auction in the “normal” way by opening with 1♣.

Example 8

♠ 8
♥ AQ5
♦ AQ94
♣ J8532

If we open 1♣ and hear partner respond 1♠, we have no good rebid. To avoid this problem, we choose to show this hand as the minors without reversing – by opening 1♦ and rebidding 2♣. Partner will think we are 5-4 or 5-5 in the minors (when we are actually 4-5), but that seems like the smallest lie on this hand (this is the idea of the “prepared rebid”), and partner knows that we may have been facing this problem.



Conclusion

When we pick up a 2-suited hand we first must make a plan for how to describe it. If it is 5422, we may choose to treat it as balanced (planning to bid NT at some point in the auction) or unbalanced (planning to bid both of our 2 suits). In general, 2-suited hands are difficult to describe because we must show our primary suit (plus any additional length), our secondary suit (plus any additional length), and our “bucket” (Small, Medium, Large, Extra Large). This is a lot of information to communicate to partner and frequently it takes more than two bids to properly do so. Try to be patient with these hands and know that other players are struggling with these hands just as much as you are.