



Intermediate- Lesson 31

Bidding Strong Hands – The 2♣ Opening Bid

We saw in our lesson on Weak Twos why it's a great idea to adopt a system of opening 2♦, 2♥, or 2♠ on weak hands with a 6-card suit; we explored how to use weak twos, both as opener and responder, and even how to defend against them when they're bid against us.

But now that we're not playing Strong Twos anymore, we need a way of opening the bidding when we pick up a very strong hand. We have two options for a strong opening bid: 2NT and 2♣.

Last time we looked at the opening 2NT- when to use it, and how best to respond to it. This time we're looking at the 2♣ opening bid. We will explore

- What types of hand are suitable to open 2♣?
- How do we respond to a 2♣ opening bid, and continue the bidding to give us the best chance of ending up in the optimum contract?

Because this is quite a meaty topic, with some new concepts involved, we can't cover it in one lesson, so we'll tackle it over two weeks. In this lesson, (the 2♣ opener) we will look at how to assess whether your hand is suitable to open 2♣, but we won't dwell too much about the responses and how to continue the bidding.

Next time, in Lesson 32, we'll look at how best to respond when partner opens 2♣, and how the bidding might proceed from there.

What sort of hand would we need to open 2♣?

The first thing to note is that opening 2♣ is forcing for one round.

It is the only opening bid where we know 100% we are going to get a chance to bid again – if you open 2♣ and your LH opponent passes, your partner MUST bid, even with absolutely nothing!

Therefore, to open 2♣, you need a very strong hand.

But how strong?

To get a handle on that, we need to consider that, when playing 2♦, 2♥, or 2♠ as weak, we need to use the 2♣ opener to cover two types of hand. We need to use our second bid to tell partner which type of hand we have.

- Type 1: The balanced /semi balanced powerhouse, ie 23+ HCP. This is the same sort of hand you would open 2NT, except it's too strong in HCP for that.
- Type 2: The shapely hand, where its trick taking potential is a mix of high card strength and shape- you will usually have one very good suit, or sometimes two good suits.

If we hold a hand of Type1, we will open 2♣, then bid NT on our second bid. This tells partner that our 2♣ was based on a balanced/ semi-balanced hand with 23+ points. It follows that this aspect of opening 2♣ is quite straightforward – it's mostly about arithmetic.

But if we hold a hand of Type 2, a shapely hand, the judgement about whether to open 2♣ is usually a lot more nuanced. What do we need? If your hand's strength depends on shape and one (or two) good suits, rather simply a powerhouse of points, it can be quite tricky to judge whether your hand is good enough to open 2♣. On the one hand, you don't want your opening bid to be passed out, and 2♣ is a guarantee that won't happen. On the other hand, your partner might be very weak and have no support for your suit, and you don't want your bidding to get carried away and end up too high.

To help here, there are some very useful tests you can apply to your hand to give you a good idea whether your hand merits a 2♣ opening bid:

1. Playing tricks
2. Quick tricks
3. Losing tricks
4. The “2 queens” test

Let’s have a look at each of these in turn.

The “playing tricks” test:

“Playing tricks” is the number of tricks you’d **expect** your hand to make, with no help from partner’s hand, assuming your intended suit is trumps, and assuming the missing cards break reasonably.

As a first rule of thumb, you need 8 ½ playing tricks in a major, and 9 ½ in a minor, to open 2♣.

For example

♠ A Q 2 ♥ K Q J 10 7 3 2 ♦ 3 ♣ A 2

You have only 16 HCP, but would count this as 8 ½ playing tricks playing in hearts: the ♣A and 6 heart tricks (assuming you lose only the A in hearts), plus 1½ tricks for the ♠AQ. So, using the playing tricks test, this is good enough to open 2♣.

♠ 2 ♥ A K 7 ♦ K Q 9 8 7 6 5 4 ♣ 2 12 HCP

You would count this as 9 playing tricks: the ♥ AK plus 7 diamonds- even though you’re missing ♦A J 10 3 2, the likelihood, though not certain, is you would lose only the ace. However, you’d want 9 ½ playing tricks in a minor. On the playing tricks test, this is not quite good enough to open 2♣, and you’d be better to open 1♦.

The “quick tricks” test:

You might not have come across the Quick Tricks concept before. It is often used as a measure of the “defensive strength” of a hand.

You count **only** the following

2 for an AK 1½ for AQ 1 for an A 1 for a KQ ½ for Kx

As a second rule of thumb, you need at least 3½ (and preferably 4 or more) quick tricks to open 2♣.

If we look at our same two hands from before:

♠ A Q 2 ♥ K Q J 10 7 3 2 ♦ 3 ♣ A 2

counts as 3 ½ quick tricks – borderline, but just about OK for opening 2♣.

♠ 2 ♥ A K 7 ♦ K Q 9 8 7 6 5 4 ♣ 2

counts as 3 quick tricks – not quite good enough for opening 2♣.

The “losing tricks” test:

We should all be familiar with losing trick count, which we covered in Lesson 17. Here, we are going to count our losing tricks assuming our longest/best suit is trumps:

Again, looking at our two hands from before:

♠ A Q 2 ♥ K Q J 10 7 3 2 ♦ 3 ♣ A 2

♠ 2 ♥ A K 7 ♦ K Q 9 8 7 6 5 4 ♣ 2

Both hands count as 4-loser hands, the first with hearts as trumps, the second with diamonds.

How to use this information?

As a third rule of thumb, you want at least as many quick tricks as you have losers to open 2♣.

Hand 1 has 3 ½ quick tricks and 4 losers; hand 2 has 3 quick tricks and 4 losers.

We have worked out that our hand 1 has passed test 1 (playing tricks), just passed test 2 (quick tricks), but failed test 3 (QUICK TRICKS >= LOSING TRICKS). We are doubtful about opening 2♣.

Our hand 2 has failed on every count, so we are clear NOT to open 2♣.

The “two queens” test:

The fourth rule of thumb is: if partner turns up with only 2 queens, do we still want to be in game?

Here are our same two example hands:

♠ A Q 2	♥ K Q J 10 7 3 2	♦ 3	♣ A 2
♠ 2	♥ A K 7	♦ K Q 9 8 7 6 5 4	♣ 2

In hand 1, I hope you’d say yes, I’d want to be in 4 hearts. With partner holding the ♣Q, you’d be unlucky to lose more than 3 tricks. The chances of both the missing K♠ and K♣ being “wrong” is 25%.

With hand 2, you’d say no!

5♦ is going to fail, losing at least the 3 missing aces.

How are we going to use these methods of hand evaluation, to decide whether to open 2♣ or bid something else? In general, start with counting your playing tricks. If you have 8½ (major suit) or 9½ (minor suit), opening 2♣ is a possibility.

Now count your quick tricks. If 3 or less, don’t open 2♣. If 4+ quick tricks, you’re almost certain to be right to open 2♣.

If you have 3½ quick tricks, consider the other tests.

Your hand doesn’t have to pass every test to open 2♣. But if it fails on playing tricks or quick tricks, avoid the 2♣ opener, and find another bid – normally 1 of a suit. (Though holding an 8-card major, and a hand that doesn’t qualify for 2♣, opening 4 of the major is often a great option).

Follow these guidelines and you shouldn’t go far wrong.

Responding to partner’s 2♣ opening bid

Next time, in Lesson 32, we’ll explore in detail how to respond to partner’s opening 2♣ bid.

However, I do need to talk today about a very common scenario, where you have a weak hand (typically 7 points or less) opposite partner’s opening 2♣.

Here, your bid is 2♦. In our system, this says nothing about your diamond holding – it says, “I am too weak to say anything else, but I was forced to make a bid”.

If opener then rebids 2NT (the sequence is 2♣ – 2♦ – 2NT) what is she is telling you?

That her hand is balanced/semi-balanced with 23+ points.

You now have **exactly the same options** you would have had if partner had **opened** 2NT, except allowing for the extra point count of 23+.

- Pass – but only after the sequence 2♣ – 2♦ – 2NT (the ONLY non-forcing rebid by opener)

- 3♣ is Stayman, looking for a major suit fit

- 3♦ is a transfer to ♥

- 3♥ is a transfer to ♠

- 3♠ shows 5 spades and asks partner to raise to 4♠ with 3+ spades, otherwise bid 3NT.

- 3NT is to play.

This is exactly as we described in Lesson 30, when we discussed the opening 2NT and responses.

On very rare occasions opener will rebid 3NT. The sequence is 2♣ – 2♦ – 3NT. It is indeed rare, but it will happen from time to time. Here the 3NT rebid says “I have a balanced hand and enough for 3NT on my own, even if you have nothing”. It requires 25+ points, or maybe fewer points with a solid running suit and a stop in all the others. You will need to decide how to respond. But you’re already in game, so anything you bid over partner’s 3NT is a slam try.

This lesson has covered a lot of ground, with some concepts that might be new to you, and we haven't yet got to describing a system for responding to a 2♣ opening bid (except the negative 2♦)
That will be for next time – Lesson 32: Responding to Partner's 2♣ Opening Bid.

In our final two lessons, 33 and 34, we will also explore some aspects of slam bidding, such as asking for aces. Once we've covered those, you should have all the tools you need to bid strong hands effectively and get some great results.

