

Basic idea. This system covers the sequences $1\clubsuit$ (any 16^+ HCP) – $1\heartsuit^+$ (GF). (A GF response requires 2 AK; see “Controls.”) The $1\clubsuit$ opener is now the *relayer* or *asker* and will continue making the cheapest available bid (with two exceptions, see below) until able to place the contract. The other hand is called the *relay responder* and makes a sequence of descriptive bids (separated by semicolons here). Ideally, the relayer will be the declarer and the defenders will have no information about the closed hand; hence “transfer-oriented.”

Very Important Exceptions (signoffs). If the relayer bids 3NT, that is always to play. A bid of $4\heartsuit$ by the relayer is the *end signal*: responder bids $4\heartsuit$ whereupon the relayer places the contract. But with a very good hand responder can bid over 3NT or $4\heartsuit$ showing controls, starting with $4\clubsuit/4\spadesuit = 4$ AK. (See “Controls.”) When the next step is 3NT or $4\heartsuit$, relayer can continue relays by bidding one step higher instead.

Responder’s bids. The responding hand is described in four stages: shape, range, controls, and denial cuebidding (location of specific honors). Sometimes a single bid belongs to two or more stages, thanks to a technique called *zooming*: when responder would make the highest possible bid at the end of one stage, responder also begins the next stage as though the relayer had made a relay ask one step below that bid. For example, the sequence $1\spadesuit; 3\heartsuit$ just shows 3424 shape, but $1\spadesuit; 3\heartsuit$ shows 4243 shape and a minimum, $1\spadesuit; 3\spadesuit$ shows 4243 shape and a maximum with 3 AK, etc., because there is no shape assigned to $1\spadesuit; 3\spadesuit$.

Shape. Hands are divided into one-suited, two-suited, three-suited and balanced (for our purposes defined as 4432 or 4333) shapes. A “suit” is a suit of at least 4 cards, provided the hand is not balanced. Every shape that does not have an 8-card suit or 12 cards in two suits is shown exactly, except that the 2- and 3-card suits of a 7321-type hand are not distinguished. With extreme shape, make the smallest lie possible.

One-suiters. First bid your suit using the scheme $1\heartsuit = \spadesuit$, $1NT = \heartsuit$, $2\clubsuit = \heartsuit$, $2\heartsuit = \clubsuit$. (This ensures that the relayer will play the hand if we play in responder’s long suit, provided it is not \heartsuit .) Your next bid will be $2\spadesuit$ or higher. Look at your length in your other three suits and see if you have a unique shortest suit. If so, bid $2\spadesuit$ if it is the highest side suit, bid 2NT if it is the middle side suit, and do nothing for now (a kind of zoom) if it is the lowest side suit; then show your shape: $3\heartsuit = 5332$, $3\heartsuit = 6331$, $3\spadesuit = 7330$, 3NT = 7321. The underline is a reminder to zoom to range and controls, since 7321 is the highest possible shape on this sequence. If you do not have a unique shortest suit, your shape must be 6322 or 7222, and the sequences are $2\spadesuit; 3\clubsuit; 3\heartsuit = 6223$, $2\spadesuit; 3\clubsuit; \underline{3\spadesuit} = 6232$, $3\heartsuit; 3\clubsuit = 7222$, $3\heartsuit; \underline{3\spadesuit} = 6322$. (How do you remember these sequences? The general rule is increasing numeric order; the general exception is that when the highest bid would then show a rarer shape than the bid one lower, we switch them, because zooming saves *two* steps.)

Two-suiters. Generally begin by bidding both your suits according to the one-suited scheme. However, partner’s relay asks will prevent you from making two consecutive bids! So, there are special sequences for showing $\heartsuit+\heartsuit$ or $\clubsuit+\heartsuit$: with $\heartsuit+\heartsuit$ bid $1\spadesuit; 2\clubsuit$, and with $\clubsuit+\heartsuit$ do nothing for now; your first bid will be $2\heartsuit$ or higher, showing a two-suiter with the minors. There’s one other slight adjustment: your next bid might be $2\heartsuit$, but you can’t do that if you bid $2\heartsuit$ showing \clubsuit . So showing a major and then bidding $2\heartsuit$ shows \clubsuit , also, as though it were $1\heartsuit/1NT; 2\heartsuit; 2\heartsuit$. (We didn’t use the $2\heartsuit$ rebid for one-suiters, so this is OK.)

Suppose first that one of your suits is only 4 cards long. Bid $2\heartsuit$ now if it’s the higher one. Next bidding $3\clubsuit$ shows 5422 and 4 \clubsuit shows 7411. Otherwise, one of your short suits is shorter than the other; bid 2NT if it’s the higher one. Then show your shape: $3\heartsuit = 5431$, $3\heartsuit = 6421$, $3\spadesuit = 6430$, $3NT = 7420$ (zoom from 3NT only if you bid 2NT first). (Generally when x shows two equal lengths, $x - 1$ shows “high shortage.”)

If instead both your suits have at least 5 cards, bid $2\spadesuit$. Now $3\heartsuit$ shows singletons in both short suits, followed by $3\spadesuit = 5611$, 3 $NT = 6511$. Otherwise, bid $3\clubsuit$ if your higher short suit is shorter, then $3\heartsuit = 5521$, $3\spadesuit = 5530$, $3NT = 5620$, 4 $\clubsuit = 6520$. (The first two digits in these numbers are the lengths of your long suits, with the higher one first; the second two are the lengths of your short suits with the longer one first.)

4432 and 4333 shapes. With these balanced shapes, start with $1\spadesuit$ (so that relayer will declare a notrump contract). Your next bid will be $2\heartsuit$ or higher. With 4432, consider your two 4-card suits; bid $2\heartsuit$ if they are the same color, $2\heartsuit$ if they are the same rank, and do nothing for now if they are the same shape; then bid your doubleton: $2NT = \spadesuit$, $3\clubsuit = \clubsuit$, $3\heartsuit = \heartsuit$, 3 $NT = \heartsuit$. With 4333, bid $2\heartsuit$ with a 4-card major, then $2\spadesuit$ always, then $3\clubsuit$ with long \clubsuit or \heartsuit and 3 NT with long \heartsuit or \spadesuit .

Three-suiters. These are last because they live in the gaps formed by the rest of the system. The two unused sequences are 1♥; 1NT; 2♦ and 2♣; 2♥. The first shows a three-suiter with both majors, the second a three-suiter with both minors. After one of these starts, there are only 8 possible shapes, so the follow-ups are simple and step-based: bid the cheapest step first if you have a high short suit (♠ or ♦), then bid in steps showing the lengths of your long suits in ♠♥♦♣ order (444, 445, 454, 544—and zoom with 544).

Range. Bid the cheapest step with a minimum, otherwise zoom on to controls. A minimum is a hand with fewer than 12 HCP or fewer than 3 AK. A passed hand is always a minimum and skips this stage.

Controls. We define AK as a measure of controls: an Ace is worth 2 AK, a King 1 AK. We don't count any AK for shortness, since relayer already knows responder's shape. AK points are shown in steps, starting with 2 (and zooming with 5) if responder has shown a minimum, 3 (never zooming) if a maximum.

Denial cuebidding. Sort your suits by length with the longer suits first, breaking ties by putting higher ranking suits before lower ones. You will cycle through the suits in this order, looking at each suit a number of times depending on its length: three times for suits of at least 4 cards, twice for 3-card suits, once for 2-card suits, and never for singletons or voids. The first time you look at a suit, check whether it contains exactly one of the Ace or King; the second time, check whether it contains the Queen; the third time, check whether it contains the Jack. (There is an exception for suits of 6 or more cards described below.) So, once you have all these "yes" or "no" answers, what do you *bid*? If the answer to the first question is "no," bid the cheapest step. In general, skip a number of steps equal to the number of "yes" answers. If relayer continues, start again where you left off, with the answer after the first "no." In these auctions, any non-relay bid by the relayer is to play, as is any bid at the slam level; the highest relay ask is 5NT.

Long suit exception. When checking a suit of 6 or more cards, replace the first two checks with the following: first check whether it contains at least two of the Ace, King and Queen, then check whether it contains an odd number (the larger possibility given the answer to the first check).

Examples. In each example North deals and opens 1♣.

<p>1. ♠ KQ73 1♣ 2♣ ♦ ♥ AKJ2 2♦ 2♥ three-suited with ♣+♦ ♦ Q10 2♠ 3♣ 4144 ♣ Q107 3♦ 3NT maximum, 4 AK 4♦ 4♥ end signal ♠ J654 4♠ — 9 AK is not enough ♥ 4 for slam without ♦ K954 more distribution. ♣ AKJ6 </p>	<p>2. ♠ A9 1♣ 1♠ balanced or ♦+♥ ♥ AQ1072 1NT 2♥ same rank ♦ AQJ 2♠ 2NT 2344 ♣ AK9 3♣ 3♦ minimum 3♥ 3♠ 2 AK ♠ J2 4♣ 4♥ ♦K, no ♣K ♥ K98 4♠ 5♣ ♥K, no ♠K ♦ K642 5♦ 5♥ no ♦Q ♣ J732 5♠ 5NT no ♣Q 6NT — 7NT is at best on a finesse.</p>
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Further avenues. We have described a simple, effective system for game-forcing auctions after a 1♣ opener. There is still room for extension and improvement, though.

- After a 1♣ opening and a negative 1♦ response, 1♥ can be played as any 20⁺ HCP, with 1♠ a second negative and all the relays shifted up two steps. (There is no range ask, and controls are shown starting with 0 AK.) In fact, there's an entire system in which most of the game-forcing auctions use similar relays after limited opening bids as well.
- We have not assigned meanings to any of relayer's non-relay bids below 3NT or to jumps to game in a suit. The former can be used to show minimum 3-suiters ("reverse relay") or to ask about stoppers in side suits; the latter can be played as keycard asks or as nonforcing slam tries ("optional RKC").
- Some denial cuebidding auctions contain redundant information, such as the 5♣ bid in the second example; South has shown only two AK and has already shown the ♦K and ♥K so cannot have the ♠K as well. The 5♣ bid could therefore deny the ♦Q instead, saving two bids. But it's tricky to make sure that both partners make the same inferences in all situations.

That's it. Enjoy!

— Reid Barton, September 17, 2008