

Two-Suited Overcalls

Superseded by *EZ-Expert Bidding Tools*

Pete Matthews Jr - <https://3nt.xyz> - © December 3, 2023

Most duplicate bridge partnerships play some style of two-suited overcalls. These are powerful tools that mean we do not need to bid a second time to show our shape, perhaps with the opponents fighting all the way. Two-suiters are a major offensive threat, since they often take more tricks than their high cards would indicate. Let's start with the most common two-suited overcalls, usually promising five or more cards in each suit:

Unusual notrump: a jump to 2 NT over any opening bid shows the two lowest unbid suits.

Michaels cue-bid: over a major suit, the cue-bid shows the other major and either minor; over the opening bid of a minor suit, the cue-bid at two of opener's suit shows both majors.

Some use these bids wildly, but I suggest they be reserved for hands where our side may actually declare the hand. After we make such a bid, declaring a hand against us will be easier. Consider these hands, after our right-hand opponent (RHO) opens 1 \diamond :

- a. \spadesuit Q J 8 4 2 \heartsuit A J 9 7 3 \diamondsuit 8 4 \clubsuit 8 [7 losers]
- b. \spadesuit K Q J 8 2 \heartsuit A J 9 7 3 \diamondsuit 8 4 \clubsuit 8 [6 losers]
- c. \spadesuit K Q J 8 2 \heartsuit A K J 9 3 \diamondsuit 8 4 \clubsuit 8 [5 losers]
- d. \spadesuit K Q J 8 2 \heartsuit A K J 9 3 \diamondsuit A 4 \clubsuit 8 [4 losers]

Losing trick count only applies when an eight-card fit has been found, so the counts above are preliminary. A normal opening bid in a major suit often has seven losers; clearly, two-suiters have extra playing strength. With a good fit, we raise as high as we can!

Mike Lawrence recommends a minimum of eight working HCP non-vulnerable, 10 when vulnerable, for a Michaels bid over a minor-suit opening; partner can get out at the two level. Vulnerable, or when we might have to play at the three level, we should have more length, strength and/or texture to our suits. Hand [a] would be a minimum non-vulnerable Michaels cue-bid of 2 \diamond . With any of the other three hands, we would take a Michaels cue-bid at any vulnerability.

Opener bids one of our suits. When RHO opens one of our long suits, we strain to overcall in our second suit. Our high cards should be well-placed, and partner (with a fit) ruffs RHO's suit after LHO.

Advancing the Unusual Notrump

When partner bids the unusual 2 NT, we know both of partner's suits. Here are standard advances, with options on the cue-bid:

	OC2	Advances of Unusual 2 NT	
Known suit	Our pick, at an appropriate level, based on fit – weak. (Bid cheaper with equal length – can run if doubled.)		
Pass of double	No preference - you pick.		
Fourth suit	Natural, a very good major suit of 6+ cards, invitational.		
Double	Penalty.		
3 NT	Natural, to play.		
○ Plan (A) ¹			
Cue-bid	Forcing, with interest in game or slam.		
	Cheap known	Worst (weak) hand.	
	Other known	Not worst (better) hand.	
	Raise cue-bid	Not worst; splinter.	Optional
	Notrump	Not worst; other splinter.	
	Fourth suit	Not worst; 3 cards.	
□ Plan (B) ²			
Cue-bid	Asks for stopper.		
	3 NT	Stopper.	
	Cheap known	Worst.	
	Other known	Not worst.	
4+ known	Weak or to make.		

Responder's redouble. We have another choice, if 2 NT is doubled:

- Redouble shows a preference, but overcaller should not lead the suit. Overcaller bids the cheaper known suit, which advancer may correct.³ Realistically, this is a fine meaning.

¹ Jeff Tang; Richard Pavlicek (before 2015).

² Richard Pavlicek (2015 or later).

³ Marty Bergen.

- Redouble shows a strong hand and creates a force.⁴ This seems unlikely unless RHO's double was frivolous.

If overcaller bids again in a known suit, that shows additional shape, but not a strong hand. Other actions show a strong hand.

We went first into detail on the unusual notrump, because the two suits are known. The fourth suit will always be a major, so we might want to play in it. Furthermore, 3 NT may be in the picture.

Advantages. The direct unusual 2 NT overcall of an opening bid is just about perfect. It prevents the opponents from finding a fit at two of a major suit. While they might penalize us, it will take some guesswork, since their own contract may score better. On the flip side, whatever they bid may fail. We can also explore for our own game, although many pairs never discuss this. Because both suits are known, advancer should have a good idea what to do.

Two-Suiter Issues

Coverage for Two-Suiters

We'll discuss methods to handle the ambiguity of our Michaels cue-bid over a major suit. From a coverage perspective, this is the *good* case: all three possible two-suiters (of new suits) are covered. A jump to 2 NT shows both minors, and the Michaels cue-bid shows either of the two major-minor hands.

When the opening bid is one of a minor, a Michaels cue-bid shows both majors, excellent when it comes up, but not so good for coverage. The unusual 2 NT covers hearts and the other minor, but we have no bid for spades and the other minor. With that hand, we must overcall in one suit and hope to get a chance to bid the other. Unfortunately, the auction is likely to die or get too high before we can bid our second suit. Overcalling in the minor suit sometimes helps, when the major and the overall strength are ordinary:

1. ♠ A J 9 7 3 ♥ 8 ♦ 8 4 ♣ K Q J 8 2

These alternative methods cover all three combinations:

⁴ Richard Pavlicek.

Bailey cue-bid. The Bailey cue-bid replaces the Michaels cue-bid, although it's definition differs over opener's minor suit only: this cue-bid shows spades and either hearts or the unbid minor suit. Bailey is discussed in depth, starting on page 8.

Top-and-bottom cue-bid: Playing Michaels, I picked up hand [2]:

2. ♠ Q J 10 8 4 ♥ Q 6 ♦ 2 ♣ A 9 8 6 2

Playing matchpoints, I made a jump 2 ♠ overcall of the 1 ♦ opening on my right, which worked out fine. Tim Hill, my partner, pointed out that some folks play top and bottom cue-bids instead of Michaels, which would be perfect for this hand. With the two top suits they double for takeout and rely on equal-level conversion (ELC) – agreeing that pulling an advance in the lowest suit to the middle suit shows shape, not extra strength – often with 4=5 or 4=6 shape, though. Max Hardy and Marshall Miles wrote about these methods.

Rossi. With three bids, we can show each of the three two-suiters immediately. Gary Schwartz and I used to play this plan:

Cheapest JO	The two suits above opener's.
2 NT	The two non-touching suits (above/below).
Cue-bid	The two suits below opener's.

2 NT and the cue-bid are kind of self-alerting to both partners. Not so with the cheapest jump overcall (JO) – I had to give it up after the bid flew out of my box one too many times, with only the one weak-jump-overcall suit. The JO also could be a problem when holding a strong hand, since partner might pass - we considered that to be a feature (we were almost always weak).

Rossi (reverse). I would swap the JO and cue-bid to fix that – each then shows the two suits *above the overcall* (easier to remember). Reverse Rossi appears technically best: it is easily explained, we never bid a suit we hold (safe to bid with a strong hand), we have 5-5 majors available at the two-level, and it's highly efficient below 2 NT.

Ghestem is another three-bid approach: 2 NT, 3 ♣, plus the cue-bid.

Cue-bid	The top and bottom unbid suits.
2 NT	The two lowest unbid suits.
3 ♣	The two highest unbid suits.

Swapping the cue-bid and 3 ♣ improves the majors but usually puts clubs into 3 ♣. See *SpoDo*, a partially-reversed Ghestem, on page 10.

System		Over 1 ♣	Over 1 ♦	Over 1 ♥	Over 1 ♠
Michaels	Q	2 ♣ = ♥+♠ 2 NT = ♦+♥	2 ♦ = ♥+♠ 2 NT = ♣+♥	2 ♥ = ♠+♣/♦ 2 NT = ♣+♦	2 ♠ = ♥+♣/♦ 2 NT = ♣+♦
Bailey	Q	2 ♣ = ♠+♦/♥ 2 NT = ♦+♥	2 ♦ = ♠+♣/♥ 2 NT = ♣+♥	2 ♥ = ♠+♣/♦ 2 NT = ♣+♦	2 ♠ = ♥+♣/♦ 2 NT = ♣+♦
Rossi (Q=two below)	Q J	2 ♣ = ♠+♥ 2 ♦ = ♦+♥ 2 NT = ♦+♠	2 ♦ = ♣+♠ 2 ♥ = ♥+♠ 2 NT = ♥+♣	2 ♥ = ♦+♣ 2 ♠ = ♠+♣ 2 NT = ♠+♦	2 ♠ = ♥+♦ 3 ♣ = ♣+♦ 2 NT = ♣+♥
Rossi (reverse)	Q J	2 ♣ = ♦+♥ 2 ♦ = ♠+♥ 2 NT = ♦+♠	2 ♦ = ♥+♠ 2 ♥ = ♣+♠ 2 NT = ♥+♣	2 ♥ = ♠+♣ 2 ♠ = ♦+♣ 2 NT = ♠+♦	2 ♠ = ♣+♦ 3 ♣ = ♥+♦ 2 NT = ♣+♥
Ghestem (original)	Q	2 ♣ = ♠+♦ 2 NT = ♦+♥ 3 ♣ = ♠+♥	2 ♦ = ♠+♣ 2 NT = ♣+♥ 3 ♣ = ♠+♥	2 ♥ = ♠+♣ 2 NT = ♣+♦ 3 ♣ = ♠+♦	2 ♠ = ♥+♣ 2 NT = ♣+♦ 3 ♣ = ♥+♦
Ghestem (reverse)	Q	2 ♣ = ♠+♥ 2 NT = ♦+♥ 3 ♣ = ♠+♦	2 ♦ = ♠+♥ 2 NT = ♣+♥ 3 ♣ = ♠+♣	2 ♥ = ♠+♦ 2 NT = ♣+♦ 3 ♣ = ♠+♣	2 ♠ = ♥+♦ 2 NT = ♣+♦ 3 ♣ = ♥+♣
Ghestem (SpoDo)	Q	2 ♦ != ♠+♥ 2 NT = ♦+♥ 3 ♣ = ♠+♦	2 ♦ = ♠+♥ 2 NT = ♣+♥ 3 ♣ = ♠+♣	2 ♥ = ♠+♣ 2 NT = ♣+♦ 3 ♣ = ♠+♦	2 ♠ = ♥+♣ 2 NT = ♣+♦ 3 ♣ = ♥+♦

Shading of a bid suit: pass poses a risk for strong overcaller.

Strength and Length of a Two-Suited Bid

Strength. For many years, I played a split range for two-suited overcalls, but given a hint, I posted this poll on Bridge Winners:

Single range: One approach, favored by Mike Lawrence and others, is to make these bids with any hand deemed strong enough.

Restricted range(s): A popular alternative, favored by Marty Bergen and others, requires a simple overcall (or other call) instead with some hands, typically those of normal opening bid strength. The two-suiter bids are used with the other hands deemed strong enough, typically stronger or weaker than the excluded hands.

Which do you prefer?

104	73%	Single Range
33	23%	Restricted Range(s)
6	4%	It Depends
7		Abstain

The so-called “mini-max” split range – only hands weaker or stronger than a normal opening bid – is the way of the past. We just explored methods to cover all two-suiters; we should not turn around and exclude a common range of hands. It’s generally more important to find the right strain than to find the correct level.

Make a two-suited bid with any hand that is strong enough.

Length. Some pairs make direct two-suited overcalls on 5-4 or even 4-4, but we’ll leave them to fend for themselves. Those hands can be handled with a takeout double or a simple overcall – or passed.

A direct two-suited overcall promises at least five cards in each of two suits.

This is particularly important, when playing the single range: sorting out the strength will be tough enough, even with 5-5 promised.

5-5 and longer hands really need a two-suited bid. Never make a takeout double of an opening bid with such a hand, however strong!

Goals for a Two-Suited Overcall System

1. Both partners must remember it; it must be easy to describe.
2. Maximize the chance of playing major suits at the two-level.
3. Minimize overcalling a suit actually held.
4. Show all three two-suiter combinations immediately.

Cue-Bid over Clubs

With many of the methods presented, an option is to play 2 \diamond as the cue-bid over clubs:

- 2 \clubsuit is always the cue-bid over 1 \clubsuit .
- 2 \diamond is the cue-bid over 1 \clubsuit that could be two or fewer clubs.
- 2 \diamond is always the cue-bid over 1 \clubsuit .

Increasingly, experts open a short club, to enable transfer responses.

Continuations after a Michaels Cue-Bid

Michaels over a Minor Suit.

Adv1	Advances of Michaels over Minor (Both Majors)
M	Bid either major at an appropriate level, based on fit.
2 NT	Natural game invitation, non-forcing.
3 ♣	Limit raise or better in hearts.
3 ♦	Limit raise or better spades.
Dble	[of RHO's raise] Limit raise or better in either major.
Rdbl	(Same choice as redouble of 2 NT.)

Michaels over a Major Suit. Overcaller's cue-bid in opener's major suit shows the other major and an unknown minor. When partner takes a cue-bid over a major-suit opening, the minor suit is not yet known. Our continuations are:

Adv1	OC1	Advances of Michaels over Major (Major+Minor)	
M		Bid known major at an appropriate level, based on fit.	
2 NT		Invitational or better, asks for the minor.	
3 ♣		Weak hand, pass or correct.	Common Continuations
3 ♦		Limit raise or better in overcaller's major.	
	3 ♥	Strong hand, minor is clubs.	
	3 ♠	Strong hand, minor is diamonds.	
Dble		[of RHO's raise] Limit raise or better the known major.	
Rdbl		(Bid your cheaper suit and don't lead your major suit.)	

The fourth suit. The Michaels cue-bidder has promised at least 5-5 distribution, including all unbid major suits. We plan to play in one of partner's suits, not in the fourth suit. Notrump is an option.

Advantages. Michaels over a minor suit shows both majors, the most important two suits to show. Because we can get out at the two-level, this Michaels cue-bid can be used aggressively. Because both suits are known, advancer should have a good idea what to do. Also, over a major suit, Michaels provides coverage for all two-suiters.

Disadvantages. Over a minor suit, there is no bid to show the top and bottom suits. Over a major suit, overcaller's minor suit is unknown.

The Bailey Cue-Bid

Description by Michael Angelo Ravera

The biggest advantages of Bailey, as I play it:

- Avoids equal level conversion in order to free up those sequences for stronger hands (possibly with transfers and so forth, but that is a different topic).
- In conjunction with unusual notrump, give ways of introducing *all* two suiters, generally at the 2-level.

The basics:

1. Direct cue bids always show the highest unbid suit (*known*) and one of the other two (*unknown*).
2. Generally only { (1 x) – 2 x }. It's up to you to play them over intermediate 2 ♣ and 2 ♦, but not generally over weak twos....
3. Apart from minimum playing strength considerations, with the advances that I outlined [a couple of decades ago], there is no gap in the strength.
4. Cheapest unknown suit advances are “pass or correct.”
 - a. If advancer has an *agenda* in another suit, they can rebid it after correction (or, by agreement, jump).
5. The cheapest known suit advance can be desperation.
6. The cheapest notrump (usually 2 NT) and re-cue (usually 3 x) advances show strong hands.
 - a. notrump shows a probable misfit.
 - b. 3 x shows a guaranteed fit and a probable double-fit.
7. Jump advances in aggressor's known suit show better fits.
8. Jump advances in possible unknown suits are generally “pass or correct without fear at this level.”
9. Jump to the four-level in opener's (not aggressor's) suit can be an ace/control/keycard inquiry. If you play keycard, you might want to use the known suit as the agreed suit....
10. Aggressor cheapest NT rebid shows a strong hand and that advancer has named the wrong unknown suit.
11. Aggressor's re-cue shows a strong hand and that advancer has named the right unknown (or the known) suit.
12. If responder makes a three-level raise { (1 x) – 2 x – (3 x) }, a double shows a desire to compete based upon values. Pass is

ambiguous. A bid is a desire to compete based upon a presumed fit or an agenda.

13. If responder cues aggressor's known suit, all calls are competitive, with pass showing the least desire to compete (but possibly a thought to penalize later), double should be the strongest desire to compete (Since you are manufacturing bidding space for opponents).
14. If responder bids one of aggressor's possible unknown suits, all calls are once again competitive, same philosophy as in 13.
15. A direct jump to 3 NT by either aggressor or advancer is usually an offer to play. (My usual meta-agreement is “3 NT is always to play unless it's silly.”)
16. Any return to aggressor's known suit is an attempted sign off (your meta-rules about “voluntary 5-level bids” should apply here).

Continuations after a Bailey Cue-Bid

Here we chart advancer's actions, using Ravera's methods.

Bailey over a Minor Suit: spades and another.

Adv1	OC1	Advances of Bailey over Minor (Spades+Another)
2 ♠		[over 2 ♣] Pass or correct to hearts.
2 ♥		Pass or correct to spades (not to the now-known minor).
♠		Bid spades at an appropriate level, with a fit or desperation.
2 NT		Strong hand, probable misfit.
3 ♣		[over 2 ♠] Pass or correct to hearts (preemptive).
3 ♠		[over 2 ♣] Pass or correct to hearts (without fear here).
3 m		Strong hand, guaranteed fit and probable double-fit.
3 NT		Offer to play.
4 m		RKB spades.
Dble		[of RHO's raise] A desire to compete on values.

Examples

1. ♠ K 9 ♥ J 8 6 4 ♦ Q 9 8 5 4 3 ♣ 2

(1 ♠) - 2 ♠ - (Pass) - ?

We try 2 ♥. If partner were to correct to 3 ♣, we would be neck deep in the big muddy. Overcaller must correct to the cheaper playable suit, 2 ♠, which lets us pass with hand [1].

2. ♠ 9 ♥ J 8 6 4 ♦ Q 9 5 4 3 ♣ A 8 2

Holding hand [2] on the same auction, we could bid 2♥. If partner bids 2♠, we sign off in 3♣, partner's second suit. If partner passes 2♥, we miss a chance to preempt, but we are eminently safe there.

Not vulnerable, we might advance 3♣ on hand [2]. If partner passes, we reach the same contract, more quickly. If partner bids 3♥, that's our preempt.

3. ♠ 9 ♥ J 4 ♦ Q 9 8 7 5 4 3 ♣ 9 8 2

It might be right to pass on this hand – stop the bleeding right here.

Bailey over a Major Suit: the other major and a minor, like Michaels – compare to the chart for Michaels over a major.

Adv1	OC1	Advances of Bailey over Major (Major+Minor)	
0M		Bid known major at an appropriate level, fit or desperation.	
2 NT		Strong hand, probable misfit.	
3 ♣		Weak hand, pass or correct.	May have an agenda over a correction.
3 ♦		Weak hand, pass or correct.	
3 M		Strong hand, guaranteed fit and probable double-fit.	
3 NT		Offer to play.	
4 M		RKB in our known major.	
Dble		[of RHO's raise] A desire to compete on values.	

Advantages. Bailey is the way to go, for full coverage using neither equal level conversion nor a third two-suited bid.

Disadvantages. The cue-bid of a minor suit is inferior to Michaels when overcaller has hearts, since advancer has to wait to find out – but so do the opponents. Bailey is a bit more complex than Michaels.

Modified Ghestem (SpoDo)

The main problem with original Ghestem (page 4) is having to force to the 3-level with 5-5 majors. To address this, we can reverse the meanings of the cue-bid and 3♣ over minors, accepting more complexity and bidding 3♣ over 1♦ with clubs.

Modified Ghestem over a Minor Suit Opening

- 2♦ The two highest unbid suits – see Michaels.
- 2 NT The two lowest unbid suits – see unusual notrump.
- 3♣ The top and bottom unbid suits.*

Modified Ghestem over a Major Suit Opening

Cue-bid	The top and bottom unbid suits.
2 NT	The two lowest unbid suits – see unusual notrump.
3 ♣	The two highest unbid suits.*

Using 2 ♣ as the cue-bid over clubs, Mike Beach named this approach *SpoDo*, which “stands for Spades and the Other minor, or Diamonds and the Other major.” Our use of 2 ♦ as the cue-bid over clubs assures us a natural 2 ♣ overcall to compensate for the loss of 3 ♣. Chris Compton, a top-ten all-time ACBL masterpoint holder, offered these comments on this plan:

- Definitely right about bidding major two suited at 2 level.
- Isn't this Italian Standard? it's pretty much the same? So, the Italians think it strong. I would emphasize that [after] 1 ♠ – (2 ♠) – 4 ♠ knowing partner's minor seems like a winner.

Advancing Ghestem (Wikipedia). Invitations are made via jump support bids at the three level (if available), cue bids denote slam interest, a bid in the fourth suit is to play, as are direct game bids. For instance [after a top & bottom original Ghestem cue-bid]:

(1 ♦)	2 ♦ ¹	(pass) ?	¹ spades & clubs
2 ♥	to play (misfit)		
2 ♠	weak support bid		
3 ♣	weak support bid		
3 ♠	invite with spades as trump suit		
4 ♠	to play		
3 ♦	slam interest		

Following responder's cuebid, the Ghestem bidder makes a relay bid in the next strain, and the bidding continues with the responder indicating the trump suit:

(1 ♦)	2 ♦	(pass)	3 ♦ ²	² slam interest
(pass)	3 ♥ ³	(pass)	4 ♣ ⁴	³ relay ⁴ club support
4 ♣	slam interest with club support			

Advantages. Immediate coverage for all combinations of unbid suits.

Disadvantages. Not having a natural 3 ♣ weak jump overcall. Making a natural 3 ♣ weak jump overcall anyhow!!!

In order to prevent the accidental weak preempt, I recommend an aggressive approach after adopting Ghestem:

Never make a natural 3 ♣ bid weak jump overcall in any game with any partner.

Some of our partners won't play Ghestem. We don't need an agreement with them; just don't do it. When playing Ghestem, one mistake at 3 ♣ can easily wipe out all its advantages for quite a while. Not up for an aggressive approach? Consider Bailey, instead.

Backstory

Michaels is the first topic in the first chapter of Lawrence's book, *Takeout Doubles*. Here is the extent of what he says about his single-range plan:

I admit that partner may not get to find out how strong you are, but you gain a lot anyway since you can put bidding pressure on the opponents. Anytime your partner has a fit, you can jerk the bidding to the three- or four-level in a hurry and leave the opponents guessing.

The continuations after a Michaels cue-bid over a major are attributed to Jeff Meckstroth and Eric Rodwell.

Bailey. Michael Angelo Ravera is the main champion of the Bailey cue-bid on the internet. He credits it to Evan Bailey and his partner Ed Barlow.

Ravera has posted about Bailey numerous times on the web, over the past couple of decades. I had trouble reconciling those, as well as posts by the occasional other practitioner, so I sent Ravera an email via Bridge Winners. He graciously replied with his description. I tweaked it to fit my publication style, and dropped it into this article – and packed away the other posts. He has a book in progress about Bailey, with which I have offered to help.

Rossi. Gary played this system with the late Peter Rossi, the farthest back we could trace it. Roman jump overcalls (all three plus 2 NT [strong] showed two-suiters).

Ghestem was invented by Pierre Ghestem of France. Christopher Donnelly posted the modified Ghestem presented here on Bridge Winners. (I derived the same plan, in an attempt to meet my goals.) An earlier post by Mike Beach calls this plan SpoDo, without using 2 ♦ as the cue-bid over 1 ♣.

David Stevenson lists all the two-suiter methods he could discover. He quips: "One well-known problem with Ghestem is that while there are a lot of different possibilities many players assume there is only one, their own method, and complain loudly when partner or opponents disagree."

Conclusion. Reverse Rossi and most versions of Ghestem appear superior to Michaels – *if we play them correctly*. Bailey appears superior to Michaels, but it's not without cost: Bailey introduces an ambiguity on the cue-bid of a minor. Staying with Michaels is “free.”

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