

# The Strong Two Club Opening

Superseded by *EZ-Expert Bidding Tools*

[Pete Matthews Jr](https://3nt.xyz) – <https://3nt.xyz> – © August 24, 2022

Playing bridge in North America, the artificial, strong 2 ♣ opening is normally used with hands that are too strong to open two notrump or one of a suit. The chance of picking up a hand with 22 or more HCP is 0.42%. For a partnership, that comes out to one such hand in five sessions. When focused on events with IMP scoring, the 2 ♣ system is important. With interest in all events, and matchpoints in particular, we just need a decent system that is easy to remember.

## Suit Responses

A standard suit response to 2 ♣ promises at least five cards (six in a minor), headed by two of the top three honors. The hand must also contain at least 8 HCP, or perhaps A-K-10-x-x in spades. (We play standard; but for other pairs, a suit positive response ranges from much lighter to not permitted at all.)

## Game Force Values

Over a standard 2 ♣ opening, an ace, king or (for most pairs) two queens is sufficient to force to game. This should give a balanced opening a play for 3 NT; we assume the same for an unbalanced opening, although a lone king could be orphaned opposite shortness.

## Competition

When the opponents interfere over the 2 ♣ opening, we play the standard agreements:

Pass    Minimum positive, no suit to bid.

X/XX    Double or redouble is negative (balanced opener passes or bids notrump).

Bid    Suit positive, but requirements are reduced.

Opener's reopening double is takeout.

When an opponent overcalls 2 ♣, a majority of commenters on Bridge Winners play that a double or redouble is negative, even after a 4 ♥ overcall. Many commenters do not like this, but they propose multiple, conflicting plans. Stick with standard!

## When to Open 2 ♣

A strong 2 ♣ opening bid is appropriate for these types of hands:

1. A strong balanced hand:
  - a. Invitational, about 23 HCP, or
  - b. Forcing to game.
2. A strong 1-suited hand:
  - a. Invitational with a major suit (about 9 tricks). Playing the Parrish relay, invitational with a minor also works.
  - b. Forcing to game with any suit.
    - i. Good suit, or
    - ii. Self-sufficient suit.
  - c. A running suit with all side suits stopped, for example:  
♠ A 8 ♥ A 5 2 ♦ A K Q J 3 2 ♣ A 3 [perfect: 9 tricks]  
♠ K 2 ♥ K 8 2 ♦ A Q ♣ A K Q 8 7 6 [Larry Cohen]  
We would open those hands, and this, 3 NT:  
♠ K 2 ♥ K 8 2 ♦ K 7 ♣ A K Q J 7 6
3. A rare 2-suited, game-forcing hand, usually longer than 5-4.

**Note:** A 2 ♣ opening bid should never be 3-suited.

Opener's new suit is forcing, so that opener can get responder to choose the suit for game. Opener's second suit will be at the 3-level or higher, so the auction will be higher still, when responder picks it. No way opener can afford to bid three suits!

As usual, the sensible interpretation of "forcing to game" is 3 NT or higher, but a new suit is always forcing.

When deciding whether or not to open 2 ♣ on an unbalanced hand, especially a 2-suiter, consider what might happen if we open one of a suit instead:

- A. If the one bid is passed out, are we likely to miss a game?
- B. How likely is it, that everybody will pass our one bid?

C. If we open 2 ♣, does the hand have the strength to penalize interfering opponents?

For example, given modest support, we basically have game in hand with:

♠ A K 10 9 6 2   ♡ A K 10 9 6 2   ♢ -   ♣ 2

If a 1 ♠ opening is passed out, we may well miss a game. However, there is almost no chance of that: 26 HCP and lots of minor suit cards are out there. If we open 2 ♣, the opponents may be at the 5-level before we name a suit. It will be difficult to bid our hand or to penalize the opponents.

♠ A K 10 9 6 2   ♡ A K 2   ♢ A K 6   ♣ 2

This is a 4-loser hand, but 21 HCP and six quick tricks, four of them in 3-card suits. Open 2 ♣, and invite in spades.

A strong 1½-suiter can present problems when opened 2 ♣:

♠ A K 10 9 6 2   ♡ A K 6 2   ♢ A K   ♣ 2

Treated as a 1-suiter, the heart suit will probably be lost. Treated as a 2-suiter, responder may pick hearts when spades are better. 4 ♠ is a good prospect opposite 2-2 majors, so this hand should be treated as a strong 1-suiter. Turn the ♡ K in to the ♡ Q, and a better plan would be to open 1 ♠; jump shift in hearts; and, if not raised, bid 4 ♠.

Major suits are easy, compared to minor suits, and diamonds are hardest.

Plan how the bidding is likely to go. When still uncertain whether to open at the 1-level or 2 ♣, the 1-level is likely to be the better choice.

## 2 ♡ Bust & Parrish Relay

Here we present the recommended system over the 2 ♣ opening. The 2 ♢ response is an artificial positive, showing at least an ace, king or two queens – but not suitable for a standard response in a suit. The 2 ♡ response is an artificial negative, denying the values for 2 ♢. 2 NT is a suit positive in hearts.

Here is a chart of the system:

R1	O2	R2	O3	2 ♡ Bust & Parrish Relay
2 ♦	Positive (GF, at least A, K or QQ), lacking a good suit.			
	2♥/2♠	Natural.		
	2 NT	Natural, balanced, unlimited.		
	3♣/3♦	Natural.		
	3♥/3♠	Natural, at most one loser opposite a void, sets trump, requires cue bidding.		
	3 NT	A running suit with all side suits stopped; any action by responder is a slam try.		
2 ♡	Negative (No ace or king and at most one queen).			
	2 ♠	Parrish relay. ♦		
		2 NT	Required, allowing opener to continue.	
			3 suit	Natural & non-forcing.
	2 NT	Balanced, about 22-24 HCP, non-forcing.		
	3 suit	Natural and forcing.		
	3 NT	Balanced, 25+ HCP. Stayman and transfers are on, but are a gamble without a 6-bagger.		
2 ♠ 2NT 3 ♣ 3 ♦	Suit positive response (2 NT = hearts). ♦			

**Parrish.** The Parrish relay allows opening 2 ♣ without game in hand, based on *any* long suit. This is a significant benefit for clubs, diamonds and hearts, at the cost of not being able to bid a natural 2 ♠ over 2 ♡ negative. Over any non-forcing suit bid by opener, responder can look down, see the queen of trump or a ruffing value, and raise!

When opener shows an unbalanced hand, there should be a reason for not bidding notrump. The 2 ♡ responder is not likely to fix that problem, so the final contract should be in a suit; Parrish is unlikely to wrong-side 3 NT. On Bridge Winners, Parrish wrote regarding his convention:

There are a lot of benefits from having 2 ♦ be GF. And from not having to use the cheaper minor as artificial. (I feel like I always

have a decent hand with clubs when I play that method.)

I have a certain fondness for the Parrish Convention. It's simple and effective and easy to learn if you already know Lebensohl. It makes the 2 ♡ bust, which I prefer to a waiting 2 ♦, much more playable. Its major downside is that it's harder to show two-suiters with spades after 2 ♣ – 2 ♡, but those hands are quite rare.

I have had very bad luck passing 2 ♡.

## Backstory

Adam Parrish is a bridge player/teacher/writer and Bridge Winners admin. With Greg Humphreys of Bridge Winners, Parrish won the NABC Fast Pairs in March, 2022.

Gary Schwartz and I have played 2 ♡ bust for decades, and it's OK. Parrish announced his convention in his column in the July 2020 issue of the ACBL *Bridge Bulletin*. It is a solid improvement to 2 ♡ bust.

## ♦ Alternative Methods

**Balanced game force.** Whether playing Parrish or not: a 2 ♡ response requires opener to jump to 3 NT with a game-forcing balanced hand. This is the main defect of our system, which other systems address.

**Without Parrish.** The Parrish relay is a game-changer, but we did without it for decades: any new suit by opener was forcing. Furthermore, without Parrish, this system has but one way for opener to get to 3 ♡ over the 2 ♡ negative response: bid it. This forces additional considerations on both opener and responder, regarding the heart suit. If opener has primary hearts, and gets the 2 ♡ response, 3 ♡ is forcing: opener may have a game-forcing two-suiter, wanting to find the correct trump suit. So, passing the 2 ♡ response may be the only acceptable solution with an invitational opening. Therefore, responder needs to strain to bid 2 ♦ when holding a trick for hearts being trump.

**Transfer Positives.** Suit positive responses can be swapped around, hoping to make opener declare.

## Other Two Club Systems

Any system of responses to the 2 ♣ opening will have strengths, weaknesses and differing complexity. The “2 ♦ GF, 2 ♥ bust” system is no longer the most popular system on Bridge Winners:

2012	2022	Polls on <a href="http://bridgewinners.com">bridgewinners.com</a>
39%		2 ♦ GF, 2 ♥ bust (no options)
	25%	2 ♦ GF, 2 ♥ bust (opt: Parrish, Kokish, or other)
31%		2 ♦ waiting, rebid cheap minor with bust (no opt)
	52%	2 ♦ waiting (options: Kokish or other)
16%	11%	Controls/steps (options: Kokish or other)
14%	12%	Other

However, the Parrish relay is clearly not yet in mainstream use:

2022	Strong 2C – 2D Game Force, 2H Bust
12	2 ♦ GF, 2 ♥ bust.
17	2 ♦ GF, 2 ♥ bust; natural positives.
2	2 ♦ GF, 2 ♥ bust; Parrish.
6	2 ♦ GF, 2 ♥ bust; natural positives; Parrish.
4	2 ♦ GF, 2 ♥ bust; Parrish & Kokish.
7	2 ♦ GF, 2 ♥ bust; natural positives; Parrish & Kokish.
2	2 ♦ GF or trick for ♥, 2 ♥ no trick for ♥; Parrish/Kokish optional.
8	2 ♦ GF or trick for ♥ & ♠, 2 ♥ no trick for ♥, 2 ♠ no trick for ♠ (trick for ♥); Kokish optional.
8	Unknown candidate [no choice above fits].

This poll asked for one or two responses.

*Natural positives* could be transfers. [better term: suit positives]

*No trick for (suit)* means that, if (suit) is trump, responder’s hand lacks: any ace, king or two queens; the queen of trump; a doubleton with four trump; and a singleton with three trump.

2022	Strong 2C - 2D Waiting
6	2 ♠ is the only permitted response.
2	2 ♠ is the only permitted response; Kokish.
20	2 ♠ negative, or positive lacking a good suit; natural positive responses.
41	2 ♠ negative, or positive lacking a good suit; natural positive responses; Kokish.
4	System of Marshall Miles, or similar.
3	2 NT inversion; 2 ♠ waiting; 2 ♥ and 2 ♣ are natural negatives, or similar.
1	System of Normand Houle, or similar.
5	Unknown candidate [choices above inappropriate].

This poll asked for one or two responses.

*Marshall Miles:* 2 ♠ denies two kings, 7 HCP including an ace, or 8 HCP including a king; Kokish over 2 ♠ response. Higher responses are positive: 2 ♥ artificial, 2 NT = ♥, etc.

*2 NT inversion:* The minimum balanced range within the 2 ♣ opening is below the 2 NT opening bid range. Responder's weak responses to 2 ♣ show suits, permitting a quick stop by a minimum opener. Opener rebids 2 NT (forcing) with a strong balanced hand and 2 ♥ with a minimum.

*Normand Houle:* 2 NT inversion. 2 ♠ waiting, could be weak with ♥ (or ♣ or flat); 2 ♥ = ♠; 2 ♣ = ♠; 2NT = 3 suits stopped. Opener rebids shown suit (2 ♥ over 2 ♠) with bal 20-21, 2NT with bal 24+. Presumably, responder's 2 ♣ over opener's 2 ♥ is a second negative, transferring to 2 NT; responder's 2 NT would transfer to 3 ♣.

## 2 ♠ Waiting & Kokish Relay

If the recommended system (2 ♠ GF, 2 ♥ bust, and Parrish) does not appeal, I recommend this one. It is most popular in the poll, and I play it with most partners. It's better than 2 ♥ bust without Parrish, which is in turn better than 2 ♠ waiting without Kokish.

R1	O2	R2	O3	Basic Kokish Relay Responses
2 ♠	Waiting: negative, or positive lacking a good suit.			
2 ♥	Kokish Relay: ♠ either a balanced game force, or unbalanced with hearts.			
	2 ♠	Required, allowing opener to continue.		
		2 NT	Game-forcing, balanced.	
		3 ♥	Natural and invitational.	
		other	Natural & forcing, with primary hearts.	
	2 ♠	Natural and forcing; new suits forcing.		
	2 NT	Balanced, about 22-24 HCP, non-forcing.		
3♣/3♦	Natural and forcing; new suits forcing.			
3♥/3♠	Natural, at most one loser opposite a void; sets trump and requires cue bidding.			
3 NT	A running suit with all side suits stopped; any action by responder is a slam try.			

Each new suit by opener is natural and forcing.

## Backstory

Eric Kokish (born 1947) is a Canadian professional bridge player, writer, and coach from Montreal. He was inducted into the ACBL Hall of Fame in 2011. As a player, he has won two NABC events; representing Canada in world championships, he won two silver and three bronze medals.

Kokish named his relay *birthright*, but popularly, it's known as Kokish. He's great at systems, not so much at names. A snazzier name, such as one of these might have captured public esteem: heart attack, braveheart, noheart.

## ♠ Alternative Methods

**Without Kokish.** When Kokish is not used, 2 ♥ is natural and forcing, and opener must rebid 3 NT with an upper-range balanced hand.

**Second negative.** Whether playing Kokish or not: After opener's rebid in a suit, responder usually makes an artificial



second negative bid with a bad hand. This is usually the cheaper minor, but Henry Bethe recommended the cheapest bid. The second negative is the weakest part of playing 2  $\diamond$  waiting. Some pairs do play 2  $\diamond$  waiting without it – good luck with that!

**Kokish.** It's a good idea to allow responder to break the 2  $\spadesuit$  relay, with these bids:

- 2 NT    Transfer, with 6+ spades; opener's 3  $\spadesuit$  is forcing – anything else shows hearts.
- 3  $\clubsuit$     Club bust: negative with six or more clubs.
- 3  $\diamond$     Club bust: negative with six or more diamonds.

Some partnerships allow responder to bid three of a major with a long suit in a bad hand, either after Kokish or right over 2  $\clubsuit$ .

Spades can be a particular problem, when opener has hearts. After my new 2 NT break, balanced opener always bids 3  $\spadesuit$  (forcing). With a heart hand, opener continues as planned, or may bid 3  $\spadesuit$  to set trump. As a consequence, a responder who completes the relay to 2  $\spadesuit$  will have at most five spades.

## Control and Step Responses

Here is a schedule of *control responses* that I played a few times – an ace is two controls, and a king is one:

- 2  $\diamond$     Zero or one.
- 2  $\heartsuit$     Two.
- 2  $\spadesuit$     Three (ace and king).
- 2 NT    Three (kings).
- 3  $\clubsuit$     Four or more.

My partner did not specify, but it appears that after a 2 NT or 3  $\clubsuit$  response, we are in the slam zone. Therefore, 3 NT should be forcing to 4 NT, with systems on.

*Step responses* assign HCP ranges to the responses in a similar manner. Controls appeal to some experts, but steps seldom do.

In either case, the Kokish relay may be played over 2  $\diamond$ .

## Backstory

My late friend Eric Schwartz wrote on bridgewinners.com:

40 years ago, I agreed to try control responses to 2 ♣. Sure enough, my partner opened 2 ♣ and I had enough controls to respond 2 ♠. Partner had spades: this wrong-sided the contract and we got a zero. I have refused to play them ever since.

Shortly thereafter, playing with a strong player, he asked me to play controls over 2 ♣. I refused. He immediately made the suggestion that any positive response would be natural and guarantee at least three controls. I have played this way ever since and have gotten good results.

Ideally, we would find the right strain at the right level. Sometimes, we don't have the space for that. If we have to bias the bidding toward discovering one or the other, choose strain, especially at matchpoints.

Playing controls, there we are at 2 NT or 3 ♣, we think we have a slam, but nobody has made a natural bid yet! Opener bids 3 NT, responder bids Stayman or transfers – more is needed.

## Combined Kokish & Parrish

R1	O2	R2	O3	Kokish & Parrish Responses
2 ♦	Positive (GF, at least A, K or QQ), lacking a good suit.			
	2 ♥	Kokish relay: hearts or 25+ balanced.		
		2 ♠	Required.	
			2 NT	Balanced, 25+ HCP.
			3 ♣	Single-suited <i>hearts</i> .
			3 ♦	4 spades and 5+ hearts.
			3 ♥	4 clubs and 5+ hearts.
			3 ♠	4 diamonds and 5+ hearts.
	2 ♠	Natural.		
	2 NT	Balanced, 22-24 HCP.		
	3♣/3♦	Natural.		
	3 ♥	4 hearts and 5+ diamonds		
	3 ♠	4 spades and 5+ diamonds		
	3 NT	A running suit with all side suits stopped; any action by responder is a slam try.		

2 ♡	Negative (No ace or king and at most one queen).♦		
2 ♠	Parrish relay.		
	2 NT	Required, allowing opener to continue.	
		3 suit	Natural & non-forcing.
	2 NT	Balanced, about 22-24 HCP, non-forcing.	
	3 suit	Natural and forcing.	
	3 NT	Balanced, 25+ HCP.	
2 ♠	Positive response in <i>hearts</i> .		
2NT	Positive response in <i>spades</i> .		

This plan includes a more complex, “game ordered” version of Kokish. It’s aimed more at bidding the correct game than driving to slam. Gone are opener’s jumps to say “my major is trump, start cue bidding.” Those jumps are changed to show hands with four of a major and longer diamonds. After the Kokish relay, notice the double rotation opener’s rebids and other changes.

If opener rebids 2 ♠ or 3 ♣, each showing a primary black suit, it should be easy to find a fit in a 4-card side suit. The same goes for primary hearts, after the Kokish 2 ♡. That’s why 3 ♡ and 3 ♠ deal with primary diamonds.

David Carera pointed out on Bridge Winners that these changes are game ordered and can be used with Kokish in any system. If you are considering a serious upgrade to your two club system, be sure to check out Bridge Winners posts listed in “References” at the end of this article. Kit Woolsey, Michael Rosenberg and other strong players made important contributions to the discussions.

## Backstory

This complex system is from a 2019 set of system notes by Stew Rubenstein and Zach Grossack, who focus on serious team play.

## Miles System

The methods of Marshall Miles combine an artificial *positive* 2 ♡ response and the Kokish 2 ♡ relay by opener:

- 2 ♠ Artificial negative response, denies holding two kings, 7 points including an ace, or 8 points including a king. 2 ♠ by opener is then Kokish, as described above.
- 2 ♥ Artificial positive response, lacking an acceptable long suit. As an example, this guarantee of strength may permit opener to introduce a five card suit that might produce a slam, instead of just rebidding 2NT.
- 2 ♣ Positive response, ♣ Q-10-x-x-x or better, or any 6-card spade suit. The suit quality requirements for a positive response in spades are a little less than for other suits, because this bid cannot pre-empt partner.
- 2 NT Positive response in hearts.
- 3♣/3♦ Positive response in clubs/diamonds.
- 3♥/3♠ Optional: a 6+ card suit headed by two of the top three honors. This is a mixed blessing, because it may pre-empt opener from showing his suit(s).
- 3NT Shows a completely solid suit, AKQJxx, AKQxxxx, or better. Opener's suit bid at the 4-level asks for control in that suit, by steps, skipping NT: 1 = none, 2 = singleton, 3 = ace or void, NT = king.
- 4♣/4♦/4♥/4♠ A transfer to the suit above, showing a one-loser suit missing the ace or king. A new suit by opener is an asking bid as over a 3NT response.

With the availability of keycard asking bids, Miles says that given enough overall strength, any 6-card suit is acceptable for a positive response, and with only five, two of the top three honors are not required.

Miles recommends second-round splinters by the 2 ♠ or 2 ♥ responder. Note that the limit on the 2 ♠ responder's hand will reduce the risk of going overboard with a splinter, compared to playing an unlimited waiting 2 ♠.

Because a balanced opener has no need to jump in NT over the 2 ♠ response, opener's jump rebid of 3 NT shows a long, solid minor with all suits stopped – 8 certain tricks and a likely ninth.

If opener jumps in a suit, he sets trumps and starts a slam inquiry. Counting the king of trumps as an ace, responder bids

an ace, if he has one, or jumps in the cheapest ace with two or more. With no ace, but one or more kings, responder bids notrump; with no aces or kings, responder raises trumps. Opener can then bid a suit to ask about that king, or 5 NT to ask for clarification of multiple aces.

## Response System Issues

The potential issues with responses and rebids after a 2 ♣ opening are myriad. We can design a system to handle just about any issue, but not all of them – not enough bids are available – and complex systems will be harder to remember.

A table of useful features of systems follows, with a column for some system you might like to compare. First, descriptions of some of the features:

*Immediate negative.* Deny an ace, king or two queens.

*Avoid a Natural 3 NT Rebid.* We would like to arrange to bid 2-forcing-NT with a game-forcing balanced hand. Then we get to use our 2 NT systems. We can play Stayman and transfers over 3 NT, but unless we have the strength to play and make 4 NT, this is fraught with peril.

*Long running suit:* If we have a 2-forcing-NT sequence, then opener's jump to 3 NT shows a hand with a running suit and stoppers all around.

When opener must jump to 3 NT to show a balanced hand, then the partnership should agree to either not do this based on a long suit, for responder to always pass 3 NT, or that an opening bid of 3 NT shows this hand.

*Long, self-sufficient major suit:* This bid sets trump and demands cue-bidding, a powerful tool when it applies.

*4-card major:* game-ordered Kokish does better than the other methods at finding a fit in opener's 4-card side suit.

*Stop in two of major:* For example, the responses of 2 ♥ and 2 ♠ could show 5+ cards in a bad hand.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● = complete feature</li> <li>○ = partial feature</li> </ul>	2 ♡ Bust & Parrish	2 ♦ Waiting & Kokish	Controls & Kokish	G.O. Kokish & Parrish	Miles System	
Immediate negative	●		○	●	●	
Avoid a natural 3 NT rebid	○	●	●	○	●	
Long running suit	○	●	●	●	●	
Long, forcing minor	●	●	●	●	●	
Long, invitational minor	●			●		
Long, self-sufficient major	○	●	○		○	
Long, forcing major	●	●	●	●	●	
Long, invitational major	●	●	●	●	●	
4-card major	○	○	○	●	○	
Forcing two-suiter	●	●	●	●	●	
Invitational two-suiter						
2-level response = hearts	●	●		●	●	
2-level response = spades	●	●		●	●	
Stop in two of major						
Opener not impeded	○	●		○	○	
Avoid art. second negative	●			●		
Multiple strength levels	○		●	○	○	

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