



Ask Jerry

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Dear Jerry:

Several players in our party bridge club “bid the ladder” in response to a strong 2♣ opening rather than using 2♦ as a waiting bid: 2♦ = 0–3 points; 2♥ = 4–6; 2♠ = 7–9; and 2NT = 10 or more. I can see the disadvantage to bidding the ladder is that it possibly exposes the strong hand, while an advantage is that it makes it easier for responder to describe the strength of their hand. What’s your take?

H.W., Dallas TX

Hi, H.W.,

I will start by saying there is no worse method for responding to an artificial 2♣ opening than “the ladder,” i.e., point count/step responses.

The artificial 2♣ opening does a good job of announcing a very strong hand, but does so without providing any sense of direction. The 2♣ bidder’s longest suit could be clubs, diamonds, hearts, or spades; it could be some type

of balanced hand; it could be a hand with more than one good four-card or longer suit. When you compound this artificial, generic, strength-showing action with a response that defines values but gives no reference to shape, significant problems often result.

When two balanced hands face each other, point count is an accurate predictor of the number of tricks that are likely to be available. According to Goren, 26 points = game; 33 points = small slam; 37 points = grand slam. Therefore, if every 2♣ opening bid was based on balanced distribution and every immediate response was based on balanced distribution, ladder responses would work out extremely well.

The reality is that point count is often inadequate to judge the power of distributional hands. Trump suits, short suits and secondary fits all come into play.

Try bidding this hand using step responses versus more a more common method.

West	East
♠ A K J 4 3 2	♠ 5
♥ 6	♥ A K 8 7 3
♦ A K Q 3	♦ J 10 5 4
♣ A 9	♣ J 8 4
2♣	2♠ ⁽¹⁾
3♠	4♥
4♠	?

(1) 7–9 HCP

In this step auction, opener has 21 HCP, and he knows responder has 7–9 HCP. Which player is supposed to bid more?

Now try, using 2♦ as a negative, or waiting, response. An initial response of 2♥, 2♠, 3♣ or 3♦ shows a five-card or longer suit containing two of the top three honors.

West	East
2♣	2♥
2♠	3♦
4NT	5♦
5NT	6♦ ⁽¹⁾
Pass/7♦?	

(1) One king.

6♦ is an excellent contract and, in the words of Huey Lewis and the News, 7♦ “ain’t the worst that I’ve seen.”

There are many methods for responding to the 2♣ opening bid. The one I used above is mainstream. Choose something that fits you, but just remember that shape and fitting cards are as important as point count, so I strongly suggest you avoid the ladder. ■