



Ask Jerry

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Dear Jerry,

Recently, my left-hand opponent opened 2♥, and partner overcalled 2NT, which I took as unusual, showing both minor suits. I bid my longest minor, clubs. Partner now bid spades, which I thought was some type of control bid, showing the atypical strong 5–5. A disaster ensued. He insisted his 2NT was strong, and I equally insisted that we had agreed to play the unusual 2NT. Please adjudicate.

Sarah

Hi, Sarah,

I like it when people ask me to adjudicate, because adjudicate is such a big word and makes it sound like something I'm going to say is both important and definitive.

The underlying principle is that there should not be preemptive bids by members of opposing sides on the same deal. The rationale is that when *they* are weak, *we* are more likely to be strong, and we need the space to exchange information.

Over a one-level opening bid, a jump to 2NT is more often than not, a form of a two-suited preempt in the two lower unbid suits. For example, over a 1♥ opening, your jump to 2NT might show something like:

♠J x ♥x ♦K J 10 x x ♣Q J 10 x x.

The 2NT overcall is the equivalent of bidding “3♣/♦.” This action falls into the category that I like to call constructively obstructive. Constructively,

partner can expect at least five cards in both minor suits and limited outside defensive strength. Obstructively, this action takes away bidding space from the opponents.

Despite limited high-card strength, this hand has the potential for a lot of playing strength when partner holds a fit(s) for your known suits. For instance, if your partner holds:

♠A x x ♥x x x ♦Q x x ♣K x x x,

the opponents are likely cold for a major-suit game, while a 5♣ contract by you rates to lose a trick in each suit for a two-trick set. At appropriate vulnerability, this could be the best possible result. Two-suited bids, like the unusual notrump and the Michaels cuebid, put partner in the picture, and they often encourage sacrifices over the opponent's game bids.

Now, contrast these two auctions:

West	North
1♣	(2♠)

versus

West	North
2♥	(3♠)

2♠ in the first auction is usually defined as a weak jump overcall: a single-suited hand with playing strength, usually lacking in defensive strength. It's a hand like:

♠Q J 10 x x x ♥x ♦Q J 10 x ♣x x.

The second auction, where the opponents have identified weakness, the jump overcall is best played as inter-

mediate: an excellent, single-suited hand, with both offensive and defensive strength. A typical hand might be:

♠A K J 10 x x ♥A x ♦K J 10 ♣x x.

Simply put, when they are weak, we need bids to show we are strong. When they are strong, we need bids to show we are weak.

In your auction, your partner's 2NT overcall shows 15-plus to 18 HCP, including at least some type of stopper in their heart suit. I feel quite sure that your partner correctly interpreted your 3♣ as Stayman, which it should have been. His 3♠ continuation merely showed at least four spades.

While the unusual notrump is typically preemptive, it can – as you observed – also be used to show a strong hand. But note that in this auction, 2NT is a *jump* over an opening one-level bid, not an overcall after the opponents open a weak two-bid.

West	North	East	South
	<i>Partner</i>		<i>You</i>
1♥	2NT	Pass	3♣
Pass	3♠		

Here's a hand that would justify the auction above:

♠A x ♥x ♦A K J x x ♣K Q J x x.

Sorry that I had to rule against you, but I hope that your partnership feels adjudicated. ■