

Smolen Bridge Convention - Bidding and Responses

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The Basics

After a 1NT opening, Smolen allows responder to show 5-4 or 4-5 shape in the majors with game-forcing values. One advantage is that the opening bidder always becomes declarer if a major-suit game is reached.

How Does It Work?

Responder starts with a normal Stayman Two Clubs. Examples of suitable hands opposite a strong 1NT (15-17 HCP):

Hand A

♠ K J 8 3
♥ A Q 5 4 2
♦ 8 2
♣ 9 5

Hand B

♠ Q J 10 5 4
♥ K J 9 8
♦ A
♣ 7 6 4

If opener bids Two Hearts or Two Spades to show a four-card major, then the auction continues as any other Stayman sequence.

Smolen, however, comes into play when opener bids Two Diamond to deny a four-card major. Responder now jumps to the three-level in his **shorter** major, thereby showing five cards in the other major.

A complete auction:

Opener

♠ A 9
♥ A 10 7
♦ K 9 8 2
♣ A J 8 5

Responder

♠ Q J 10 5 4
♥ K J 9 8
♦ A
♣ 7 6 4

Opener

1NT
2 ♦
3NT

Responder

2 ♣
3 ♥ *
Pass

Three Hearts shows exactly four hearts and five spades. Opener then indicates his doubleton spade by bidding 3NT.

Another example:

Opener	Responder
♠ A 9 5	♠ Q J 10 5 4
♥ A 10	♥ K J 9 8
♦ K 9 8 5 2	♦ A
♣ A J 8	♣ 7 6 4

Opener	Responder
1NT	2 ♣
2 ♦	3 ♥ *
3 ♠	4 ♠
Pass	

This time, opener advances with Three Spades holding three-card support. Responder raises to game, although he could also make a slam try with a strong hand. Either way, the opening bidder will declare the contract, and thus the opening lead will usually come around to the stronger hand.

Similarly:

Opener	Responder
1NT	2 ♣
2 ♦	3 ♠
?	

Now responder has shown four spades and five hearts. Opener can bid 3NT with only a doubleton heart, or Four Hearts with three-card heart support.

Reaching the "Wrong" Major

On the rare occasion when responder is 5-4 in the majors and opener holds four-card support for both of those suits, you will play in the weaker fit using Smolen:

You	Partner
♠ K J 7 4	♠ Q 10 8 5 2
♥ A 8 6 3	♥ K 7 4 2
♦ A Q 4	♦ K
♣ Q 4	♣ K 6 2

You	Partner
1NT	2 ♣
2 ♥	4 ♥
Pass	

You reach game in your eight-card heart fit rather than the more robust nine-card spade fit. Not that this will always be a bad thing: if hearts split 3-2, you may be able to discard a minor-suit loser on dummy's long spade.

However, there are two downsides to playing Four Hearts in this situation.

First, a 4-1 heart break is likely to be more problematic if that suit is trumps rather than if it is a side suit. For a start, you may be able to discard losing hearts on minor-suit winners in a spade contract. No such option is available when hearts are trumps.

Second, with only four cards in the suit, the defenders are more likely to be able to engineer a spade ruff playing in hearts than they are to have a heart ruff available against a spade contract. On the diagrammed deal, LHO leads a singleton spade against Four Hearts. RHO wins with the ♠ A, gives his partner a spade ruff, regains the lead with the ♣ A, and delivers a second ruff to put your game one down. If you are really unlucky, North began with 1-2-5-5 shape and South still has a trump trick to come too. Declarer has made just eight tricks.

Against Four Spades, the defense leads a heart. Declarer wins with the king, cashes the ♦ K, and then plays a trump. South wins with the ♠ A and plays a second heart. Declarer draws South's remaining two trumps, discards two hearts on the top diamonds, and concedes a trick to the ♣ A. Four Spades makes 11 tricks.

Bidding 5-4 and 4-5 Hands Without Smolen

While Smolen can prove useful, my view is that these hands can be bid easily enough with transfers. Then the above sequences can be used for more difficult hand types instead.

The following is my partnership structure for finding major-suit fits **without** Smolen.

Sequence	Meaning
1NT—2 ♣ —2 ♦ —2 ♥ / ♠	<u>Garbage Stayman</u> , showing a weak 5-4 or 4-5. Alternatively this can be <u>Puppet Stayman</u> , showing a 4-card major with at least game-invitational strength.
1NT—2 ♦ —2 ♥ —2 ♠	Invitational or stronger 4-5 majors.
1NT—2 ♥ —2 ♠ —3 ♥	Game-forcing 5-4 majors. Unfortunately there's no way to show 5-4 majors with only invitational strength.
1NT—2 ♣ —2 ♦ —3 ♥	Invitational 5-5 majors, instead of Smolen.

1NT—2 ♣ —2 Slam-invitational 5-5 majors, instead of Smolen.
♦ —3 ♠

1NT—4 ♦ —4 Game-going 5-5 majors without slam interest.
♥ / ♠

What follows is a breakdown of each of these sequences.

1NT—2 ♣ —2 ♦ —2 ♥ / ♠

Using standard methods, you can also use Stayman when holding a weak hand with both majors (5-4 or 4-5) or with a three-suited hand short in clubs. This is sometimes called Garbage Stayman.

With the three-suiter, you intend to pass any reply to Stayman.

With both majors, you can investigate a possible 4-4 fit in your shorter major and, if that does not materialize, sign off in your five-card suit. Thus:

Opener	Responder
♠ K J 10	♠ Q 7 5 4
♥ A 7 3	♥ J 9 8 6 2
♦ Q J 10	♦ 8 3
♣ A J 7 3	♣ 5 4

Opener	Responder
1NT	2 ♣
2 ♦	2 ♥
Pass	

In my view, opener is NOT invited to bid Two Spades over Two Hearts with 3-2 shape. Responder should be 4-5 in the majors, and we would generally prefer to play a 5-2 fit rather than a 4-3.

Playing Smolen, you need these sequences to show invitational hands with 4-5/5-4 in the majors. Thus, with weak 5-4 and 4-5 hands, you cannot use Garbage Stayman. Rather, you have to guess to transfer to your five-card major and pass the response. Your side will therefore play a 5-2 fit occasionally rather than a 4-4 fit.

Note that if you play Two Clubs as Puppet Stayman, then you have to give up Extended Garbage Stayman because those sequence are needed to find 4-4 major-suit fits on invitational and game-forcing hands.

1NT—2 ♦ —2 ♥ —2 ♠

You

♠ K 6 4 3
♥ A Q 8 7 6
♦ 10 2
♣ 9 4

Partner You

1NT 2 ♦
2 ♥ 2 ♠

Here, you transfer into hearts before bidding spades. This sequence is forcing for one round only, so you can show both suits efficiently when holding only game-invitational values.

If partner then bids 2NT, Three Hearts or Three Spades (all showing a minimum), then you can stop in a partscore on your combined 23-count (or thereabouts). The slight downside is that you become declarer in any spade contract.

1NT-2 ♥—2 ♠—3 ♥

When responder is 5-4 in the majors, he can also transfer and then bid his second suit. Thus:

Opener	Responder
1NT	2 ♥
2 ♠	3 ♥

Responder has shown 5+ ♠ / 4 ♥ and game values (or better). Opener can now choose the denomination by bidding Three Spades, 3NT or raising hearts. (Four Clubs or Four Diamonds would be a cue-bid with a maximum hand agreeing hearts.)

One downside of this sequence is that responder will declare any heart contract. Also, note that there is no invitational sequence with this shape. You either use Stayman and sign off at the two-level, or you commit to game.

1NT—2 ♣—2 ♦—3 ♥

Most of the time when you add a conventional method to your system, you have to give up either the natural meaning for certain bids or alternative uses for sequences. In my view, the biggest downside of playing Smolen is that there are other hand types that can make better use of these bids.

How, for example, would you bid this hand facing a 15-17 1NT opening?

♠ Q J 8 6 4
 ♥ A 8 6 5 2
 ♦ 10 4
 ♣ 8

How exactly you force to game (if that is your decision), brings us to the question of how to bid various strengths of hands with 5-5 majors. I prefer to use two of those sequences gained by **not** playing Smolen for that purpose.

Thus:

Opener	Responder
1NT	2 ♣
2 ♦	3 ♥

This jump to Three Hearts shows specifically 5-5 in the majors and game invitational values. Something like the hand above. Opener now chooses to play at the three-level or in game in his preferred major.

1NT—2 ♣—2 ♦—3 ♠

The other sequence, with responder jumping to Three Spades at his second turn, can then be used to show the same shape but at least slam invitational values. How, exactly, you continue the auction after Three Spades is a matter for partnerships to discuss. This is how my partnership advances:

Opener	Responder
1NT	2 ♣
2 ♦	3 ♠
?	

Opener's Rebid	Meaning
3NT	No preference, unsuitable for slam. Now: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 ♣ sets hearts, strong slam try or more • 4 ♦ sets spades, strong slam try or more • 4M is to play (having already made a slam try)
4 ♣	Slam interest agreeing hearts
4 ♦	Slam interest agreeing spades
4M	Preference with an unsuitable hand for slam

Once the suit is set, either player can cue-bid, Blackwood, or bid the agreed suit to show no extra values.

1NT—4 ♦ —4 ♥ / ♠

With a 5-5 hand that just wants to play game in whichever major opener prefers, responder jumps directly to Four Diamonds. (We do not play Texas Transfers.) Thus:

Opener	Responder
1NT	4 ♦
4 ♥ / ♠	Pass

This sequence is not invitational. It just asks opener to choose a major at the four-level.

Origins

Smolen was created by the late American expert Mike Smolen.

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