

This series is based on *Grant Standard*, a set of conventions and agreements that are in popular use today, such as 15-17 INT openings, five-card majors, and weak two-bids. A summary chart of *Grant Standard* and the corresponding convention card can be found at www.AudreyGrant.com. The site also has *Grant Basic*, a simpler set of agreements.

Earlier articles in this series appeared in the *Bridge Bulletin* and can also be found under 'Articles' at www.AudreyGrant.com.

In the previous issue we looked at the unusual notrump, a way to compete with a two-suited hand when the opponents have opened the bidding. This convention proved so effective, that Mike Michaels of Miami suggested another 'unusual' way to show a two-suited hand over an opponent's opening bid.

The Direct Cuebid

When the opponent on our right opens the bidding in one of a suit, it's rare that we want to suggest playing in the same trump suit. So the classic meaning assigned to a direct overcall in the opponent's suit was to show shortness in the suit and a very strong hand—a sort of 'super' takeout double. The artificial bid of an opponent's suit is termed a **cuebid**.

Over the years, the cuebid was expanded into a general forcing bid used in a variety of situations. Experience showed that a direct cuebid of right-hand opponent's suit wasn't very useful to show a strong hand. Such hands occur rarely and can be shown by starting with a takeout double and bidding strongly thereafter—perhaps following up with a cuebid of the opponent's suit.

So Mike Michaels suggested that a direct cuebid of the opponent's suit could be used to show a two-suited overcall as follows:

The Michaels Cuebid

MICHAELS CONVENTION

- A direct cuebid of 2♣ or 2♦ shows 5+ cards in both majors.
- A direct cuebid of 2♥ shows 5+ spades and 5+ clubs or diamonds.
- A direct cuebid of 2♠ shows 5+ hearts and 5+ clubs or diamonds.

Suppose the auction starts:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♦	?

This would be an ideal hand to make a Michaels cuebid of 2♦, showing at least five cards in both major suits.

♠	A J 10 7 5
♥	K Q 9 8 5
♦	4 2
♣	3

Suppose the auction begins:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♥	?

With this hand, we can bid 2♥, showing at least five spades and a five-card or longer minor suit—which could be clubs or diamonds.

♠	A J 10 7 5
♥	3
♦	4 2
♣	K Q 9 8 5

The advantage of showing two suits at once is that we have a better chance of landing on our feet. Partner likely has a fit for at least one of our suits. Knowing we have a distributional hand might help partner to compete, perhaps taking a sacrifice against the opponents' contract. The cuebid also takes more bidding room away from the opponents.

Of course, there is a downside. We risk getting the partnership overboard when we don't have a fit. The opponents might then double our contract for penalty. However, the Michaels convention has proved so popular it is used by almost all club and tournament players.

Length of the Suits

As with the unusual notrump, a Michaels cuebid typically promises at least five cards in each suit. The more distributional, the safer it is to compete. For example:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♠	?

A 2♠ cuebid will commit the partnership to bidding a suit at the three level, but with 6-6 distribution, there's little danger. The opponents likely have a fit of their own and won't want to defend, even with the majority of the high cards.

By promising at least 5-5 in the two suits, partner, as advancer, will be able to compete knowing that only three-card support is needed for an eight-card fit.

Strength of the Hand

The Michaels cuebid is primarily designed as an obstructive tool. It does not promise much strength, only good distribution. Typically, it shows less than the values for an opening bid. With a stronger hand, we can overcall the higher-ranking suit, planning to show the other suit at the next opportunity.

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♦	?

With this hand, South can simply overcall 1♠ rather than cuebidding 2♦. South can bid hearts

♠	A K 7 6 4
♥	A Q 9 8 3
♦	4
♣	Q 5

later if it is convenient. If South were to start with 2♦, it would be difficult to judge whether to bid again if advancer bids at the cheapest level. The hand has lots of defensive strength, so South doesn't want to 'over-compet' when the opponents can't make anything.

Some partnerships prefer a wider range for Michaels and would use that call with the above hand.

However, restricting the cuebid to weakish hands allows advancer to compete aggressively with a good fit on the assumption that if the contract goes down—perhaps doubled for penalty—the opponents can make a game or slam.

We can make an exception when we have a very strong two-suiter, where we are willing to bid again after partner's call.

With this hand, for example, we can use Michaels over a 1♣ or 1♦ opening.

We plan to raise partner's advance to game or bid again if the opponents compete. For example:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♣	2♣
3♣	Pass	Pass	4♥

Partner will interpret our sequence as showing that we want to be in a game contract in one of the major suits. With a better fit for spades than hearts, partner can bid 4♠.

As with all competitive actions, vulnerability is a consideration. We can be very aggressive at favorable vulnerability—when the opponents are vulnerable and we are not—, but should be very conservative if the vulnerability is unfavorable.

Advancing After Michaels

If partner cuebids 2♣ or 2♦, we know partner has both major suits. **With a poor fit, we bid the suit we prefer at the cheapest level, or pass if responder bids. With a good fit with one or both majors, we can compete aggressively.**

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♦	2♦	Double	?

We don't have a good hand to compete since too much of our strength is in the opponents' suits, and we have a poor fit for spades. We don't have to bid after East's double, but with a distinct preference for hearts, we should bid 2♥.

The more it sounds as though we have found a good fit, the less likely the opponents are to double us for

penalty, even if we are in trouble. We shouldn't consider notrump with this type of hand. We're unlikely to have a source of tricks.

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♣	2♣	2♥	?

We should find out what East's 2♥ bid means in this type of auction. Since North has shown both major suits, most partnerships would treat this as a cuebid by responder showing a fit for opener's clubs. However, the auction can become confusing when both sides are making artificial cuebids! Whatever it means, we have a fit with both of partner's suits and should be willing to compete.

A bid of 2♠ would be conservative; a jump to 3♠ is likely to be more effective; and many players would make a preemptive 'raise' all the way to 4♠, especially if our side is not vulnerable. Putting pressure on the opponents is an excellent tactic, and we may come close to making ten tricks in the major suits anyway.

If partner cuebids 2♥ or 2♠, we know which major suit partner has—the other one—, but we don't know which minor suit. If we are interested, we bid 2NT to find out.

ASKING FOR PARTNER'S MINOR

When partner makes a Michaels cuebid of 2♥ or 2♠, advancer's bid of 2NT asks opener to bid the minor suit.

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♥	2♥	Pass	?

Partner has shown spades and a minor. We don't have a fit for spades, so we'd like to play in our minor suit fit. We suspect partner has clubs, but can't be sure. So we bid 2NT. If partner bids 3♣, we will play there; if partner bids 3♦, we can consider bidding more.

If the opponents bid and we want to compete in partner's minor suit, we can bid notrump at a higher level—a sort of 'unusual' notrump.

Suppose we are South and the auction begins this way:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♠	2♠	4♠	?

With a good fit for whichever minor suit partner holds and little defense against 4♠, we want to compete to the five level, especially at favorable vulnerability. Any penalty is likely to be less than the value of the opponents' game. We can bid 4NT to discover partner's minor.

We should be a careful here. It might be obvious to us that 4NT is asking partner to bid a minor, but partner might think we are using the Blackwood convention. Similarly, a bid of 3NT might be considered a natural bid in some sequences. Some partnerships prefer to bid 5♣ in a situation like this, expecting partner to pass with clubs and correct to 5♦ with diamonds. A partnership should discuss such sequences.

Other Uses of Michaels

Once the partnership is familiar with Michaels, **its use can be extended to other situations.**

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♥	Pass	1NT	2♥!

Since South is unlikely to want to play in West's five-card suit, North should interpret South's 2♥ bid as a Michaels cuebid, showing spades and a minor.

Playing in the Opponent's Suit

The opponents occasionally open a three-card minor suit, so it's possible that we might want to play in that suit. This is typically handled by passing and then bidding the suit later, although some partnerships treat a direct jump overcall in the opponent's suit as natural.

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♣	?

With a hand like this we can pass, planning to bid clubs later, or we can jump to 3♣. In either case, we'll hope partner is on the same wavelength! ♦