

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.

When the opponents open the bidding, and we have a two-suited hand, we could start by overcalling in the higher-ranking suit, planning to show the second suit at the next opportunity. However, that second chance may never come. Everyone might pass our overcall or the auction may be at an uncomfortably high level when the bidding comes back to us.

The advantage of being able to show two suits with a single bid is that partner will get a clear picture of our hand right away and may be able to compete even if the opponents take the auction to a high level. Also, it's safer to offer partner a choice between two suits. We're more likely to land in a suitable trump fit, even when the opponents have the majority of the strength.

Many conventional methods have been developed to show two-suited hands. One of the earliest—and most popular—is the unusual notrump, introduced by Alvin Roth in 1948.

Unusual 2NT Overcall

Roth's initial suggestion was that a jump overcall of 2NT over an opening bid of 1♥ or 1♠ can be used to show a weak two-suited hand with both minor suits, clubs and diamonds.

The Unusual Notrump

We can afford to give this 'unusual' meaning to 2NT because we rarely hold a strong balanced hand of 20 or more points when the opponents open the bidding. If we do get such a hand, we can let partner know by starting with a takeout double and then bidding notrump—showing a hand too strong to overcall 1NT.

Suppose the auction starts:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♥	?

This would be an ideal hand to use the unusual 2NT: a weak hand with both minor suits.

♠	4
♥	5
♦	K J 10 7 5
♣	Q J 9 6 4 3

Length of the Suits

What is meant by a 'two-suited' hand? The unusual 2NT bid typically promises at least five cards in each suit: 5-5 distribution or better.

Partner, advancer, will have to choose a suit at the three level and might have only three-card support, or worse. The partnership wants some degree of safety, especially since the 2NT bid can be made with a weak hand.

Suppose the auction starts:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♠	?

It would be very dangerous to bid 2NT with this hand, which would commit the partnership to the three level.

Partner might choose 3♣ on a three-card suit, or even a doubleton, and we would be in a poor contract. It would be better to make a simple overcall of 2♦, or perhaps make a conservative pass.

Vulnerability is a consideration with a borderline hand. The opponents will be quicker to double when we are vulnerable, especially if they are not. The longer and stronger the suits, the less riskier it is to bid 2NT.

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♠	?

Although there are only 8 high-card points, this would be a good hand to bid 2NT even at unfavorable vulnerability.

This hand would be a much riskier 2NT bid. We might only take such an action at favorable vulnerability, if at all.

♠	4
♥	8 3
♦	K Q 8 7 5
♣	Q J 7 5 4

Strength of the Hand

The unusual 2NT is primarily used to suggest a possible sacrifice if partner has a fit with one or both suits. So advancer assumes it shows a weak hand.

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♥	?

This hand has too much potential on defense to suggest a sacrifice against the opponents' contract. Simply overcall 2♦, planning to bid clubs next, if convenient. The deal could belong to our side.

An exception is 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 bid 2NT, planning to raise partner's response. If the opponents compete, we can double to show the extra strength. For example:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♥	2NT
4♥	Pass	Pass	Double

Which Two Suits?

The unusual 2NT proved so useful as a competitive tool that the idea was expanded to include other two-suited hands. **Most partnerships use the jump to 2NT over any bid of one-of-a-suit as unusual, showing the two lower-ranking unbid suits.**

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♦	?

Instead of overcalling 1♥ with this hand, we could jump to 2NT to show the two lower unbid suits, hearts and diamonds. To see why this might be advantageous, suppose we were to overcall 1♥ and the auction continued something like this:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♦	1♥
1♠	Pass	2♠	?

Bidding 3♣ at this point would promise a much stronger hand. Also note how easy it was for the opponents to find their spade fit after the 1♥ overcall. They might not have such an easy time over 2NT.

In summary, the modern style is:

UNUSUAL NT OVERCALL

- 5+ cards in both lower-ranking unbid suits.
- Less than an opening bid (or very strong).

Always check with partner on this. Because opponents sometimes open 1♣ or 1♦ with a three-card suit, some partnerships prefer to keep 2NT as always showing both minor suits, even over 1♣ or 1♦.

Advancing After 2NT

Since the 2NT bid usually shows a weak hand, advancer treats it in a similar manner to other preemptive bids, focusing on trick-taking rather than points. **With a poor fit with partner's suits, advancer signs off at the three level in the preferred suit, or passes if responder bids. With a good fit with one or both suits, advancer competes aggressively, perhaps sacrificing against the opponents' game or slam contract.**

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♠	2NT	Pass	?

With this hand, we have a poor fit with partner's suits, so we simply give preference to diamonds. We would make the same call if North doubled. Things could be worse, we might have had only a doubleton diamond. Landing in a poor contract at the three level is one of the dangers of the unusual notrump. If East bids, we'd be happy to pass.

♠ K J 5 3 2
♥ K Q 6 3
♦ J 7 5
♣ 4

We should not consider playing in notrump with this type of hand. The 2NT bid promises distribution, not strength. Trying to play a misfitting hand in notrump is usually a bad idea and may encourage the opponents to double for penalty.

With this hand we have a good fit with clubs and a useful ♦Q in partner's other suit. We should be willing to compete to at least 4♣ whether or not East bids. We might consider sacrificing in 5♣ if the vulnerability is favorable and they bid game. We don't expect to make 5♣, but it's unlikely to cost more than 500 points if they double.

♠ 8 6 4
♥ K 7 3 2
♦ Q 5
♣ K J 7 4

With this hand we would jump to 5♦ expecting to make the contract if partner has as little as the ♦K and ♣A. We shouldn't lose more than two tricks in the major suits, since partner has at most three cards in hearts and spades. Partner's 2NT bid gives us a pretty good picture of the combined hands.

♠ 8 4 2
♥ A 9 6 3
♦ A Q 7 5
♣ K 5

We have to be on our toes when using a convention such as the unusual 2NT. Consider this auction:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♣	2NT	3♠	Pass
4♠	Double	Pass	?

What do we do with this hand? We must first interpret the meaning of partner's actions. The 2NT call showed the two lower unbid suits, hearts and diamonds.

♠ J 7 3
♥ J 8 4 2
♦ J 10 6
♣ 9 4 3

The subsequent double says partner has a strong distributional hand rather than the usual weak hand. Based on this knowledge, we should bid 5♥. The compete deal might be something like this:

♠ —
♥ A K Q 7 4
♦ A Q 8 7 5 3
♣ 8 5

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

♠ J 7 3
♥ J 8 4 2
♦ J 10 6
♣ 9 4 3

East-West won't have any difficulty making 4♠. With the help of the diamond finesse, we'll make 5♥!

Extending the Unusual NT

Once the partnership is familiar with the unusual notrump, **the concept can be extended to other situations.**

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♥	Pass
Pass	Pass		1NT!

South's 1NT bid in this auction can't be showing a balanced hand with 15–17 points, since South passed initially. Instead it can be used as 'unusual' showing a hand like this: both minor suits and a desire to compete to at least the two level.

♠ 4
♥ 9 3
♦ Q J 9 7 5
♣ K J 10 8 3

Here's a similar situation.

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♠	Pass
2♠	Pass	Pass	?

We are in the balancing position. If we pass, the auction is over. We'd like to compete, but can't make a takeout double without support for hearts. A bid of 2NT would be unusual, asking partner to pick a minor suit.

♠ 9 3
♥ 8 4
♦ K Q 7 5
♣ K J 8 4 2

An experienced partnership can find many opportunities to use an 'unusual' notrump bid. But be careful. Even the best partnerships sometimes have misunderstandings. ♦