

The Unbalanced Heart Convention

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There is one sort of hand that is hard to describe opposite a 1NT opening: an unbalanced hand of game-invitational strength with five hearts and less than four spades, e.g., ♠-AQ3 ♥-J8732 ♦-3 ♣-Q842.

Assuming you want to try for game, how do you proceed? Using Jacoby transfers, you might bid 2♦ and then raise 2♥ to 3♥. Or should you bid 2NT after the 2♥ bid? Would Stayman be the answer?

Any of these routes is risky. Raising hearts could result in a 3♥ contract with Kx or worse opposite your jack-fifth, if opener has a minimum and has to pass. Besides, that sequence shows six hearts. Bidding notrump after a transfer bid is supposed to show a balanced hand. Opener might pass 2NT or go on to 3NT with a 4-3-3-3 hand that would play better in hearts. With Stayman, a 2♠ response by opener shuts out the heart suit (a 3♥ rebid is too dangerous, even if you play it non-forcing).

An invitational two-suited hand can also be a problem: ♠-5 ♥-K8764 ♦-AJ832 ♣-64. After a 2♦ transfer to hearts, most people play that a 3♦ rebid is forcing, but this hand is not good enough for that. If 3♦ is not forcing (as Alvin Roth says), then a game-going two-suiter becomes a problem. Is there another way to show both suits invitational? Try this: With an unbalanced heart hand, transfer to 2♥ and then bid 2♠ artificially:

Opener	Responder
1NT	2♦ - Jacoby Transfer
2♥	2♠ – Unbalanced Heart Convention

Opener	Responder
1NT	2♦
2♥	2♠ – Jacoby Transfer

The 2♠ bid says, "Please tell me about your heart support and hand strength." Opener obeys by bidding 3♥ or 4♥ (or a cue bid) with heart support, 2NT or 3NT without it.

The invitational two-suiter is shown this way:

Opener	Responder
1NT	2♦
2♥	2♠ – Unbalanced Heart Convention
2NT	3♣/3♦ – not forcing

Responder is showing a second suit with invitational strength. Opener will probably pass with his minimum hand and lack of heart support (as indicated by the 2NT bid), but could go on with a good fit. With game-going strength, responder uses a standard forcing Jacoby sequence:

Opener	Responder
1NT	2♦ - Jacoby Transfer
2♥	3♣/3♦ - forcing

What if responder has an unbalanced hand with five spades? No problem, since opener's response to Stayman cannot shut out the spade suit. After opener's 2♦ or 2♥ response, responder can bid 2♠ (forcing, as I play it) and then show a second suit on the next round, not forcing, if opener rebids 2NT:

Opener	Responder
1NT	2♣
2♦/2♥	2♠
2NT	3♣/3♦/3♥ – not forcing

With a game-going hand, responder would use a forcing Jacoby sequence, transferring to spades before showing the second suit.

The Unbalanced Heart Convention is also useful after a 2NT opening, but there is no stopping below game:

Opener	Responder
2NT	3♦
3♥	3♠

The 3♠ bid is Unbalanced Heart Convention, showing an unbalanced hand with hearts. With a balanced hand, responder would rebid 3NT instead of 3♠.

Opener's Response to Unbalanced Heart Convention

When responder uses Unbalanced Heart Convention, opener's next bid clarifies his hand:

Opener	Responder
1NT	2♦
2♥	2♠
2NT - no heart support, minimum hand (cheapest bid)	
3♣ - no heart support, maximum hand (next cheapest bid)	
3♦ - notrumper cue bid in support of hearts, minimum hand	
3♥ - heart support, minimum	
3♠/4♣/4♦ - heart support, maximum, notrumper cue bid	
3NT - maximum, heart support, no good notrumper cue bid holding	
4♥ - same, with four good hearts	

The reason for bidding 3♣ with a maximum and no heart support is that the bid provides room for responder to show a diamond suit. If the 1NT bidder has ♠-AJ32 ♥-K4 ♦-AKJ2 ♣-763, he would certainly be interested to know that responder has a heart-diamond two-suited hand. The 3NT raise serves a similar purpose, leaving room for a 4♣ or 4♦ slam-try bid by responder.

See the previous chapter for a description of notrumper cue bids.

(These show secondary values, e.g., KQx, KJx, etc., not Axx)

Opener may count a moderate hand as a "maximum" if it contains good heart honors and outside points consisting mostly of aces. If in doubt, however, call it a minimum--let responder do any stretching.

Note that with a minimum and heart support, opener can only bid 3♥ or make a notrumper cue bid in diamonds. Responder may sign off in 3♥ if she does not like the 3♦ cue bid (i.e., with a singleton diamond). The 3♣ rebid is forcing to game.

When opener bids 2NT or 3♣ over 2♠, a minimum heart "rebid" shows six hearts and an unbalanced hand. This bid is invitational if opener bid 2NT, forcing if he bid 3♣. A jump to 4♥ over 3♣ is therefore a mild slam try featuring a strong suit. A 4♥ jump over 2NT only says that responder wants to be in game.

Opener	Responder
1NT	2♦
2♥	2♠
2NT/3♣	3♥/4♥

Opener will probably pass 3♥ when he has bid 2NT, showing a minimum. With a balanced hand and six hearts, responder immediately raises 2♥ to 3♥, invitational. Why differentiate? Because Unbalanced Heart Convention gives opener a chance to make a trial bid (but only in diamonds) in support of hearts when she has a minimum. Responder may be able to bid game on the basis of a good diamond fit. With a balanced hand, she doesn't care where opener's outside strength lies--she just wants top cards.

If the next hand bids over opener's 2♥ rebid in response to 2♦, Unbalanced Heart Convention does not apply:

South	West	North	East
1NT	Pass	2♦	Pass
2♥	3♣/3♦	3♠ – natural, spade stopper(s)	

A Unbalanced Heart Convention spade bid must be made at the same level as the transfer. North implies no stopper in the opposing suit, and only a five-card heart suit (but may be cue bidding toward slam). He can't have four spades, of course.

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