

STOPLIGHT

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Have you noticed how often partner jumps to 2NT when you respond to an opening bid with a hand such as ♠-K8742 ♥-J9432 ♦-6 ♣-82? Of course you must pass, even though you know that three of a major would probably be a better contract. Having stretched to respond 1♠, you dare not bid 3♥, which is forcing. Game is unlikely, but could be makeable if opener has a good fit with both majors, such as ♠-AQ3 ♥-KQ10 ♦-AK7 ♣-J963. If you bid 3♥, however, partner is sure to turn up with ♠-Q6 ♥-K85 ♦-AKQ3 ♣-KQ32. Three hearts is the right spot, but you can't stop there.

Another situation: You open 1♦ with ♠-AQ83 ♥-K4 ♦-QJ9762 ♣-4 and partner responds 1♥. Your 1♠ rebid fetches a 2NT rebid from partner:

Opener	Responder
1♦	1♥
1♠	2NT

A 2NT rebid by responder is invitational, not forcing, for most partnerships. In this auction partner perhaps has a hand of this sort: ♠-K4 ♥-98732 ♦-K3 ♣-AJ82. Three diamonds would be much more comfortable than a notrump contract, but can you stop in 3♦? Isn't any further bid by you an acceptance of partner's game invitation?

If you do play that a 3♦ bid now would be a sign-off, then you will have trouble with a hand like ♠-AQ83 ♥-K4 ♦-AQJ872 ♣-4. You must bid 3NT over 2NT, missing an easy slam if partner has the hand shown. If you decide to go slamming in diamonds, partner may turn up with an unsuitable hand: ♠-J4 ♥-AQ832 ♦-65 ♣-KJ87. For this reason, and to avoid the possibility of misunderstandings, it is common practice to play any further bid after an invitational jump to 2NT as an acceptance of the game invitation. If the game try is not to be accepted, then 2NT must be passed.

Most partnerships make one exception to this rule: After a third or fourth seat opening, a rebid of the same suit by opener is a sign-off bid after a 2NT response:

Opener	Responder (a passed hand)
1♠	2NT
3♠ is a sign-off	

Any other rebid by opener is forcing, and is in general an acceptance of the game try by the responder. With a hand such as ♠-KQ876 ♥-A9762 ♦-3 ♣-42 opener should not rebid 3♥, which is forcing. Opener would like responder to take a choice between 3♥ and 3♠, but how can that be done? There is, however, a small chance of making game in a major. Responder could have ♠-

AJ3 ♥-KQ8 ♦-Q87 ♣-8753. The only way to reach game is for opener to make the terrible overbid of 3♥. Then responder is sure to have ♠-J10 ♥-J108 ♦-AQ84 ♣-K953, and the result is a defeated game contract in hearts or notrump.

What we need is a "stoplight" bid, one that says, "Stop! I'm light!" The logical call, since it is the cheapest, is a bid of 3♣. After any non-forcing jump to 2NT, a bid of 3♣ says, "I think we should stop below game, unless you have a terrific fit. Please bid 3♦, and I'll clarify my hand -- perhaps by passing!" Example:

Opener	Responder (a passed hand)
1♠	2NT
3♣ - Stoplight	

A 2NT response by a passed hand is not forcing, but opener wants to stop in three of a suit. Opener may have ♠-A87632 ♥-KQ4 ♦-4 ♣-Q32 or ♠-AQ863 ♥-9 ♦-A8763 ♣-42. When responder now bids 3♦, opener bids 3♠ with the first hand and passes with the second. In this sequence responder should not bid 3♦ with a preference for spades over diamonds. With ♠-J109 ♥-AJ5 ♦-Q92 ♣-KJ74 responder bids 3♠, not 3♦. With four hearts instead of four clubs responder bids 3♥, in case opener has spades and hearts. Another example:

Opener	Responder
1♥	1♠
2NT	3♣ - Stoplight

Now opener must bid 3♦ with equal length in spades and diamonds, because partner could have more diamonds than spades. He could have any of these hands:

- | | | | |
|-------------|-------|----------|--------|
| 1) ♠-J97632 | ♥-4 | ♦-Q8 | ♣-J642 |
| 2) ♠-KJ765 | ♥-543 | ♦-J943 | ♣-7 |
| 3) ♠-A873 | ♥-4 | ♦-J86543 | ♣-65 |
| 4) ♠-Q9742 | ♥-4 | ♦-K10832 | ♣-42 |

Responder wants to stop in 3♠ with hand 1), unless opener has a fine spade fit with quick tricks outside. With hand 2) responder will bid 3♥ if opener bids 3♦, offering opener a choice between 3♥ and 3♠ as a final contract. With 3) responder hopes to stop in 3♦. Otherwise the contract will be 4♦, which figures to be better than 2NT, or 3♠ (giving responder a chance to practice playing a 4-3 trump suit with a 6-2 suit on the side). With 4) there is a good chance that responder will end up playing 3♦ with a 5-3 fit in both spades and diamonds. The difference is unimportant at rubber bridge or IMP scoring, and stopping anywhere at the three level is likely to be a top score (or if not, a bottom score) in a matchpoint contest.

Stoplight is often useful in takeout double sequences:

South	West	North	East
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1♦	Dbl	Pass	1♠
Pass	2NT	Pass	3♣ - Stoplight
South	West	North	East
1♣	Dbl	Pass	2NT
Pass	3♣ - Stoplight		

West has a minimum double and an unbalanced hand that includes a five-card suit. He thinks that the partnership should stop short of game, despite East's 11 (or so) HCP, but he doesn't like the idea of passing 2NT. East must now bid 3♦, which the doubler will either pass (e.g., with a 3=3=6=1 hand or correct to three of a major).

The Stoplight bid is not an absolute command to play at the three level. Suppose the bidding goes:

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♦
2NT	3♣ - Stoplight

Responder probably wants to stop in 3♦, but opener can bid 3NT with a great diamond fit and fast tricks outside.

May the Stoplight bid ever be passed? Not usually, but I can think of three situations where it might be:

Opener	Responder (a passed hand)
1♣	2NT
3♣ - Stoplight	

Opener usually has a six or seven-card club suit with a weak hand, but could have a weak 5-5 in the black suits. Responder may pass with three clubs and a doubleton spade.

Another:

Another:	Opener	Responder
	1♣	1♦
	1♠	2NT
	3♣ - Stoplight	

Responder may now pass with four clubs, but not with three. Opener might have ♠-KQ76 ♥4 ♦-Q873 ♣-KQJ2, planning to pass 3♦.

But suppose responder has a better hand, and wants to be in game? How can responder show club support in a good hand without going past 3NT, since a 3♣ bid is artificial? We must find another call to show a forward-going club bid in a game-going hand. Bid 3♦ to show clubs? But then how would we show diamonds with a good hand?

Before solving this problem, let's take a look at the bids of 3♥ and 3♠ over 2NT. These bids tell something about our major suit holdings. If instead of using these bids to inform partner about our majors, we ask partner about his majors, we can make that inquiry with just one bid. By using one bid to serve the purpose of two bids, we gain back the bid we used for Stoplight.

The bid that asks partner about the majors should obviously be 3♦. After a non-forcing jump to 2NT, a 3♦ bid asks, "Do you have one of the following: 1) an unbid four-card major suit? 2) support for a major that I have bid? 3) a rebiddable holding in a major that you have bid? With two of these, bid 3♥; with none, bid 3NT." If partner has previously denied a four-card major (e.g., in response to a takeout double), then the 3♦ inquiry asks for a three-card major.

For instance:

Opener	Responder
1♥	1♠
2NT	3♦ ?
3♥	- five hearts, may have spade support
3♠	- spade support, four-card heart suit
3NT	- neither of the above

The 3♦ inquiry is forcing to game, since Stoplight is used with weak hands.

Now we have two unused bids -- 3♥ and 3♠ -- which we can use to show a club or diamond bid in a game-going hand, perhaps with slam interest. After a non-forcing jump to 2NT, a 3♥ bid shows a normal forward-going 3♣ bid, and a 3♠ bid shows a normal forward-going 3♦ bid:

Opener	Responder
1♥	1♠
2NT	3♥ shows clubs
	3♠ shows diamonds

Opener now bids as if responder had made a normal forcing bid in the indicated minor suit.

The artificial nature of a 3♥ or 3♠ bid still applies when the minors have been bid previously:

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♦
2NT	3♥/3♠

A 3♥ bid shows club support, while a 3♠ bid shows a rebiddable diamond suit. Both bids are an acceptance of opener's game invitation, with a possible interest in slam.

Stoplight is also used to differentiate between a slam try and a sign-off in game:

1)Opener	Responder
1♣	1♠
2NT	3♣ – Stoplight
3♦	4♠

2)Opener	Responder
1♣	1♠
2NT	4♠

Sequence 1) denies interest in slam, a sign-off, while sequence 2) shows a desire for slam if opener's hand is suitable. The same principle applies after all invitational jumps to 2NT:

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♠
2NT	3♣ – Stoplight
3♦	4♥

Responder has at least 5-5 in the majors and little interest in slam.

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♠
2NT	3♦ - asking about majors
3♠/3NT	4♥

Since opener has denied four hearts or spade support, responder must be at least 5-5 in the majors. Since he did not use Stoplight, this sequence indicates some interest in slam. Why not jump to 4♥ over 2NT? Because that is an "auto-splinter," showing something like ♠-AQJ10432 ♥-6 ♦-K76 ♣-J4. You don't play auto-splinters? You should!

If an artificial bid gets doubled, the meaning of a redouble depends on whether the suit has been previously bid in a natural sense:

1)North	East	South	West
1♣	Pass	1♠	Pass
2NT	Pass	3♦	Dbl
Redbl			

2)North	East	South	West
1♦	Pass	1♠	Pass

2NT	Pass	3♦	Dbl
Redbl			

In sequence 1), where diamonds have not been bid naturally, the redouble just shows a double stopper or better in diamonds, not a desire to play in 3♦ doubled. In sequence 2) diamonds have been bid as a real suit previously, so the redouble shows good diamonds and suggests that perhaps a 3♦ contract can be made. South may use judgment in deciding whether to pass or bid on.

Stoplight is used when an opponent has bid, but remember that the 2NT bid must be a jump for Stoplight to apply:

North	East	South	West
1♣	1♦	1♠	Pass
2NT	Pass	3♣ - Stoplight	

However:

North	East	South	West
1♣	Pass	1♠	2♦
2NT	Pass	3♣ - is natural, weak	

Stoplight does not apply when the other side has made a takeout double (since a jump to 2NT over an opposing takeout double is conventional, not natural). It does apply after a jump 2NT response to an overcall:

South	West	North	East
1♦	1♠	Pass	2NT
Pass	3♣ - Stoplight		
	3♦ - asks about the majors		
	3♥ - club suit		
	3♠ - ? (diamond suit?)		

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