Many players use Jacoby transfers in response to an opening 1NT bid from partner. It allows responder to show a five-card or longer major, while allowing the strong hand – the 1NT opener – to declare, assuming the opponents are not in the auction.

Allowing the strong hand to declare is important. The 1NT bidder frequently holds combinations of honors (called tenaces in bridge lingo) that are worth more tricks if the defenders lead into them than if the defenders lead through them. For example, if you hold the ♥A Q, you’d like your left-hand opponent to lead a heart for you, but not your RHO.

Game-forcing hands that are 5–4 in the majors (five spades and four hearts or vice versa), however, are difficult to describe in response to a strong (15–17 HCP) 1NT opening. Transfers are a problem in this situation because they risk making responder – the weak hand – declarer.

Say you hold:

♠A K 6 5 3  ♥K 8 7 4  ♦8 7 3  ♣4.

Partner opens 1NT. You respond 2♦, a Jacoby transfer to spades, and partner dutifully bids 2♠. You have enough strength to force to game, and you have a four-card suit you haven’t mentioned yet, so you bid it: 3♥.

This is a perfectly good auction, but there is a risk. You are the declarer in this case, not partner. Suppose these are the combined hands:

♠Q 8  ♥A 9 6 2  ♦K 5 4  ♣A Q 10 7

♠A K 6 5 3  ♥K 8 7 4  ♦8 7 3

If LHO leads the ♥Q, you’re in big trouble. The ace will be over the king, and you’ll likely lose three diamond tricks and a trump trick for down one.

The problem is that partner’s ♥K was vulnerable to attack. If partner declared, however, he’d likely make the contract since the ♥K would be protected.

Is there a way to avoid this problem? The Smolen convention, named for the late expert Mike Smolen, helps address this situation. It works like this: instead of using transfers for hands that are 5-4 in the majors, it uses Stayman (2♣). After partner’s 1NT opening, you bid 2♣.

If partner pleasantly surprises you by bidding a major, you’ll simply jump to four of that major, and partner will declare. But what if partner doesn’t have a four-card major? He’ll respond to your Stayman inquiry with 2♦. Now what? Could you still have a 5–3 major-suit fit? Is there a way to find out?

This is where Smolen helps. You now jump to the three-level of your shorter major. This Alertable call tells partner that you have four cards in that major and five in the other. With the previous example hand, you’d jump to 3♥. This jump after opener’s 2♣ rebid would tell partner that you have four hearts and five spades. With three-card spade support, he would bid 3♠, and you could raise to 4♠ or cuebid if you were interested in slam. Without a three-card spade fit, partner would simply sign off in 3NT.

Example auctions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opener</th>
<th>Responder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1NT</td>
<td>2♣</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2♥</td>
<td>3♠</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3NT</td>
<td>Pass</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) Stayman: do you have a four-card major?
(2) No.
(3) Smolen: I have five hearts and four spades.
(4) I have three hearts and prefer this to 3NT.

<table>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2♥</td>
<td>3♠</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) Four-card major?
(2) No.
(3) Five spades, four hearts.
(4) I don’t have a fit for spades.