



# THE BIDDING TOOLKIT

## Smolen

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♥. Partner raises you to 4♥.

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  
♣ 4

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. Either way, partner – the 1NT opener – declares.

Example auctions:

Opener	Responder
1NT	2♣ <sup>(1)</sup>
2♦ <sup>(2)</sup>	3♠ <sup>(3)</sup>
4♥ <sup>(4)</sup>	Pass

- (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.

Opener	Responder
1NT	2♣ <sup>(1)</sup>
2♦ <sup>(2)</sup>	3♥ <sup>(3)</sup>
3NT <sup>(4)</sup>	Pass

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