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**"The 'Smolen Convention' as a Way to Show Partner as a  
1NT Opener Who After Your Bid 2C Stayman  
Denies a 4-Card Major That You as Responder Hold  
(1) at Least 5-4 or 4-5 in Both Majors and  
(2) 'Game-Going' HCPs"**

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To return to the "Esther Bridge Lessons," CLICK:

<https://esther-bridge.com/index.html>

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One of Esther's *most treasured* bridge books is Marty Bergen's 2011 little "pocket book", Pocket Posh: Tips for Bridge Players. Within his 2011 "pocket book" Bergen emphasizes *very strongly* that 2-Suited Hands play very well in Suit Contracts. That fact indeed is the basis for Bergen's "**Rule of 20**" as introduced in the first few pages of his 1996 award-winning bridge book, Points Schmoints!. The "**Rule of 20**" says you can and *should* open with a **Suit** bid, in any position, in any vulnerability, if the sum of (1) your HCPs plus (2) the number of cards in your **2** longest suits equals **20** or more. Within his 2011 book Bergen notes that:

“Any hand with 5-5 distribution has great potential. This is especially true when you have good suits, and really gets exciting once you find a fit.” (p. 17)

Of course, holding a 2-Suited Hand when your **2** "long" Suits are *both* Majors is particularly exciting because contracts set in

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<sup>1</sup> As noted in an article in the Winter/Spring, 2024 article in The American Bridge Teachers' Association (ABTA) Journal, [https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/ABTA\\_1\\_24.pdf](https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/ABTA_1_24.pdf), Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen in fact is a hypothetical, and not a real person! So this article was really, really written by Bruce Thompson.

the Majors yield higher Bridge Scores than do contracts set in the Minors.

### Why "Showing" Partner

#### Your Hand Is 2-Suited Is **So Important**

As noted, a 2-Suited Hand plays very well when you are playing Suit contracts. However, there is *another* reason why it is important to "show" Partner your 2-Suited Hand: the probability of finding a "fit" with Partner go up *massively* as your Hand holds 2 Suits. The probability of finding an 8-card "fit" when your 2 Suits are **4-3** is **49%**, when your 2 Suits are **4-4** is **60%**, and when your 2 Suits are **5-3** is **66%**. But when your 2 Suits are **5-4** is **74%**, and when your 2 Suits are **5-5** is **84%**!<sup>2</sup>

### Conventions With Which Opener or Responder

#### "Shows" a 2-Suited Hand

The fact that 2-Suited Hands play well in Suit contracts is honored by the various conventions with which the Opener or the Responder can "show" a 2-Suited Hand:

1. The "**Flannery Convention**" with which an Opener "shows" both Majors by bidding **2D!**:  
<https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/flannery.pdf>
2. The "**Reverse Flannery Convention**" with which a Responder "shows" a Hand 2-Suited in the Majors.  
[https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/Rev\\_Flann.pdf](https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/Rev_Flann.pdf)
3. The "**Unusual 2NT Convention**" with which an Overcaller of an Opponent's Suit bid "shows" a Hand 2-Suited in the 2 "lowest" unbid Suits:  
[https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/unus\\_2NT.pdf](https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/unus_2NT.pdf)
4. The "**Michaels Cuebid**" with which Overcaller of an Opponent's Suit bid "shows" a Hand 2-Suited in the 2 "highest" unbid Suits if RHO opened 1 of a Minor:  
[https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/5\\_cuebids.pdf](https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/5_cuebids.pdf)

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<sup>2</sup> Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons" see "**A Comprehensive List of 8 Different Categories of Bridge Probabilities, and How These May Help Guide Your Bidding and Play**":

[https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/8\\_probs.pdf](https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/8_probs.pdf)

If RHO opened a Major a "**Michaels Cuebid**" Overcall shows 5 cards in the unbid Major and 5 cards in an unspecified Minor.

The "**Smolen Convention**" "shows" the 1NT Opener that you as Responder hold (1) both Majors either 5-4, 4-5, or possibly 5-5 and (2) Game-going HCPs given Opener's **15-17** or **15-18** HCPs. And the "**Smolen Convention**" allows you to "show" exactly which Major is "longer" (or possibly "stronger") than the other.

#### Frequency of "*Smolen-Eligible*" Hands

You will be dealt a Hand that is **5-4** in the **2** "longest" Suits in **24.7%** of randomly-dealt Hands (5431 = **12.9%**, 5422 = **10.6%**, 5440 = **1.2%**;  $12.9\% + 10.6\% + 1.2\% = \mathbf{24.7\%}$ ).<sup>3</sup> There are **6** possible 5-4 Suit combinations (i.e., S-H, S-D, S-C, H-D, H-C, D-C). Therefore, you will be dealt a Hand that is 5-4 in the Majors in  $24.7\% / 6 = \mathbf{4.1\%}$  of the Hands you are randomly dealt.

You will be dealt a Hand that is **5-5** in the **2** "longest" Suits in **24.7%** of randomly-dealt Hands (5521 = **3.2%**, 5530 = **0.9%**;  $12.9\% + 3.2\% + 0.9\% = \mathbf{4.1\%}$ ). There are **6** possible 5-5 Suit combinations (i.e., S-H, S-D, S-C, H-D, H-C, D-C). Therefore, you will be dealt a Hand that is 5-5 in the Majors in  $4.1\% / 6 = \mathbf{0.7\%}$  of the Hands you are randomly dealt. Therefore, you will be dealt "*Smolen-Eligible*" Hands (i.e., 5-4 or 5-5 in the Majors) in  $4.1\% + 0.7\% = \mathbf{4.8\%}$  of the Hands you are randomly dealt!

Who Was Michael Smolen,

the Inventor of the "**Smolen Convention**"?

**Michael J. Smolen** (1940 - 1992) was an American champion bridge player. Smolen won **5** North American Bridge Championships (NABC) and was runner-up in **3** North American Bridge Championships. In 1982 Smolen was awarded the Fishbein Trophy for winning the greatest number of American Contract Bridge League MasterPoints at the at the NABC that year.

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<sup>3</sup> See "**Relevant Percentages for Bridge Players**":  
<https://www.bridgewebs.com/taverham/Probabilities.pdf>

## Preconditions for Responder Bidding the "Smolen Convention"

1. The Opener must make a 1NT opening bid showing (1) 15-17 or 15-18 HCPs, (2) a "balanced" Hand with (a) no void, (b) no singleton, and (c) no more than 1 doubleton, but (d) possibly a 5-card Major.
2. Responder must bid 2C Stayman<sup>4</sup> asking Opener if he holds a 4-card or 5-card Major with Responder "promising" 8-10 or 9-10<sup>5</sup> HCPs.
3. Opener 1NT bidder must respond to the Stayman 2C bid by bidding 2D to deny holding a 4-card Major.

### The "Smolen Convention"

After the Partnerships' bidding proceeds 1NT - 2C - 2D, then the Responder holding a 5-4 or 4-5 (or possibly 5-5) distribution in the Majors along with Game-going HCPs next bids the Major in which he holds 4 cards thus promising the Opener that he holds 5 cards in the other Major. As Larry Cohen notes in his posting, "Smolen",<sup>6</sup> on his "Bridge with Larry Cohen" website explains, this bidding has the distinct advantage that

**"if [O]pener wants to play in the five-card [M]ajor, it [the contract] is played from his (the strong) side. As is usually the case notrump opening [by which Opener 'shows' his 'strong' Hand], you want the strong hidden playing the contract" [and for that Hand to be 'hidden']".**

### Examples of "Smolen" Bids

Here are two examples slightly modified from Marc Smith's "BridgeBum" website posting, "Smolen".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> As noted by Esther in her "Brief History of Contract Bridge" the "Stayman Convention" was actually noted invented but Sam Stayman but instead was invented circa 1940 independently by George Rapée and by Jack Marx.

<sup>5</sup> Some Partners require 9-10 rather than 8-10 HCPs to bid Stayman because if the final contract is set at 3NT that 1 extra HCP may matter.

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://www.larryco.com/bridge-articles/smolen>

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.bridgebum.com/smolen.php>

Example #1

NORTH (15)

Dealer

**Partner**

**S:** A T  
**H:** A T 8  
**D:** K 9 8 3  
**C:** A J 9 6

SOUTH (14)

**YOU**

Opener

**S:** Q J 9 6 3  
**H:** K J 9 7  
**D:** A  
**C:** 8 7 5

Bidding

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEAT
1NT	PASS	2C	PASS
2D	PASS	3H*	PASS
3NT**	PASS	PASS	PASS

\*SOUTH's "Smolen" "jump" 3H bid "shows" (1) 5 Spades and 4+ Hearts and (2) Game-going HCPs.

\*\*NORTH's 3NT bid *denies* 3 Spades and *denies* 4 Hearts.

Example #2

NORTH (16)

Dealer

Partner

S: A T 5  
H: A 9  
D: K 9 8 5 3  
C: A J 9

SOUTH (11)

YOU

Opener

S: Q J 9 6 3  
H: K J 8 7  
D: A  
C: 8 7 5

Bidding

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEAT
1NT	PASS	2C	PASS
2D	PASS	3H*	PASS
3S**	PASS	4S	PASS
PASS	PASS		

\*SOUTH's "Smolen" "jump" 3H bid "shows" (1) 5 Spades and 4+ Hearts and Game-going HCPs.

\*\*NORTH's 3S bid "shows" 3+ Spades.

**"Smolen" After Opener Bids 2NT**

Smolen is also "on" when the Opener bids 2NT rather than 1NT. Thus, in the following auction,

Opener	Responder
2NT	3C
3D	3H

the Responder's 3H bid "shows" (1) the Partnership together hold Game-going values and (2) the Responder holds 5+ Spades and 4 Hearts. Similarly, in the auction,

Opener	Responder
2NT	3C
3D	3S

the Responder's 3H bid "shows" (1) the Partnership together hold Game-going values and (2) the Responder holds 5+ Hearts and 4

Spades. And some Partnerships by Partnership Agreement play the following variation as illustrated in this auction:

Opener	Responder
2 <b>NT</b>	3 <b>C</b>
3 <b>D</b>	4 <b>C</b>

the Responder's 4**C** bid "shows" (1) the Partnership *together* hold Game-going values and (2) the Responder holds exactly **4** Hearts and **4** Spades.