

AUTHOR OF 25 STEPS TO LEARNING 2/1

PLAYING 2/1

THE REST OF THE STORY



PAUL THURSTON

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CONTENTS

Introduction	5
1: Hand Evaluation — Getting Off on the Right Foot	7
2: Major-Suit Openings in Third or Fourth Seat	19
3: Raising Partner's Major — Interrupted	31
4: A Notrump Ladder for 2/1	65
5: The Extended Notrump Family	75
6: The Auction after 1NT — Our Notrump Engine	85
7: The Rest of the Notrump Story (or Most of It!)	107
8: The Newest New Minor Forcing or THE ABC's of XYZ	115
9: XYZ — The Rest of the Story	129
10: Review Quiz Featuring XYZ Auctions	143
11: If It's Broken, Let's Fix It!	156
12: Going Forward in Reverse and There's No Fault in Default	165
13: Review Quiz	179

INTRODUCTION

Time is on my side

So sang Mick Jagger, but maybe it really isn't! It has been well over a decade since the publication of *25 Steps To Learning 2/1*. At the end of that book I promised a follow-up to flesh out the system, particularly in the area of competitive bidding, and to fill in some of the other gaps, so I guess it's time to get at it! (I know wife Jo-Anne, publisher Ray and great student Theo will agree!)

The intervening time hasn't been totally wasted, as there have been many changes in bidding theory and technology since 2002: some of those will be discussed in this book and incorporated into its recommendations. Also, I've had all those years of feedback from readers and students, as well as the opportunity to field-test personally both the 2002 version of 2/1 and the newest additions you'll discover here.

This book includes several chapters that, strictly speaking, don't deal directly with 2/1 auctions or tools, but have related topics that are still necessary parts of the overall system.

For example, suppose these are your agreements:

Opener	Responder
1♥	1♠
1NT ¹	

1. 12-14 HCP balanced.

Opener	Responder
1♥	2♦
2NT ¹	

1. 12-14 HCP balanced or 18-19 HCP balanced.

Opener	Responder
1♥	2♦
3NT ¹	

1. One-loser six-card hearts with side stoppers.

What would your bidding plan be with:

♠ K 6 ♥ A J 7 6 5 ♦ Q 9 8 ♣ K Q 4

or with :

♠ A Q 9 8 7 ♥ A 7 4 ♦ 8 7 ♣ K Q 5

We'll deal with this (and many more related issues) in the chapters entitled *The Extended Notrump Family* and *Our Notrump Engine*.

Also on tap: a more fully-developed approach to understanding and using reverses as well as a *Having-Your-Cake-And-Eating-It-Too* version of the *Newest New Minor Forcing*.

Whatever you do, don't throw away your dog-eared copy of *25 Steps To Learning 2/1* (unless you've got a new one on hand!) as most of what's in there will still be part of how we'll bid in the future and we will refer to that original book throughout this one.

Thank You to all the great regular partners who have "field tested" these bidding methods in various forms of competition over the years and, I hope, have pointed me in winning directions:

Ron Nichol, Rick Delogu, Dave Willis, Jeff Smith, Mike Rippey, Dave Woods, Alberto Fernandez, Paty Cantu, Keith Balcombe, Duncan Phillips and, of course, Jo-Anne — who have all made the effort to form and improve these 2/1 methods such great and pleasurable fun.

Finally, I hope you do, unlike Jagger, get some satisfaction from the following pages!

HAND EVALUATION — GETTING OFF ON THE RIGHT FOOT

A number of readers of *25 Steps To Learning 2/1* complained that I relied too much on high-card points (HCP) as the way to assess a hand's strength and for breaking down ranges for systemic bids, for example 6-9 HCP, 10-12 HCP, etc.

Now I do realize that other methods for hand evaluation exist — Losing Trick Count, ZAR points, Kaplan-Rubens Evaluator and so on — and they all have their adherents. But without being overly simplistic, I intended then (and still do now) to make the 2/1 system accessible to the greatest number of readers without requiring a drastic reorientation from the point-count approach we all learned in Basic Bridge 101. In short, if it ain't broke, it don't need fixing!

However, there are several adjuncts to HCP-oriented thinking that may be worth rehashing so we're on the same wavelength.

Quality of Points

1. Aces and kings are worth slightly more than the 4 and 3 values they're assigned in the classic 4-3-2-1 scheme, while queens and jacks are slightly overvalued. However, no one needs or wants to be burdened with numbers like 4.37, 3.18, 1.94 and 0.87, so we'll stick with the rounded-off versions while keeping in mind the relative over- and under-valuations of the honor cards.

2. Honor cards in combination are definitely more valuable than the same cards strung out on their own. A holding of KQ6 in a suit will produce one trick for sure and maybe even two, while K64 in one suit and Q65 in another may not produce any tricks at all, even though both holdings add to 5 HCP. Also, honor cards supported by good high spot cards are worth more than otherwise: QJ10 will be a trick while QJ5 may not be.

In part, this ‘quality of points’ concept was meant to be reflected in the intentional overlap of certain systemic bids. For example, in *25 Steps* we defined a constructive single raise of a major as three-card support with 8-10 HCP while a three-card limit raise could be 10-12 HCP. For example:

♠ Q 8 7 ♥ Q J 7 6 ♦ K 7 ♣ Q 7 4 3

This is a maximum single raise of 1♠ to 2♠ (isolated honors, no aces, no good spot cards) while:

♠ K J 10 ♥ 6 4 ♦ A Q 10 9 5 ♣ 8 7 6

would be a good minimum for a three-card limit raise. Notice that both examples add to 10 HCP.

Distributional Points

Having learned all about the Goren-style distributional point count that assigns values to short suits, long suits and maybe even Armani suits, many readers asked where that disappeared to in my presentation of 2/1. In my view, counting points for distribution is not necessary or even useful except in one very specific circumstance — when a fit has been found and a player (either opener or responder) is contemplating pushing to game or slam.

As an example:

♠ A Q J 9 8 7 ♥ 3 ♦ A K 10 3 ♣ 9 7

For me, this is a 14 HCP hand. A good one to be sure, but still just 14 HCP. The classic Goren approach would have you count something for the short suits (2 for the singleton heart and 1 for the doubleton club) but that can lead to the grossest kind of overvaluation due to what’s called ‘duplication of values’. For example, if I’m counting 2 points for

the heart shortness and partner is counting 4 HCP for ♥KJ65, jointly we are counting 6 points for heart ‘values’ yet may take no tricks in the suit!

Now some of this duplication of values will often be unavoidable, but the simple approach of not counting distributional points until a fit has been found will eradicate much of the problem. Further, not counting short-suit points but emphasizing long-suit values instead (the modern approach adopted by most teachers) will generally result in greater accuracy.

For the bean counters, the above example is 14 points until spades have been raised and once that has happened, you might add 2 points for the sixth spade and another point for the good four-card side suit. After your 1♠ opening has been raised to 2♠, your hand would then be worth 17 total points and worth a shot at game (assuming, as is recommended, the 2♠ raise is constructive with 8-10 HCP).

Note that if partner’s response is 1NT, so that no spade fit has been found, the example hand is still worth only 14 HCP: a good 14 to be sure but still only 14 until we have some better sense of where the auction might be heading.

Opening the Bidding

Surprisingly enough, this is the one area of bidding practice that has changed the most in the last decade, even though that change is incrementally small. Previously, I suggested 12 HCP as the bottom end for opening bids of one of a suit but there is a definite trend (especially among upper-echelon players who think they can take more tricks) to lower that to 11 HCP.

Look at these hands:

1. ♠A Q 8 7 5 ♥K Q 7 4 ♦9 8 ♣9 6
2. ♠A 6 ♥9 4 ♦K Q 9 8 5 4 ♣Q 8 6
3. ♠A J 7 6 5 ♥7 6 ♦A Q 8 4 3 ♣7
4. ♠A 9 8 ♥K Q 8 4 ♦Q 6 ♣9 7 6 5
5. ♠K Q 8 7 6 ♥A 9 7 6 5 ♦J 7 ♣7

These are all examples of hands that I have seen opened in first seat by players claiming to be playing 2/1.

Now, I know everybody prefers bidding to passing and there’s most definitely a modern mania for ‘Bid! Bid! Bid! and worry about having to take tricks later’ but there are at least two hidden dangers to opening with the featherweights listed above.

Danger 1

One of my favourite algebraic memory aids for bidding is:

$$OB + OB = G$$

This is a short form for ‘When an Opening Bid is opposite another Opening Bid, Game should be reached’. But this will result in more minus scores than pluses if the opening bid is based on one of the hands above and responder, with a similar paucity of values, insists on reaching game. Indeed, even if responder has the values associated with a more classic opening bid, the game reached will often be unmakeable if opener has one of those featherweights.

For example, when I saw Hand 1 above opened 1♠, opener’s partner held

♠ 2 ♥ 10 6 5 ♦ A Q 7 4 ♣ A Q 8 4 3

and pushed to a no-play 3NT. Now, one more HCP may not seem like a lot but one more jack in either of those hands (especially in opener’s to get him up to 12) would have made the quest for nine tricks much likelier to succeed.

The long and short of it: if your partnership is going to lower the bar for an opening bid, you had better raise the lower limits for responder’s game forces and invitations (or really, really improve your declarer skills while investing in whatever good luck charms you hope might work!).

Danger 2

Keeping in mind that every opening bid is actually two bids in one — the one you’re making and the rebid you’re going to have to make most of the time — preparing a sound base for that rebid will often be crucial.

Take Hand 4 above:

♠ A 9 8 ♥ K Q 8 4 ♦ Q 6 ♣ 9 7 6 5

The ‘modern’ player holding these cards opened 1♣ and over his partner’s 1♠ response, rebid 1NT. No big stretch, you say, as responder was expecting 12-14 for the rebid. But this responder held

♠ Q 10 6 4 ♥ A 9 ♦ A 10 9 4 ♣ K 4 3

and jumped to 3NT. And while the Meckstroths and Versaces of the world might make game with this combination, the contract was odds

against and eventually drifted one off — dummy was understandably disappointed!

The problem lies with the stretching of ranges occasioned by the opening bid and rebid. Here's the table we're going to be recommending:

Opener	Responder	
1X	1Y	
1NT		= 12-14 HCP
1NT		= 15-17 HCP
1X	1Y	
2NT		= 18-19 HCP
2NT		= 20-21 HCP
2♣	2♦	
2NT		= 22-24 HCP

This scheme for the Notrump Family of hands and the relevant HCP content doesn't really work well at all if the first entry is stretched to 11-14 HCP. In fact, most pairs who allow one-bids on balanced 11 HCP hands change the rebid of 1NT to show 11-13 and the 1NT opening to show 14-16 with relevant adjustments all the way through the structure.

In the example we've been examining, the other pair holding these cards in a high-level match passed with the 11 HCP hand, fetched up in 2NT and made that for a decent gain. That result would also have been obtainable after opening 1♣ with the 11 HCP hand but only if the responder had settled for merely inviting game with his decent 13 HCP.

The bottom line: if you're going to be a 'modern' player and open as light as some of these examples, your partnership will need to make wholesale system adjustments to the strength of responding hands you're going to force to game with — and even those you're going to invite with. Here's another example of what can happen when the light initial action isn't balanced by heavier standards for responder's actions:

Opener

♠ K Q 6 4 3
 ♥ A 7 4 3 2
 ♦ J 5
 ♣ 8

1♠

2♥

pass

Responder

♠ J 7 5
 ♥ 10 6
 ♦ K 4 3 2
 ♣ A Q J 3

1NT

3♠

A trump lead, the ♦A offside, hearts 4-2 — all not unreasonable or unlikely but the final result was down two. The hand was actually played well and declarer did guess (desperately) to take a club finesse to generate a trick there. Assuming an initial pass and a lightish third-seat opening you might stop in 2♠ and manage a small plus but passing the deal out is not inconceivable either (and would, I'd wager, score well in many arenas).

Now, I don't want to make wimpish conservatives out of all of you who like this kind of 2/1 style. Your card play skills never get sharpened if you're not occasionally in razor-thin contracts, and there are many light opening bids (judging by HCP standards) that fit the style profitably:

- 1) One-suited hands with playing strength regardless of partner's fit for our main suit:

♠ K Q 10 9 6 5 4 ♥ A Q 6 ♦ 7 2 ♣ 3

Only 11 HCP, but a very good suit and a hand that requires very little from partner for game to be playable.

- 2) Two-suited hands that offer ease of rebid.

In *25 Steps* I emphasized the difference between two-suited hands where the suits are touching in rank and those where the suits are not touching. We'll see later in Chapter 12, *Going Forward In Reverse*, how and why this is important, but for now just accept that within the systemic structure, non-touching two-suiters that are also sub-minimum in HCP are better passed in first or second chair while those with touching suits might be opened. Remember, spades and diamonds form a non-touching combination as do clubs and hearts, while spades and hearts, hearts and diamonds, clubs and diamonds, and spades and clubs are the touching-in-rank combinations.

♠ A Q 10 9 4 ♥ K Q 10 9 2 ♦ 7 2 ♣ 3

Open 1♠ in first or second seat — two five-card suits touching in rank and only 1 HCP off our threshold of 12 HCP. Good quality suits as well.

♠ J 7 6 4 2 ♥ A 3 ♦ K 8 5 3 2 ♣ K

Pass in first or second seat — non-touching suits and poor ones at that. While we still would count the ♣K as 3 HCP, it's not a good 3 points when he's all by himself.

Danger 3 — Upgrades, downgrades and the flaws approach

No discussion of modern bidding practice in any systemic structure, 2/1 included, would be complete without some attention being paid to the process of upgrading and its less common cousin downgrading. 'Upgrading' refers to the mental evaluation process whereby a player rates a hand as being worth more than its face value in terms of HCP and slots the hand into a bidding category one up from what you might expect.

For example, an upgrader would see:

♠ A 10 ♥ A 10 5 ♦ A Q 10 9 5 ♣ 10 9 4

as worth more than a 'mere' 14 HCP (very good spot cards, three aces and a quality long suit) and open 1NT even though that might promise 15 HCP. All those plus values will usually overcome the lack of one more jack.

Compare this example with:

♠ Q 5 ♥ K 6 5 ♦ A Q 4 3 ♣ A J 5 4

a 'real' 16 HCP example we'd all be happy to open 1NT. There's little doubt which of the two hands is stronger in terms of trick-taking potential, even though it contains two fewer HCP.

Factors to consider for a possible upgrade/downgrade:

- Aces and kings are more valuable than their point count implies, while queens and jacks are less so.
- Honor cards supported by tens and nines are better than those with lower spot cards.
- Stray jacks and queens, especially if in short suits, are not great.
- It will always be better to have two four-card suits as a possible source of length tricks than to be 4-3-3-3.

2/1 - BEYOND THE BASICS

Paul Thurston's *25 Steps to Learning 2/1* was an instant bestseller, winning the 2003 American Bridge Teachers' Association Book of the Year award. In a tantalizing postscript to that book, he promised a sequel, one that would cover 'the rest of the story' for those who wanted to add modern sophistication to their 2/1 bidding. Here at last he delivers, and the long wait has been worth it. This book describes an understandable and playable version of today's most popular system, something that has been missing from the literature until now. The topics covered include comprehensive notrump and major-suit raise structures, and XYZ, the most up-to-date version of New Minor Forcing.



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