

Bridge Theory for the Practitioners

Amit Chakrabarti

25. The Semi-Forcing Notrump, Part I

Forcing Notrump response to 1-Major opening is commonly viewed as an essential tool if one plays a 2/1 game forcing (GF) system. Let's say that the opener opens 1S with a minimum balanced hand and a general 5332 shape. He would be forced to bid something over 1N response and is expected to bid 2C or 2D promising only 3 cards in the minor suit. Responder now often settles for 2S with a 5-2 fit even holding 4 or 5 cards in that minor not knowing what sort of fit in the minor suit exists. The situation could be worse if opener opens 1H with a minimum hand and with 4 spades along with a specific 4-5-2-2 shape. Now after 1H – 1N, 2C promises only 2 cards in the suit. This problem might be solved by playing Flannery 2D but one can envision other, perhaps better, use for 2D opening.

I argue that Forcing NT is **not** an essential tool for playing 2/1 GF. We play 1N over 1 – Major (1M) as *semi-forcing*. Semi-forcing sounds like an oxymoron as something must be either forcing or non-forcing. From that point of view, our semi-forcing NT is actually non-forcing. However, the range of semi-forcing 1N is extended (typically showing 6-11 high card points) compared to the Standard American non-forcing 1N showing 6-9 points. Also, opener would not pass the semi-forcing NT if he has a side suit of at least 4 cards with one exception. He has the option of passing the semi-forcing NT with a minimum hand and a specific 4-5-2-2 shape when he opens 1H.

What are the advantages of semi-forcing NT?

- Consistent with 2/1 GF structure. 1N over 1M shows 6-11 high card points.
- Playing in 1N is a possibility and often creates good results. With a general 5332 shape and minimum hand, opener would pass 1N. More on this in part II of this subject.
- Minor suit fits can be explored better. Being able to play in a 4-4- minor fit often produces +130 (making 4) while 2M produces only +110 or can even go down.

What are the disadvantages of semi-forcing NT?

- 3 card limit raise cannot be shown by bidding 1N first as partner might just pass 1N.
- Some bigger balanced hands (more than 11 counts) cannot be included in 1N semi-forcing structure. Again, the risk is that partner might just pass 1N.
- If the responder has 10-11 points and 5+ Hs and bids 1N semi-forcing, there is a huge risk that the H-fit might never see light as again, partner might just pass 1N.

In this article I will focus on the issue of **Limit Raises** when playing Semi-Forcing NT. Now, both 3 and 4-card limit raises must be shown directly and not going through 1N. One can modify Bergen raises for this purpose. For example, one can say that 1M-3C is 4 card limit raise and 1M – 3D is 3 card limit raise. However, one loses the ability to show a *mixed raise* (mixed raise typically means 6-9 count with 4 trumps.).

The structure I play with my regular partner avoids these difficulties and more. For example, opener often has a huge problem evaluating his hand after a 3 card limit raise without knowing immediately whether responder has any kind of shortness or not. Our structure solves this problem as well.

I. Limit Raises when Responder is not a passed hand:

3C Three Types of Hands

- 1) **6-9 with 4+ trumps (Mixed Raise); might have some shortness**
- 2) **10-11 with 4 + trumps; might have some shortness**
- 3) **10-11 with exactly 3 trumps; MUST have some shortness**

3D 10-12 with exactly 3 trumps; NO shortness

Opener's 2nd bid after 1M – 3C

- 3M = Please pass even if you have the Limit Raise hand. I have opened a dog.
- 3H, only after opening 1S = I have game interest with 5S and 4H and looking for a 4-4 H fit.

(Note: I am a 4-4 fit junky. In this case 4-4 H fit if exists would play better than a 5-3 S fit or sometimes even better than a 5-4 S fit. I recall one 6H slam we bid, made only because of that one extra pitch in long Spades.)

- 3D = Please describe your hand; I have game interest if you have a Limit raise

Responder's 2nd bid after 1M – 3C – 3D

- 3M = mixed raise hand
- 3 Other major (i.e. S over 1H opening and H over 1S opening) =
I have a limit raise hand with shortness

If interested, opener can now bid 3N to ask where that shortness is.
- 4M = I have the *baddest* limit raise possible. I have no shortness.
- 4C/4D = I have a good limit raise hand and I am cue bidding A or K of the suit I am bidding. (Our cue bidding structure is *Italian Style* and I will write about it in a future column).

II. Limit Raises when Responder is a passed hand:

Now one does not need to bid 3C or 3D to show limit raises. One can play Two-way Reverse Drury and bid thusly:

2C Three Types of Hands

- 4) 6-9 with 4+ trumps (Mixed Raise); might have some shortness**
- 5) 10-11 with 4 + trumps; might have some shortness**
- 6) 10-11 with exactly 3 trumps; MUST have some shortness**

2D 10-12 with exactly 3 trumps; NO shortness

As you can see, it has the same structure (less memory strain), just one notch lower.