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ONCE upon a time it was considered more important to show the location of your high cards rather than the nature of your hand. These days we realise that balanced and distributional hands should be treated significantly differently. Once you might have opened an Acol 2♥ with ♠ A Q 4 ♥ A K J 3 2 ♦ K 7 6 ♣ A 10. Nowadays you would open 2NT.

Traditional methods of bidding after a 2NT opening such as Baron (bidding four-card suits up the line) or Stayman did nothing to locate a 5-3 major-suit fit, so the next step was to play Five-card Stayman. To start with this was simple: 3♣ asked if opener held a five-card major – if he had one he bid it, otherwise he bid 3♦. Then responder could introduce four-card majors until a fit was found.

The snag with this method, however, was that it meant that 4-4 major-suit fits tended to be played by the weaker hand with the 2NT opener coming down in the dummy, making it much easier for the defence. So some bright spark suggested that it would work better if responder, instead of bidding the suit he held after the 3♦ response, bid the suit he hadn't got. Brilliant!

Of course, as with every system, there are variations, but this is a fairly simple version:

After 2NT – 3♣:

- 3♦ denies a five-card major but promises a four-card major;
- 3♥ shows five hearts;
- 3♠ shows five spades;
- 3NT denies a four- or five-card major.

After 2NT – 3♣ – 3♦:

- 3♥ shows four spades;
- 3♠ shows four hearts;
- 3NT is to play – responder was only interested in a five-card major;
- 4♣ shows both majors and slam

interest (now 4♦ is a sign off, asking responder to bid 4♥ which opener will pass or convert to 4♠ – this can make the weaker hand declarer but only when he is in game and is known to have fair values, so shouldn't matter too much; 4♥/4♠ set the suit and accept the slam try);

- 4♦ shows both majors with no slam interest; opener just bids his major.

For example:

♠ A Q 6 5		♠ K J 4 3
♥ A 5		♥ K Q 6 2
♦ A K 10 6		♦ Q 5
♣ A 9 6		♣ 8 7 2

West	East
2NT	3♣
3♦	4♣
4♠	4NT
5♦	6♠

Once West shows a maximum with four spades, East is worth a slam and just checks there aren't two aces missing (pretty impossible if West is maximum but it always makes us feel a bit more confident if we can use Blackwood or RKCB, as here).

One of the other problems with bidding over 2NT is when responder has five spades and four hearts. This was easy in the days of Stayman because after the 3♦ response responder simply bid 3♠ and opener could choose between 3NT and 4♠. But this is a difficult hand for these new methods. Some people like to play that a 3NT response to 3♣ denies a four- or five-card major and also denies three spades, meaning that responder with 5-4 in the majors can happily pass knowing that there is no eight-card major fit; conversely, the 3♦ response does not promise a four-card major, but when

no 4-4 fit is found, responder can bid 4♠, confident of three-card support.

Fairly recently another bright spark (or maybe the same one for all I know!) came up with a much simpler solution to this problem: simply swap the 3♥ and 3NT responses. So now:

After 2NT – 3♣:

- 3♦ denies a five-card major but promises a four-carder;
- 3♥ denies any majors, whether four- or five-card;
- 3♠ shows five spades;
- 3NT shows five hearts (after this, 4♦ is a 're-transfer' asking opener to bid his suit and get the hand played the 'right' way up).

This removes all problems with 5-4 in the majors. Responder can enquire and then bid 3♠ over 3♥, showing five spades and allowing opener to bid 3NT, 4♠ or cue-bid as appropriate. For example:

♠ A Q 4		♠ K J 10 5 3
♥ K 5		♥ A 7 6 2
♦ K Q 4		♦ A 3
♣ A K 7 3 2		♣ 5 4

West	East
2NT	3♣
3♥	3♠
4♣	4NT
5♠	5NT
7♠	

One can use Five-card Stayman after a 1NT opening too, but it is less common. In my view it does not go very well with a weak no-trump because you give up the ability to remove 1NT with a weak hand, and that is too big a price. It is my preference to play it with a strong no-trump, though, and I like to play that responder bids the suits he has, not the ones he doesn't. I'm not sure there is a good reason for this – just habit! □