

Four-Suit Transfers Over 1NT vs. 2♠ Relay to 3♣

One of the first conventions players learn as they gain experience is Jacoby Transfers. A common “add-on” is to use 2♠ as a relay to 3♣, showing a weak hand in either ♣ or ♦. There is less common agreement on the meaning of 3♣ or 3♦ directly over 1NT. Some play these as showing slam interest; some play these as invitational; some may not have an agreement. The 2♠ relay system has several weaknesses. Opener doesn’t know which minor responder has. Responder doesn’t have a method of differentiating between weak, invitational, and slam interest hands.

Suppose partner opens 1NT, and you have xx/xx/KQxxxx/xx. What do you bid? If partner had the ♦A, you should have great chances to make 3NT. If partner has a Jx or worse in diamonds, you are likely to take only one diamond trick in NT.

A four-suit transfer system solves most of these problems. 2♠ shows clubs, and 2N shows diamonds.

In the above example, responder would bid 2NT, showing diamonds. However, there is “room” for opener to make two bids (3♣ or 3♦). Experts use this opportunity to tell partner whether opener holds the A or K of diamonds. We will play “reverse Bergen acceptance”, which means that bidding 3 of responder’s minor shows the A or K. Bidding the intermediate suit denies the A or K. Thus, on the example hand, responder would bid 3NT over 3♦, but would sign off in 3♦ over 3♣. It is true that responder will now be the declarer in 3♦, but this is a minor disadvantage compared with knowing whether or not to bid game.

If responder has a hand with slam interest, he can begin with a relay to identify his 6+ card suit and follow that with one or more cue bids, to allow opener to indicate interest or not.

The Four-Suit Transfer does have one disadvantage. 1NT-2NT is no longer a balanced raise with 8+ to 9 points. There is a solution, but it’s more complicated. With such a hand, you must go through Stayman first (even in you don’t have a 4-card major). Also with 8+ to 9, balanced with 4♠, after 1NT-2♣-2♥ you must bid 2♠. Partner will know you don’t have 5 (without 4♥) because you would have transferred to spades initially. If you don’t show 4 spades by bidding them, partner must assume that you had no four-card major and that you had bid Stayman on your way to a 2NT raise.