

Hamilton Bridge Centre

Reverses By The Opening Bidder

A bidding minefield.



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Introduction

I wish I had a dollar for every time I hear a new (and sometimes not so new) bridge player say, "I don't play reverses." A reverse is not a "convention"; it's an integral part of Standard American bidding. You simply can't bid many hands correctly unless you understand reverse bids.

However, reverses can also be confusing and intimidating for new players. Hopefully, this article will help "demystify" reverses so you'll understand them and feel comfortable using them.

There is a companion article on [responding to reverses](#) which you should study only after you understand this one.

Before you go further, though, there are three articles you should review before this one. They are:

- [Captains and privates](#)
- [Rebids by opener and responder](#)
- [Is it forcing?](#)

These articles set some groundwork that is useful before you start learning about reverses.

A Tale Of Two Hands

You're sitting North, and the auction has proceeded as follows:

Example 1

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1♦	Pass	1♠	Pass
??			

What would you bid next holding each of the following hands:

♠ A 7
♥ K Q 10 3
♦ A 9 8 7 6
♣ 8 3

♠ A 7
♥ K Q 10 3
♦ A K 8 7 6
♣ Q 3

If your answer is 2♥ in both cases, please continue reading.

Purpose Of Opener's Second Bid

In general, the purpose of the auction is to describe your hand to your partner. This description covers both points and distribution.

When you open the bidding with one of a suit, your hand is very undefined. An opening bid in one of a suit can be made with 12 to 21 points, and with a wide variety of distributions. Your job on your second bid is to both limit your hand and describe your distribution, so partner receives a more accurate picture of your hand. The article on [Captains and Privates](#) goes into more detail on this subject.

The example hands are identical in distribution, but quite different in terms of high card points. The hand on the left contains 13 points (a minimum opening bid), while the hand on the right contains 18 points (substantially more than a minimum). The hand on the right, in fact, is too strong to open 1 NT.

Clearly, bidding 2♥ in both cases cannot be correct. How will partner know whether you have the 13 point hand or the 18 point hand? You have to find two different bids, one that describes the minimum 13 point hand and one that describes the more powerful 18 point hand.

I'm going to give you the answers now, and then explain the reasoning behind them. The minimum 13 point hand should rebid 1 NT. The more powerful 18 point hand should rebid 2♥. Now, on with the explanation.

Some General Bidding Principles

There are two general bidding principles at work in these two hands:

1. The weaker your hand, the fewer bids you should make.
2. Always consider what partner has **not** bid.

How do these two principles work with these two hands?

1. The weaker your hand, the fewer bids you should make.

When you open a 13–point hand, you are opening with a **minimum** hand. As a rule of thumb, a minimum opening hand should only make two voluntary bids (you make more than two only if partner continues to make forcing responses). These two bids taken together should clarify the strength and distribution of your hand.

When you open an 18–point hand, you have a bit more leeway. Since you have extra strength, you can risk bidding higher even if partner has a weak hand. That means you can risk a third voluntary bid to tell partner that your combined hands may be in the game range.

2. Always consider what partner has **not** bid.

In this auction, **partner has not bid hearts**. Why not? At this point, the assumption you make is that **partner holds fewer than four hearts**. If partner held four hearts, you assume he would have responded 1♥ instead of 1♠. What's that? Partner could hold five spades and four hearts? Of course he could, in which case the 1♠ response is correct. But on his next bid, partner will tell you about the hearts.

Principles At Work

Let's apply the two principles to the two example hands.

When you rebid 2♥ in this auction, **you are bidding a suit partner does not hold**.

With a minimum 13–point hand, bidding a suit partner does not hold is dangerous. Partner will probably bid again, and you will probably feel obligated to make a third bid. This violates principle number 1: only make two voluntary bids with a minimum opening hand. That's why a 1 NT rebid is correct with this hand: it shows a minimum point count and a (reasonably) balanced hand. Also, the 1 NT rebid is **not forcing**. Partner can pass if he chooses (and he should pass with a balanced minimum of his own). When partner holds five spades and four hearts, though, partner should rebid 2♥ over your 1 NT. **This rebid is not forcing** (see the article on [Is It Forcing?](#) for more details). As opener you will pass and voilà: you find your eight–card heart fit after all.

With the stronger 18–point hand, you can afford to bid a suit partner does not hold. This **unusual** bid alerts partner to the fact that you

hold a stronger hand. You don't expect to play the hand in hearts (you've assumed partner doesn't have them), but your stronger hand allows you to make a third voluntary bid. You will get the chance to make that third voluntary bid because your 2♥ bid is **forcing** (more details on that shortly).

Some Additional Thoughts

Many newer players have a problem rebidding 1 NT with the minimum opening hand shown in this example. Two of the most common reasons they give are:

1. I don't have a club stopper.

So what. Except in specific situations (such as when the opponents are bidding as well), a notrump bid does not promise stoppers. All you're doing with your 1 NT rebid is showing a minimum opening hand with reasonably balanced distribution.

2. I want to rebid my diamonds so partner knows I really have them.

You have probably been told not to rebid a five card major suit when you open 1♥ or 1♠. Let me fill you in on a little secret: the same thing applies when you open a minor. Unless you have no other choice, never rebid a minor suit without six or more cards in the suit. Trust me. An exception might be in a team game when your five card diamond suit is particularly strong. But that's about the only exception I can think of. And it doesn't apply in this case anyway, because the diamond suit in the 13–point hand is pretty ratty looking.

Behold The Reverse

We've come this far and I still haven't explained what a reverse is. I've done that on purpose: before you can understand reverses (whatever they are), you need to understand why the two example hands require different bids on your second round. Now that you understand this reasoning, you're ready for: **the reverse**.

The 2♥ rebid discussed above is an example of a **reverse**. Why is it called a reverse? Who cares about the name; just remember that a reverse bid must satisfy **all** of the following conditions:

- You're bidding a suit partner has bypassed in the bidding. In the example above, partner bypassed hearts in order to bid spades.
- The bypassed suit is **higher ranking** than your original suit. In the example above, you started with diamonds. Since hearts are higher ranking than diamonds, a heart rebid is a reverse.
- A point that hasn't been made so far: your first suit is **longer** than the second suit. In the example hand, you hold five diamonds and four hearts. In order to reverse, your first (lower ranking) suit must be longer than your second (higher ranking) suit. In a typical reverse, you will hold five cards in your first suit (diamonds), and four cards in your second suit (hearts). We'll discuss this further in a later section.

When To Reverse

Now that you know what a reverse bid is, when can you make one? There are two conditions that must apply:

1. **You must hold more than a minimum opening bid.** How much more? Use a reverse bid with hands in the 16 to 18 point range. Knowing that your hand is within this range, responder can judge his bids much more accurately. With a hand in the 19 to 21 point range, you should either jump shift (with a two–suited hand) or jump directly to game (with a single–suited hand). If partner's initial response is at the two level, a reverse on 15 points is acceptable, provided your high card points are generally concentrated in your two suits. Let's look at two examples:

Example 1 (Repeated)

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1♦	Pass	1♠	Pass
??			

Example 2

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1♦	Pass	2♣	Pass
??			

In Example 1, your partner has responded at the one level. This response only promises 6 points (although partner could have more). You should hold at least 16 points to reverse.

In Example 2, your partner has responded at the two level. This response promises 10 points (again, partner could have more). Now, you can reverse with fewer points because partner has extra. You can reverse with as few as 15 points.

- You must have the correct distribution.** In order to reverse, the length in your two suits must be **unequal**, with the **lower-ranking suit being longer**. Even experienced players sometimes mess up on this one. Let's look at some examples where the distribution requirements are not met.

Example 3

♠ A Q
♥ K Q 10 8 3
♦ A K 9 4 3
♣ 7

In this hand, your two suits are equal in length. In this case, **do not reverse, even with the correct point count**. Start by bidding 1♥. If partner responds 1♠ or 1 NT, rebid 3♦ to show the extra strength (a "jump shift"). If partner responds 2♣, then a rebid of 2♦ is enough. This bid is forcing for one round (see the article on [Is It Forcing?](#) for more details), and with a good hand you want to keep the bidding level low to explore for slam.

Example 4

♠ A Q
♥ K Q 10
♦ A K 9 4 3
♣ 9 8 5

In this hand, your heart suit is too short for a reverse. When you reverse, your second suit must be at least four cards in length (and your first suit at least five). On this hand, a 2 NT rebid would be correct over a one-level response. Over a 2♣ response or a diamond raise, jump to 3 NT.

The Finer Points

Now that you've survived this far, there are some finer points to reverses that you need to know.

What About A 1 NT Response?

Opener can reverse after a 1 NT response. Opener must have the same point count (16 to 18) and distribution requirements as if partner had responded with one of a suit.

When Is A Reverse Not A Reverse?

There are two cases when a reverse is not a reverse.

- When all the bidding is done at the one level. Here's an example:

Example 5

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1♣	Pass	1♥	Pass
1♠			

North's 1♠ rebid is not a reverse, because the bidding is still at the one level. Also, South may have spade support. With four hearts and four spades, South would correctly bid hearts first.

2. When the opponents are competing. This requires two examples:

Example 6**North dealer, neither side vulnerable**

North	East	South	West
1♦	2♣	2♥	Pass
2♠			

In this example, partner's suit (hearts) outranks your first suit (diamonds). Your 2♠ bid in this case is **not** a reverse. You will have four or five diamonds, but only four spades (with five spades, you would have bid spades first).

Example 7**North dealer, neither side vulnerable**

North	East	South	West
1♥	2♣	2♦	Pass
2♠			

In this example, partner's suit (diamonds) does not outrank your first suit (hearts). Your 2♠ bid in this case **is** a reverse.

More Extreme Distributions

So far, we have emphasized that a reverse shows unequal distribution of your two suits, with at least five in the lower-ranking suit (the one you bid first), and at least four in the higher-ranking suit. What about more extreme distributions? Let's look at an example.

Example 8

♠ A 7
♥ K Q 10 8 3
♦ A J 10 9 4 3
♣ —

There's an old saying in bridge: six/five, come alive! Whenever you hold six cards in one suit and five in another, your hand has extreme offensive strength. Conversely, it's not so good for defence (your opponents will probably be ruffing your long suits). Therefore, the point count requirements for a reverse are loosened so you can bid more (Steve likes that part). On this hand, start with 1♦, and rebid 2♥ over any response partner makes. If partner bids again, bid 3♥ to show the more extreme distribution.

Responding To Reverses

This article is already complicated enough, so there's a separate one on [responding to reverses](#). However, you and your partner must understand the following:

- When partner responds at the one level, a reverse is **forcing for one round**.

This would apply in Example 1: over partner's 1♠ response, a reverse by opener to 2♥ is forcing for one round. Responder's next bid will show whether game is possible or not.

- When partner responds at the two level, a reverse is **forcing to game**.

This would apply in Example 2: over partner's 2♣ response, a reverse by opener to 2♥ is forcing to game.

Reverses By Responder

This article has focused on reverses by the opening bidder. However, responder can reverse as well. Here are two examples:

Example 9

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1♦	Pass	1♥	Pass
1 NT	Pass	2♠	

South has reversed, since spades are higher ranking than hearts.

Example 10

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1♦	Pass	1♥	Pass
2♦	Pass	2♠	

South has reversed again (spades are still higher ranking than hearts).

When can responder reverse? Responder can reverse when:

- His hand meets the same distribution requirements as already discussed for opener's reverse. In the above examples, South must hold at least five hearts and at least four spades, with the heart suit always being longer than the spade suit.
- South must hold 13 points or more. Responder doesn't need as much to reverse, since opener has already guaranteed 13+ points with his opening bid.

A reverse by responder is always forcing to game.

Responder can reverse only when opener has rebid his own suit, or or has rebid notrump. Responder is not reversing when he bids the fourth suit, as in the following example:

Example 11

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1♦	Pass	1♥	Pass
2♣	Pass	2♠	

This is not a reverse, even though spades are higher ranking than hearts. South is making a bid called "fourth suit forcing", which is outside the scope of this article. It still shows a good hand (it's forcing either for one round or to game, depending on partnership agreement), but the distribution requirements for a reverse do not apply. South will typically make this bid when looking for a notrump contract missing a spade stopper; North is expected to rebid notrump with a spade stopper, or

rebid one of his original suits otherwise.

In Conclusion

Hopefully, you've now been demystified when it comes to reverses, and your more experienced opponents won't be laughing at your bidding quite as often.