

Understanding the new rules on 2- and 3-level openings (Blue Book 7C)

This note applies to all openings from 2♣ to 3♠ inclusive, but to make it simpler I only discuss the 2♣ opening. Everything here applies to *agreements or understandings* – you can always decide unilaterally to deviate from your partnership agreements, if partner is as surprised as the opponents.

Can I play Benji?

Yes.

To start with, a 2♣ opening can mean anything you like if it promises a “strong” hand. This is now defined as either 16+ HCP, or 12+ HCP and at least 5 controls.

That means you can’t [agree to] open 2♣ on AKQJ10987 KJx Jx - and call it “strong”.

However, BB7C also allows a wide range of possibilities in the 2♣ opening that aren’t “strong”. In particular it can be either a single-suiter (5+ cards) or a two-suiter (5-4 or better) in any suit or suits, any strength, *as long as clubs isn’t one of the possible suits*. Clubs are excluded in this case because the opening bid is 2♣.

So it’s quite legal to [agree to] play a 2♣ opening as:

- 19-20 balanced, OR
- A one- or two-suiter of, say, 10-15 HCP that opener thinks is worth eight playing tricks and don’t want to open at the 1-level, but doesn’t have clubs, OR
- A single- or two-suiter including clubs that either has 16+ HCP or 12+ points and at least 5 controls

(Lots of other combinations of meanings in the 2♣ opening are permitted; this is just an example which looks like the way many people like to play Benji. For example, another popular treatment is to play a 2♣ opening as either game forcing from strength or a weak hand with diamonds.)

That does indeed mean that you can’t [agree to] open KQxxxx – x AKQxxx 2♣, but you can open KQxxxx x AKQxxx –, or KQJ109x AKQJ10x x -.

What about natural Acol Twos?

If you are opening 2♦, 2♥ or 2♠ as a natural, strong Acol Two, you can [agree to] play them whatever strength you want, no restrictions. The strength is announced by partner.

Disclosure

An Acol Two bid is, in the words of Terence Reese a hand ‘of power and quality’ – for Reese it typically had 16-19 HCP or more if it wasn’t worth a game force. If you regularly like to open distributional hands with fewer than 16 HCP (and not clubs) with a Benji 2♣, that’s entirely legal but you must explain the types of hand you might have.

That’s it. The rest of this note gives a little more information and explains *why* the regulation is written this way.

So it’s all about agreements? I can open what I like if we haven’t agreed it?

It’s true that you are free to open 2♣ on anything if it’s not a partnership agreement. This isn’t a “get out of jail free” card however: if a pair explicitly wanted to have an agreement for the 2♣ opening that isn’t permitted, they could always just say “oh no, that wasn’t our agreement, partner

just chose to deviate". It would take a long time before there was sufficient track record to demonstrate that the pair had an illegal concealed agreement. For that reason, the TD will tend to rule that a pair has an agreement unless there is tangible evidence otherwise. Even a first time partnership can have an implicit agreement about the strength needed for a 2♣ opening, including (for example) whether or not the opponents could be left to play in a game contract undoubled.

Where a hand is a true freak (such as with a double void or a 12-card suit), TDs should accept that few pairs would have agreements on how to bid it.

Why are you stopping me opening a traditional Acol Two?

We aren't. We are stopping you opening a (semi-)pre-emptive hand and calling it a strong hand. This is because it's not fair on your opponents who expect a strong opening bid to show a strong hand and may think they need to pre-empt when it's their hand on power. In 'All About Acol' Ben Cohen and Rhoda Lederer explicitly suggest opening a (natural) "strong two" on AKQJxxxx and nothing else, particularly in third seat, "if only on account of the pre-emptive value of the bid".

In traditional Acol, an Acol Two in a minor was always expected to be stronger than in a major. This is also true in Benji where it is possible to bid 2♣ – 2♦ (negative) – 2♥ or 2♠ non-forcing, but a minor must be bid at the three level. It makes perfect sense to require a better hand for the 2♣ opening when the suit (or one of the suits) is clubs.

Why have this exception for the suit opened?

At first sight, it seems odd to have the specific rule that, if opener doesn't have a strong hand, they can't have the suit opened. This rule applies for all artificial pre-empts.

Many hands called an 'Acol Two' have very little defensive strength and are closer to super-charged pre-empts than strong hands. It may be the opposing pair's hand, and depending on how a pair define their 2♣ opening, it may be best to defend against it as if the most likely holding were a pre-empt in an unspecified suit. That's likely to include an artificial double. It's much harder to defend against a pre-empt if the double could easily be passed out because opener has AKQxxx in the suit. Natural two bids (of whatever strength) are far easier to defend against, as a double is unambiguously for take-out.

Look at the August 2017 English Bridge article for some examples.

Why don't other countries have rules like this?

The WBF allows any 13+ HCP hand to be defined as 'Strong' (which is the definition the EBU uses for strong-only openings at Level 5). You can't [agree to] open 2♣ on AKQJxxxx Qxxx - - in the Round Robin stages of the Bermuda Bowl or at all in the Olympiad. This doesn't seem to bother anyone; it is very much an English idiosyncrasy to want to open 2♣ (or 2♦) systemically on this sort of hand.

What's with the "5 Controls"?

The idea is that a hand described as 'strong' should have at least some defence and this seemed an easy way of defining it. We've seen hands described as an 'Acol Two' that have no defence against an opposing slam!

How can a Weak NT be called a 'Strong Hand'?

It's true that you can [agree to] open 2♣ on AKx Axx xxxx Jxx and call it strong. The L&EC wanted to keep the regulation (relatively) short and decided no harm would come if a pair wanted to open 2♣ on this sort of hand, if it was disclosed properly.

Why can't you let the players decide what a 2♣ opening looks like?

The L&EC debated many options. We could have gone for an 'anything goes' approach i.e. no restrictions at all on a 2♣ opening (for example, you could play 2♣ to mean "0-8 points any"). However, once we decided to have some rules, we stuck to one of our principles which is that all system regulations must be objective. It is not acceptable to sit down to play and *not know* if a TD will rule that your agreement is legal or not, or for it to depend on which TD you get.

A consequence of having an objective rule is that random honours can make what seems to be a pointless difference. So KQxxxx Q – AKQxxx is a "strong" hand while KQxxxx J – AKQxxx isn't. The L&EC are well aware of this but think it is acceptable to achieve a rule that is easy to understand and to implement.

Why does the rule have to be so complicated?

The EBU are much more generous than most bridge organisations in what agreements we allow for opening 2- and 3-level bids. Many countries don't allow 'multi'-style weak bids except at the highest levels of competition. Some of the options we allow at club level would be considered 'Brown Sticker' in world events and either not be allowed, or require advance disclosure. This seems to be what people want – the L&EC get far more requests for more lenient regulations than we do complaints that the current rules are too lax.

The consequence of this approach is that the rules are longer than the far simpler WBF ones. In many jurisdictions, a weak opening must promise a specific suit (sometimes with an exception for the Multi 2♦). The EBU allow the suit or suits to be unknown, but have the restriction that the suit opened must be explicitly either shown or denied. This reduces possible confusion for the opponents about the meaning of double or a "cue bid".

The L&EC considered having a special "Benji" rule solely for 2♣ and 2♦ openings which could have been much more specific about what an "Acol Two" looks like, and possibly allow some hands that are currently not permitted, but decided to stick with having one set of rules for all openings from 2♣ to 3♠.

But doesn't BB 5C3 say that Eight Solid spades and nothing else is a strong two?

5C3 is not terribly well written. It was trying to make two distinct points: (i) you can continue to open 2♣ on some hands with a long suit even if they don't satisfy the requirements for a "strong" opening; and (ii) you must disclose clearly what you have agreed about your 2♣ opening, whether or not it is always "strong" in the technical Blue Book sense.

And Finally: What about 1-minor openings?

If you want to open 1♣ (or 1♦) on a strong hand with any shape, as in Strong Club systems such as Precision or Blue Club, then you must [agree to] have a hand that qualifies as "strong" in the Blue Book sense. That does indeed mean that you can't [agree to] open 1♣ on AQJ1098 AQJ1098 – J.