

# Modern Churchill

## Introduction

The original Churchill bidding system was devised in 1929 by S Garton Churchill and played by Church (as everyone called him) and his devotees with considerable success for nearly 50 years. Church described his system in a huge 600-page book published in 1979, in which Edgar Kaplan said in an Introduction that he was sure that none of the top pairs in the world at that time could match Church's efficiency in slam bidding. In rereading that book recently, I was impressed by that statement, since Church's system used **absolutely no conventions**, even forgoing such modern mainstays as Stayman, Jacoby Transfers, and Blackwood. Church was at least 50 years ahead of his time, since his system ran afoul of the modern trend toward artificial conventions and was totally ignored by the second generation of experts who had become convinced that complex systems with hundreds of pages of system notes were required to win (or at least to make a living by teaching such methods to lesser mortals),

In the 1990s, when the ACBL realized its membership was declining because finding players willing to put forth the effort needed to master those complex systems was becoming increasingly difficult, they turned to Larry King, who had founded the women's professional tennis tour, to launch an experimental Pro Bridge Tour playing Individual tournaments with \$100 entry fees and cash prizes for the top performers. Individual events rarely appear in modern tournaments these days because each player plays only a hand or two with each other player, and faces the problem of agreeing on a bidding system each time he changes partners. Larry King solved that problem by requiring each player to play the Standard American Yellow Card, and was pleased to find that everyone who played in his events was delighted with the absence of Alerts and the reduction in director calls.

I've always had a soft spot in my heart for Individual events, since I was perhaps the only player in ACBL history to make Life Master by winning a Regional Individual (New Orleans in 1977), so I decided to enter the Pro Tour in Long Beach, but had only limited success (I won the Consolation). Later, I began continuing email conversations with Larry, who shares my love of simple systems and my distaste for most of the artificial conventions that clutter the modern convention card. I also share his fear that the ACBL has lost faith in the Pro Tour as a way to find and promote the bridge equivalent of a Michael Jordan or a Tiger Woods, who would be capable of getting the media coverage needed to build its membership.

When I started rereading Church's book, I quickly realized that his methods could provide a simple system that is easily learned and yet could outperform modern convention-based systems in the hands of players who had mastered the inferential logic that makes use of artificial conventions unnecessary – the same inferential logic that was universally used by the top players in the 30s and 40s before artificiality forced players to spend so much time learning conventions that they never got around to learning how to bid intelligently. Most teachers these days have never played a simple system and don't even attempt to teach bidding logic, teaching instead the rule-based conventional system their students seem to demand. Returning to a simple system is thus an uphill struggle, but in my view is necessary if the ACBL is to survive.

This document is an attempt to present the essential ideas of the Churchill System while adding only a few basic conventions (Stayman, Jacoby Transfers, and KeyCard Blackwood) that modern players would consider indispensable, even though Church found them useless.

## The Basic Structure

Churchill did not use high card points (HCP) for hand evaluation. Instead, he based his opening bid requirements on defensive tricks and distribution. I'll honor his approach here, but will sometimes show the HCP equivalent in parentheses to aid in the transition from the methods currently taught, but urge the reader to forget HCPs and begin to think in terms of defensive tricks, distribution, and the Losing Trick Count (LTC). As a quick refresher, the LTC of a hand counts one loser for each missing A, K, or Q in a 3-card suit or longer (3+), one loser for each missing A or K in a 2-card suit, and one loser if a singleton is not an A. In today's (non-Church) systems, a typical opening bid has a LTC of 7 or less, a LTC of 6 by Opener would justify a mild game try, while a LTC of 5 would justify a strong game try, and a LTC of 4 or less is usually worth a game-forcing 2C opening.

In general, new suit bids, including the opening bid, are forcing for one round. The lone exception is a non-jump new suit rebid by Opener after a negative 1NT response. All new-suit jumps are forcing to game. The only signoffs are a non-jump bid of 2NT or a non-jump bid of a suit previously bid by either partner. Opening bid requirements are based on defensive tricks (DT) and distribution. The weakest distribution is a balanced hand with 4333, 4432, 5332 or 5422 shape, the latter two with a 5-card minor. The strongest distributions are 7330, 6430, 5440, or 5530 shapes, because they possess a long suit with support for at least two other suits. This almost insures finding a fit with partner, and provides a good chance for a double fit. Next strongest are the shapes with a singleton and support for two other suits – 6331, 5431 and 4441. These are followed by shapes with a long suit and support for one other suit – 6421, 7321, 8311, and 8320. Suits with a long suit but no singleton or void (5332 with a long major or 6322 or 7222 must be evaluated based on the high-card content of the short suits, with doubleton Qs or Js being downgraded initially, but later upgraded if partner bids that suit. Suit texture (tens, nines, and eights in long suits) is also an important feature in hand evaluation.

## Opening Bids

**Balanced Hands** – A 1NT opening requires 2-1/2 DT (roughly 11-14 HCP). With the 5422 and 6322 shapes, the hand should have a full stopper in one doubleton and at least a partial stopper in the other doubletons. Stronger hands should be opened with a minimum bid in a 4- or 5-card suit and then followed by a rebid in NT. This rebid guarantees 3+ DT (roughly 15+ HCP) and a balanced hand.

**Unbalanced Hands** – This includes all hands with a singleton or void, as well as all hands with a 5+ card suit that do not qualify for a 1NT opening. For the strongest shapes (7330, 6430, 5530 or 5440), the 2-1/2 DT requirement to open can be reduced to 1-1/2 DT. With weaker shapes, the DT requirement for the next strongest shapes (6331, 5431, and 4441) should be increased from 1-1/2 DT to 2DT, but with the 4441 a couple of Qs or Js would be needed to compensate for the lack of a 5-card suit. For the intermediate shapes (5521, 6421 or 7321) the DT requirement can also be reduced to 2DT. Finally, for freak hands (any 8+ card suit, 6610, 7511, 7520, and perhaps 6520 or 6511, the DT requirement can be reduced to 1DT.

**Suit Opening Bids at the One-Level** -- This includes all balanced hands too strong for a 1NT opening, as well as those unbalanced hands with a 5+ card suit that also have a second biddable suit or good support (at least xxxx or KJx) for at least one other suit, **Choosing** The choice of which of two or three suits of equal length to open depends on the location, strength, and length of the other two suits. Be sure to choose that suit that facilitates your

rebid and smoothes the path toward what you initially anticipate could be the optimum contract. That choice may depend on your overall strength, since the path the auction could take may depend on whether slam, game, or a partscore is the expected target contract. Naturally, that target contract is likely to change as the auction progresses and more information becomes available. This issue will be explored in the example hands to be shown later.

**Suit Opening Bids at the Two-Level** – This includes all hands with a 6+ card suit that do not qualify for a one-level opening. Unless the suit is solid, it is unlikely to play well in another suit or in NT in the absence of at least a partial fit or a late entry is available after the suit has been established.

## Responses to 1NT Opening

**2C is Range-Ask Stayman** – Opener should rebid 2D with a minimum (roughly 11-12 HCP). With a maximum (roughly 13-14 HCP), he should rebid a 4-card major (hearts first if he has both majors) or 2NT with no 4-card major. After Opener's negative 2D rebid, Responder can use the traditional Stayman/Jacoby Transfer structure at the 3-level or he can sign off with 2H, 2S, or 2NT. After Opener's positive 2H rebid, Responder's 2S rebid shows 4 spades and is forcing one round. After a positive 2S or 2NT rebid, all Responder's rebids are natural and forcing to game; a 3C or 3D bid here could be a mild slam try in the minor that Opener can encourage by cue-bidding a major, but will usually discourage by a 3NT signoff.

**2D and 2H are traditional Jacoby Transfers** – Opener can accept the transfer or sign off in 2NT. Super-acceptance is not permitted since Responder did not use the Range Ask

**2S is an unconditional transfer to 3C, showing long clubs** -- Opener must accept, which Responder will usually pass as a signoff. Any rebid by Responder is at least a mild slam try; Opener should encourage with a cue bid if he holds a maximum 1NT opening.

**2NT is an unconditional transfer to 3D, showing long diamonds** -- Opener must accept, which Responder will usually pass as a signoff. Any rebid by Responder is at least a mild slam try; Opener should encourage with a cue bid if he holds a maximum 1NT opening.

**3C, 3D, and 3H are game-forcing Stayman and Jacoby Transfers** – They deny slam interest since Responder did not start with the Range Ask.

**3S and 3NT are unconditional transfers to 4C and 4D** – They also deny slam interest because of not starting with the Range Ask. They may be aiming at a minor suit game, or they may merely be trying to keep the opponents from finding a major suit game.

**4C is Gerber** – Opener rebids 4D with 0 or 3 aces, 4H with 1 or 4 aces, or 4S with 2 aces. A 5C rebid then asks for specific kings up the line.

## Responses to 1C, 1D, 1H, 1S, 2C, 2D, 2H, & 2S

**Minimum NT Bid**– Since each of these openings is forcing, Church called this response the “Utility Response”. It's essentially a negative response to ensure that opener has a chance to make a second bid to further describe his shape and strength. This response shows less than about 7 HCP, the strength required for a sound raise in traditional 5-card major systems, and shows nothing about distribution. Should Responder later show support for any of Opener's suits, Opener is free to pass, but of course can bid on with additional strength not yet shown.

**New Suit at Same Level** – This shows a biddable 4-card suit Q10xx or better or a 5+ card suit. The hand is too strong to make the Utility Response, and the bid is forcing one round.

**New Suit at Next-Level** – This virtually guarantees a useful 5+ card suit and is forcing one round, **but not necessarily game-forcing**. This is the biggest departure from modern 5-card major systems. A decent suit with texture such as AKJ9x and no outside strength is OK, as are even weaker suits such as KJ10xxx with an ace or king on the side.

**New Suit Jump** – This shows opening bid strength with a decent 5+ card suit **and 3+ card support for Opener's suit**.

**Jumps to Game in a New Suit** –These show a semi-solid 7+ card suit with no outside entries, such that the hand is only useful if played in that suit (even if holding 3+ card support for Opener's suit).

**Raises of Opener's Suit**—These are all natural bids, and a single raise can be passed. Single jump raises imply 4-card support and are game-forcing. A raise after first making the Utility Response is a game invitation with 3-card support (or with two doubleton honors, QJ or better). Jump raises usually deny a useful 5+ card suit that could be a source of tricks, since bidding such a suit before raising is usually preferable.

**NT Jump** – This shows a balanced hand with at least 2-1/2 quick tricks, and is game-forcing.

**3NT** – This shows an unspecified solid suit AKQxxx or better with an outside A or K, but without 3+ card support for Opener's suit. Opener will usually be in a position to place the contract, but has two ways to investigate further. **4NT** is Keycard Blackwood with Opener's suit agreed, while **4C** asks for the length of the solid suit, with step responses showing 6, 7, 8.

## **Opener's Rebid and the Continuation of the Auction**

- (1) Any new suit bid by either partner is forcing for one round,
- (2) A new-suit jump below game is forcing to game by either partner.
- (3) A jump rebid by either partner of a suit he has previously bid sets the trump suit and is forcing to game, usually initiating cue-bidding of controls.
- (4) A new suit after a single raise is a natural game try, usually a second suit, and asks partner to evaluate game prospects in view of this information.
- (5) Other new suits by either partner after suit agreement are cue-bid slam tries, usually showing the cheapest ace not previously shown. In general, aces are shown up the line, and subsequent cue-bids in the suit of a previous cue-bid show the king.
- (6) A bid of **4C** or **4D** after that suit has been previously bid by either partner is Keycard Blackwood with that minor agreed. A possible exception exists if the previous auction suggests that the bid could be invitational. In that case, the bid could be passed, but if partner chooses to accept the invitation, he makes the appropriate keycard response.
- (7) A bid of **4NT** is Keycard Blackwood if there is no agreed suit, or if the agreed suit is spades. If the agreed suit is hearts, **4S** is Keycard Blackwood (Kickback), and **4NT** is a spade cue-bid. If there is no previously agreed suit, the last suit bid naturally (not a cue-bid) is the agreed suit.
- (8) After a Keycard Blackwood Response, the Keycard Asker will sign off in the agreed suit if two keycards are missing. If one keycard is missing, Asker will often be able to bid the slam directly, but if he is still not certain of the slam he can make the cheapest bid to tell partner that one keycard is missing, so as to see if partner is able to bid the slam with that information. The usual reason for Asker's uncertainty is

that he is uncertain of the location of the trump queen. In this case, Asker's bid of the cheapest suit functions as the key queen ask in traditional Roman Keycard auctions, but the ambiguous ask described here can handle a few rare situations that RKC does not address, such as extra trump length (Axxxx opposite Kxxxx) or a missing honor in a side suit needed to supply tricks.

## When the Opponents Compete

### Introduction

When the auction becomes, or is expected to become competitive, finding a fit quickly is vital, so that later bidding can focus on choosing the right bidding level (partscore, game, slam, double, sacrifice or pass quickly when out-gunned). For this reason, once the opponents enter the auction, we favor the *Karate* structure that makes it possible to show two suits with a single bid. See <http://www.northshorebridge.com/karate.pdf> for a full description; a brief summary of our first action after they enter the auction is provided below.

**If their first action shows a specific 5+ card suit (typically a 5+ card major)** -- our first non-jump suit bid shows that suit and the next-higher ranking suit, excluding the opponent's suit, with at least 8 cards in the two suits, while a new suit jump bid shows a single 6+ card suit. *Karate* calls this structure **Tri**, since it shows all three pairs of two suits that do not include the opponent's suit. A Double at the 3-level or higher is penalty, while at the 1-level or 2-level a Double shows support for the other three suits, similar to a traditional takeout double. All NT bids show a full stopper in their suit, while a cue-bid of their suit shows a partial stopper with 3-card support for partner's suit if he had opened the bidding.

**If their first action shows a suit that could have fewer than 5 cards (typically a 3+ card minor opening bid)**– Our first non-jump suit bid shows that suit and the next-higher-ranking suit, including any suit previously bid by partner or the opponent, since we might wish to play in their 3 or 4-card suit. These bids show four of the six possible two-suit pairs. The other two pairs are non-touching suits (clubs and hearts or diamonds and spades). At low levels (no one has jumped), Double and a minimum NT bid show the two non-touching pairs, with NT showing the pair that includes the opponent's suit and Double showing the other pair. At higher levels (someone has jumped), a Double is penalty, and a NT bid shows either of the two non-touching pairs (partner can usually guess which). This treatment allows Opener to pass the double for penalty if the opponent has bid his second suit. *Karate* calls this structure **Hex**, since it allows all six two-suit pairs to be shown.

### Strategy When We Opened the Bidding

Only one *Karate* bid is permitted in an auction in which the opponents compete. Once the *Karate* bid has been made, all further bids are natural and new suits remain forcing one round. If a *Karate* bid shows a suit bid by partner, it guarantees 3+ card support for a major, or 4+ card support for a minor. If a *Karate* bid shows the opponent's minor, it shows either a 5+ card suit or a 3+ card stopper in that suit with 3NT as a possible target. New suit jumps and jump raises retain their Churchill meaning; they are game forcing and set the trump suit. Partner will usually just bid game, but with extra strength not yet shown, he can treat the bid as Keycard Blackwood and make the appropriate response. After an opponent's takeout double, a redouble shows the non-touching suit pair that includes partner's suit, and a NT bid shows the other non-touching pair.

## Strategy When They Opener the Bidding

After the *Karate* bid, the Churchill structure is off and all bids are natural, with new suit bids forcing one round. Knowing the *Karate* bidder's two suits will frequently allow quick preemptive action to suggest a possible sacrifice or to make it more difficult for the opponents to find an acceptable sacrifice when it's not their hand. Knowing those two suits also makes it possible to recognize a misfit early and get out of the auction before it gets bloody. It's important to recognize that when we have a misfit the opponents also have a misfit and to be alert for a penalty double opportunity.

# Super Churchill

## Introduction

The successful use of the *Karate* competitive bidding structure in **Modern Churchill** has demonstrated the advantage of showing two suits with a single bid in order to locate possible double fits as early as possible in the auction, allowing early preemption and making it easier to plan the auction intelligently so as to reach the optimum contract before the opponents can do so. This suggests that showing two suits with the opening bid, before the auction has become competitive, should provide that same advantage one round earlier. **Super Churchill** achieves that objective by applying *Karate's Hex* structure to low-level opening bids in a suit.

## Opening Bid Structure

**Balanced Hands** – A 1NT opening remains weak (11-14 HCP) with the Range-Ask Stayman response structure. Stronger balanced hands use the **Hex** structure (see below) to show two suits (44, 43, or 53), and on the next round a minimum NT rebid shows 15-17 HCP, and a jump NT rebid shows 18-19 HCP. Still stronger hands can open 2NT with 20-21 HCP.

**Two-Suited Hands** -- The strength and distributional requirements for an opening bid remain the same as in **Modern Churchill**, but with two biddable suits a simple modification of the **Hex** structure is used: **1C** shows clubs and diamonds, **1D** shows diamonds and hearts, **1H** shows hearts and spades, **1S** shows spades and clubs, **2C** shows clubs and hearts, and **2D** shows diamonds and spades. If followed by a NT rebid, two 4-card suits (or one 4-card suit and a well-stopped 3-card suit with 4333 shape) are permissible, but if unbalanced, the two suits must be at least 54, and the suit actually opened need not be the 5-carder. These opening bids are forcing one round, with a minimum NT bid serving as the Utility Response.

**One-Suited Hands** – Unbalanced hands lacking a second suit must open **2H, 2S, 3C, or 3D**, and guarantee a 6+ card suit. Later support by Opener for a suit bid by Responder will imply 3-card support, but could be an unbiddable 4-card suit no better than J9xx.

**Continuation of the Auction** – The usual Churchill rules apply. New suits are forcing one round, except after the Utility Response, and the standard Churchill signoff bids apply