

The Wolff Relay - what if he rebids 2NT?



Bobby Wolff



by Lex De Groot

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In the April 1993 issue of BRIDGE (the monthly bulletin of the Dutch Bridge League), Kees Tammens relates how Berry Westra was pacing to and fro, a broken man, at the conclusion of the final match for a spot in the finals of the first Forbo International Team of Four Tournament, held at the Kurhaus, in Scheveningen, The Netherlands. What had happened? As West, Westra held:

	♠ 843	♥ AQ2	♦ AK52	♣ AQ2
West Westra	North Baldursson	East Van der Neut	South Thorvaldsen	
1♣ ¹⁾ 2NT ²⁾	1♦ Pass	1♠ 4NT	Pass (All Pass)	

¹⁾ why not 1D?

²⁾ 18-20 hcp

Tammens rightly observed that 4NT is quantitative in this auction, rather than Blackwood, as no trump suit had been agreed. What was Westra to bid? It is true, he didn't have a minimum, and in addition, splendid controls, but the rest was really small fry. Even holding ♦10 instead of ♦5 would have persuaded Westra to bid the slam, according to Tammens. Perhaps. The value of ♦10 in this hand is rather questionable, sitting under the diamond-overcaller. Every once in awhile South will have Q-J doubleton, or three small, so that the 10 - in contrast to the 5 - might serve as a threat in a squeeze against North. Be that as it may, in the circumstances Westra took a dim view, and passed.

What about Jaap van der Neut? He held ♠K Q J 9 7 6 ♥K 5 3 ♦6 4 ♣K 6, and with that he had a tough call to make. On the one hand a good source of tricks, but on the other hand a dearth of aces. Blackwood, perhaps? Even were West(ra) to show four aces and hold, say, ♦Q - 18 points already - then there would only be eleven tricks without a lead into the diamond tenace. The opponents hold a minimum of eight, and more likely nine or ten points between them, and in view of the overcall these will be located mostly with North, behind the NT-bidder. Thus, a successful slam will depend more on the nature, rather than the exact number of points in opener's

hand. This requires intelligent co-operation by West, which is possible only when he can form a reasonable impression of East's hand. Was that the case, here? Hardly. I assume that Westra and van der Neut were an ad hoc partnership, without detailed agreements on numerous bidding situations (e.g. what did 1♠ promise, following the 1♦-overcall?). And that's probably just as well, as the danger of shipwreck of such a partnership, when equipped with a plethora of bells and whistles, is seldom compensated by an occasional success.

How would you have bid the East-hand after the 2NT-rebid with your regular partner? Three spades, forcing, first? Fine. But if that's your systemic bid, and assuming you don't play preemptive jump responses to one-level openings, how do you bid a weak hand with long spades if you want to play in 3♠? Or do you pass, holding ♠K J 9 7 6 5 ♥8 5 ♦7 3 ♣10 7 5, when partner opens with 1♣? I should hope not. So, should East bid 4♠ if 3♠ is a close-out? But that need not be anything more than a minimum responding hand with long spades, and certainly wouldn't do justice to van der Neut's cards. His 4NT wasn't such a bad idea under the circumstances, despite the result being a bitter disappointment.

Actually, we would like to be able to do everything: sign off below game with a weak hand; bid game with a fair hand; and suggest slam with something better still. And maybe distinguish between good and broken suits. Well, all that is possible using the Wolff Relay. Moreover, the nice thing about it is that you need not incorporate the entire scheme into your system all at once. So there's plenty of opportunity for getting accustomed and experimentation. We'll survey the various possibilities by means of a number of sample auctions, and it's up to you to define the specific requirements for a given sequence.

The Wolff Relay

The *Wolff Relay*, a convention based on an idea by Bobby Wolff, is useful to any partnership not using preemptive jump responses to opening bids of one of a suit. Responder wants to distinguish between forcing and nonforcing bids in his suit(s) when opener rebids 2NT after a one-level response, thereby denying four-card support - certainly for responder's major.

In the following, X and Y denote arbitrary suits, m is a minor, and M is a major.

1X	1Y	When responder rebids his major directly, it is forcing, and shows a five or six-card suit. If opener denies three-card support by rebidding 3NT, then responder may pass or, with slam interest, bid 4NT (quantitative, as no trump suit has been agreed) or 5(Gerber). Holding at least a semi-solid six-card suit and slam interest, he bids 4Y or makes a cue-bid. But if opener bids anything but 3NT or 4Y after 3Y, then that is a cue-bid, agreeing Y as trumps, and showing slam interest and responder's 4NT would be Blackwood.
2NT	3Y	

1X	1Y	An immediate jump to game (4M or possibly 5m) is a close-out with at least a six-bagger, and denies slam interest.
2NT	4Y	

1m	1Y	To sign off in his suit, responder first bids 3♣ artificially. Opener shows three-card support for responder's suit by bidding 3Y, but otherwise rebids 3♦. Now responder can sign off by passing 3♦ or 3Y, or by repeating his suit over 3♦, after which opener must pass.
2NT	3♣	
3♦/3Y	Pass/3Y	

Note that 3♣ is initially Wolff, even if the opening bid was 1♣.

1m	1♠	Responder can sign off in a lower-ranking suit, except clubs, with a weak five-five hand, including dropping the 3♦-rebid. But if responder's second suit is hearts, then opener, with a super hand for hearts, could still bid game, of course.
2NT	3♣	
3♦	Pass/3♥	
1X	1Y	Responder shows a good hand with slam interest, but with a broken six-card suit, by rebidding his suit at the four-level following the relay. Had opener rebid 3Y instead of 3♦, then 4NT would have been Blackwood.
2NT	3♣	
3♦	4Y	
1m	1♥	Here, responder shows a normal game forcing reverse, with spades and longer hearts.
2NT	3♠	
1m	1♥	This is forcing, and the equivalent of Stayman with four-four in the majors. Opener must NEVER bid a four-card spade suit, as this might cross partner's intentions.
2NT	3♣	
3♦/3♥	3♠	
1m	1M	If the Wolff 3♣-bidder next bids 3NT, it means that he has a secondary club suit, or support for opener's clubs, with a mild interest in slam.
2NT	3♣	
3♦/3M	3NT	

This last sequence must therefore never be used by a responder who is merely interested in finding out if opener has three-card support for his major, with the intention of playing in 3NT or 4M. This is because following opener's rebid of 3♦ it is not possible for a 5=3=3=2 responder to bid a natural 3NT, as that would show clubs. Instead, responder must bid 3M, forcing, rather than 3♣. Then he can next bid 3NT, to play, over opener's 3♦-response.

1m	1M	With a strong two-suiter in his first suit and clubs, responder repeats his clubs. He must be strong enough to play in 4NT when opener rejects the slam try by bidding 4NT.
2NT	3♣	
3♦	4♣	
1m	1M	Remember that the jump to 4♣ is Gerber, even if the opening bid was 1, but 4NT would be quantitative.
2NT	4♣	
1m	1♠	Opener's rebid of 3NT shows doubletons in both majors (and presumably a strong doubleton hearts in view of the 2NT-rebid). Hence, a five-five responder will normally pass knowing there's no five-three fit. Therefore, 4♥ shows six-five.
2NT	3♥	
3NT	?	
1m	1♠	<i>False Preference</i> , suggested by Bob Mosher. Opener's rebid of 3♠ promises three-card support for one of the majors, but NOT NECESSARILY SPADES. When responder, holding five-five, places the contract, he must bid 4♥ because he doesn't know which major partner can support. Opener corrects to spades with three-card spade support. If responder only has five-four, then he bids 3NT, and again opener will correct holding three-card spade support.
2NT	3♥	
3♠	?	

It should be clear by now that using the *Wolff Relay* increases the diversity of responding hands that can be described following opener's 2NT jump rebid. But what is the price we have to pay? We sacrifice the natural bid of 3♣ on some hands with secondary clubs or support for partner's clubs. Hardly a serious loss in view of the fact that many partnerships are using some form of Checkback Stayman anyway. And what about opener's 3♦? That, too, will hardly be missed after opener's descriptive 2NT rebid. Conceivably it might have been useful following 3♣, in case responder was still looking for a four-four minor fit. Or maybe it could show a six-card diamond suit with which one elected to rebid 2NT instead of '3-1/2'♦. Certainly no great loss if one considers the gains. Is the scheme too complicated, and a strain on memory? Only you can decide that for yourself. Perhaps one could start off simply, with just the basic idea. See also the Epilogue where reference is made to the *Wolff Signoff*.

Systemmongers will undoubtedly come up with different variations and extensions (what is a jump in a new suit following the relay?; what changes if the opponents double 3♣ or 3♦?; or what if they make an overcall?). To illustrate the range of possibilities, we shall consider the auctions in which responder has a spade single-suiter.

Bad hand with six-card suit (a very poor hand with only a five-bagger is unlikely, as responder would have passed):

1♣	1♠	or	1♣	1♠
2NT	3♣		2NT	3♣
3♠	3♠ (end)		3♠	Pass

Gameforcing values with a six-card suit:

1♣	1♠
2NT	4♠ (end)

Gameforcing values with a five-card suit:

1♣	1♠	or	1♣	1♠	or	1♣	1♠
2NT	3♠		2NT	3♠		2NT	3♠
3NT	Pass		Cue	4♠ (end)		4♠	Pass

Slam-going values with a five-card suit:

1♣	1♠	or	1♣	1♠	or	1♣	1♠	or	1♣	1♠
2NT	3♠		2NT	3♠		2NT	3♠		2NT	3♠
3NT	4NT		3NT	5♣		4♠	4NT		Cue	
	quantitative			Gerber			Blackwood			Spades are trumps

Slam-going values with a (semi-)solid six-card suit:

1♣	1♠	or	1♣	1♠	or	1♣	1♠
2NT	3♠		2NT	3♠		2NT	3♠
3NT	4♠ or cue or 5♣ <small>Gerber</small>		4♠	4NT <small>Blackwood</small>		Cue	<small>Spades are trumps</small>

Slam-going values with a broken six-card suit:

1♣	1♠	or	1♣	1♠	or	1♣	1♠
2NT	3♣		2NT	3♣		2NT	3♣
3♦	4♠		3♠	4NT <small>Blackwood</small>		3♠	Cue (except 4♣ which, like 3NT shows clubs)

Difficult to remember all this? Not really, with this aide-memoire: use *Wolff* with a *weak hand*, or a '*weak*' suit (6-card suit) in a strong hand. The rest is logical. With values for game, bid game; if (with a 5-card suit) you require trump support, rebid your suit. If partner rejects (3NT), then pass, or bid 4NT (quantitative), or Gerber (5). But if, despite of the rejection, you rebid your suit, or bid another suit (cuebid), then you're showing a (semi-)solid suit and slam-interest.

Déjà vu

The date is February 20th, 1993, and we're playing the last match for a place in the finals of the Forbo International Team of Four Tournament.

♠ 843	♠ KQJ976
♥ AQ2	♥ K53
♦ AK52	♦ 64
♣ AQ2	♣ K6

West <i>Westra</i>	North <i>Baldursson</i>	East <i>Van der Neut</i>	South <i>Thorvaldsen</i>
1♣	1♦	1♠	Pass
2NT ¹⁾	Pass	3♠ ²⁾	Pass
3NT ³⁾	Pass	4♣ ⁴⁾	Pass
4♦ ⁵⁾	Pass	4♥ ⁶⁾	Pass
5♣ ⁷⁾	Pass	5NT ⁸⁾	Pass
6NT ⁹⁾	Pass	Pass	Pass

¹⁾ 18-20

²⁾ Shows either game values with five spades, or slam interest with five spades, or six (semi-)solid spades.

³⁾ Let's see which way the wind blows. True, I have three-card spade support, but really minimal, and no ruffing value either. If he only has a five-card suit and values for game, then I'm going to bid 3NT with my double stop in diamonds: lead up to me, and they won't get a diamond ruff.

- 4) A cuebid; so he's got six good spades and slam interest.
- 5) Good heavens, I'm joining this party: at worst we lose one trick in spades, *he* is cuebidding, and *I* have all first-round controls in the side suits.
- 6) Cuebid; we're playing mixed (1st and 2nd round control) cuebids.
- 7) Let's keep dancing. If we have enough tricks we belong in 6NT, and not 6♠. Just imagine, South leads his singleton diamond, and North has the ♠A.
- 8) No other controls. Partner's diamond holding may be vulnerable, and I've got kings, not singletons, so they should be good for no trump.
- 9) Should I make a grand slam try (e.g. with 6♦?). I practically could have bid 6NT after 4♠. If his controls in the round suits include a singleton wouldn't he have bid 5♠ rather than 5NT? Let's see: five tricks in spades, three in hearts, two in diamonds, and three in clubs already make thirteen. But there may be a spade loser. Could he have solid spades in addition to two kings? I rather doubt it: he would have asked for aces (5♣ after 3NT). But not with minimal values for his slam invitational hand, with only six spades and without an ace.

Bingo! Excellent auction. Not only did we beat the reigning world champions (Iceland), but we also made it to the final!

And then the alarm went off.....

Epilogue

In a discussion I had with Bobby Wolff it transpired that his original concept was called the *Wolff Signoff*, whereby the 2NT-rebidder always must bid 3♦ over 3♣. That gives responder an opportunity to sign off in his long suit, also when he holds a weak hand with a four-card major (in which he responded) and a six-card minor on the side. Thus, one can play in 3♦ or 4♣, rather than in a Moysian major suit fit, where declarer may get short-ruffed. Playing the *Wolff Relay*, opener is allowed to show three-card support in response to 3♣, and signing off in the minor when holding the weak 4M-6m hand, is generally not possible. But all things considered, to many players this flaw will be outweighed by the extra dimensions afforded by the *Wolff Relay*.

The *Wolff Relay/Signoff* can also be applied in a competitive auction in which the advancer (overcaller's partner) has bid a *constructive* 2NT. For example,

West	North	East	South
1♥	1♠	2♥	2NT
Pass	3♣ (Wolff)	Pass	3♦
Pass	3♠		

In this auction 3♣ followed by 3♠ is intended as a signoff, whereas 3♠ instead of 3♣, Wolff, would have been encouraging.

When overcaller wants to sign off, this will usually be in his suit (a two-suiter is normally shown in a different manner), and then advancer's delayed support following 3♣ will not be embarrassing because the overcall is never based on a weak four-card holding.