

Smolen (Mark Oettinger)

This is a convention of limited utility, but when it comes up, it is very handy. It is a normal extension of Stayman, and is part of most modern partnerships' toolbox for describing the various major-suit-oriented hands opposite a 1N opener. The two basic sequences are:

1N P 2♣ P
2♦ P 3♥*...

and...

1N P 2♣ P
2♦ P 3♠*...

Responder (who is 5=4 or 4=5 in the majors, and has a game-going hand...10+ HCPs) starts with Stayman, and if opener rebids 2♦ (denying a 4-card major), responder jumps to either 3♥ to show 5♠ and 4♥, or to 3♠ to show 5♥ and 4♠. It may seem counterintuitive to bid the major suit of which you have fewer, but since opener denied a 4-card major when he rebid 2♦, you know that he does not have 4-card support for your 4-card major, so what you are doing is determining whether partner has 3-card support for your 5-card major, failing which, you will play in 3N. And if opener does have 3-card support, he will be the one to first bid the trump suit, having the effect of a transfer, "right-siding" the contract more often than not, keeping the stronger hand hidden, having the opening lead "come up to" the strong hand, and often gaining tempo.

A related issue to discuss with partner is how "extensions" or "continuations" of the basic Smolen sequence are to be understood. For example in the following auction:

1N P 2♣ P
2♦ P 3♥* P
?...

What does 3♠ mean? Maximum 1N opener with 3+♠ (under the principle of slow arrival)?

What about 3N? Only 2♠?

What about 4♣, 4♦ or 4♥? 3-card trump support for responder's 5-card major? Ace of the indicated suit, denying a lower Ace? Italian-style cuebid?

What does 4♠ mean? Minimum 1N opener with 3+♠ (under the principle of fast arrival)?

I have posed a few possible interpretations, but different treatments are equally supportable. What is important is that you and your partner have clear understandings wherever you can, and general "rules of construction" for when the inevitable "undiscussed" sequences arise. Two useful "rules of construction" are:

Rule of Construction # 1: If it's undiscussed, it should be assumed to be natural;

and

Rule of Construction # 2: If you think that partner might misconstrue your bid, assume that he will...and bid something else.