Krzysztof Jassem

WJ05 – a modern version of “Polish Club”

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SYSTEM LICYTACYJNY
wspólny język 2005
WJ05 – a modern version of “Polish Club”

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 9

POLISH CLUB – BASIC APPROACH AND ADVANTAGES ................. 11

WJ05 – DISTINCTIVE FEATURES ........................................... 12
Openings ................................................................................. 12
  1♦ opening – 4+ cards ..................................................... 12
  2♦ opening – Multi (weak with ♥ or ♠) .............................. 12
  2♥, 2♠ openings ............................................................... 12
  2NT opening .................................................................. 13
  4♣, 4♦ openings ............................................................... 13
Responses .............................................................................. 13
  Responses to 1♣ ............................................................... 13
  Responses to 1♦, 1♥, 1♠ .................................................... 13
  2NT response to a 2♣ opening .......................................... 13
Specific Auctions in Later Rounds of Bidding ......................... 14
  Bubrotka ........................................................................ 14
  Continuations over a 1NT opening ..................................... 14
  Slam bidding .................................................................. 15
  After a 1♦ opening and 2♣, 2♦ responses ......................... 15
  Gadgets ........................................................................ 15
Handling Interference ............................................................. 15
Overcalls ............................................................................... 15

THE NON-COMPETITIVE AUCTION ........................................ 16
Summary of Opening Bids ...................................................... 16
The 1♠ Opening ..................................................................... 17
  1♥, 1♠ responses ............................................................ 17
  1NT response ................................................................. 17
  2♠ response ................................................................. 17
  2♦ response ................................................................. 17
  2♥, 2♠, 3♠ responses .................................................... 17
  2NT, 3NT responses ...................................................... 17
  3♦ response ................................................................. 17
  3♥, 3♠, 4♦ responses .................................................... 17
  4♦ response ................................................................. 17
The 1♥ Opening .......................................................... 19
  2♥ response ............................................................ 24
  2♠, 3♣, 3♦ Responses ................................................ 25
  2NT Response ......................................................... 25
  3♥ Response ............................................................ 26
  Weak and strong splinters ........................................... 26
  Responses to a third seat opening ................................ 27

The 1♠ Opening .......................................................... 27
  2♥ response ............................................................ 27
  Weak and strong splinters ........................................... 28
  Opening 1NT ............................................................. 28
  Continuations after an opening 1NT .............................. 28
  Other responses to 1NT .............................................. 31

2♣ Opening ............................................................... 33
  2♠ response – relay ................................................ 33
  2♥, 2♠ responses .................................................... 34
  2NT response ........................................................ 34
  Other responses ...................................................... 34
  Over enemy interference ........................................... 34

2♦ Opening – Multi ..................................................... 34
  2♥, 2♠ responses .................................................... 35
  2NT response ........................................................ 35
  3♥ response ............................................................ 36
  3♠ response ............................................................ 36
  3♦ response ............................................................ 36
  3♣, 3♦ responses .................................................... 36
  4♥, 4♦ responses .................................................... 36
  Handling interference .............................................. 37

2♥, 2♠ Openings ......................................................... 37
  2♠ response (over 2♥) .............................................. 37
  2NT response ........................................................ 37
  Other responses ...................................................... 37
  Handling interference .............................................. 37

2NT Opening ........................................................... 38
  Continuations ........................................................ 38

3-level Openings ........................................................ 38
  Continuations over a 3-level opening ............................ 38

3NT Opening – gambling .............................................. 38
  Continuations over a 3NT opening ............................... 38

4♣, 4♦ Openings – natural ........................................... 38

4♥, 4♦ Openings ........................................................ 38
  Continuations ........................................................ 39

Opening 1♠ ............................................................... 39
  Preparatory variant .................................................... 39
  Natural variant ....................................................... 39
  Strong variant ....................................................... 40
How do you show the strong club variant? .......................... 42
How do you show the medium variant of the 1♣ opening (15–17)? 43
How do you show the weak club variant (12–14)? .................. 45
1♦ response ................................................................. 45
1♥, 1♠ responses ......................................................... 50
1NT response ............................................................... 54
2♦, 2♣ responses ......................................................... 55
2♥, 2♠ responses ......................................................... 55
2NT response ............................................................... 55
3♦, 3♣ responses ......................................................... 57
3♥, 3♠ responses ......................................................... 57
3NT response ............................................................... 57

CONVENTIONS FOR THE UNCONTESTED AUCTION .................... 58
Jump-shift responses ...................................................... 58
Why do we jump in a suit? .............................................. 58
Continuations after a jump-shift response .......................... 60
Fourth-suit Forcing ....................................................... 60
Fourth-suit – denying a stopper ....................................... 60
Fourth-suit – to obtain more information about partner’s hand 61
Fourth suit – to set up a force with a raise for partner’s suit 61
Fourth Suit – forcing the auction with a one-suiter ............. 62
Gawryś after 1♦–1♠–2♣ .................................................... 62
Fourth-suit forcing – a question of level .......................... 62
Continuations over fourth-suit forcing ............................... 63
Third-suit Forcing .......................................................... 63
When do we use third-suit forcing? ................................. 63
Third-suit at the two-level .............................................. 63
Third-suit at the three-level ............................................. 64
Forcing 2NT ................................................................. 64
When do we use Forcing 2NT? ...................................... 65
Continuations over Forcing 2NT ...................................... 66
2NT after a Major Raise ................................................. 67
2NT with only game interest .......................................... 67
2NT with unlimited hands ............................................. 67
Magister ................................................................. 68
Sign-off in clubs ......................................................... 68
Invitational strength .................................................... 68
Game-forcing ............................................................ 68
Continuations ............................................................ 68
En Passant ............................................................... 70
Drury ................................................................. 71
Continuations over Drury .............................................. 71

SLAM BIDDING .......................................................... 71
Types of Slams .......................................................... 71
Slams on combined strength ........................................... 71
Strong hands with ruffing potential ........................................... 72
Tricks in two suits ........................................................................... 72
Shortness .......................................................................................... 72
Freak distribution ............................................................................ 73
When slam is not cold ...................................................................... 73
Roman Keycard Blackwood – 1430 ................................................. 73
  When isn’t 4NT Blackwood? .......................................................... 74
  When is 4NT Blackwood? .............................................................. 74
  Responses ....................................................................................... 74
Exclusion Blackwood ...................................................................... 75
Hoyt (King-ask) ............................................................................... 75
  Responses ....................................................................................... 75
5NT – RKC 1430 .............................................................................. 76
5NT – Grand Slam Force ................................................................. 76
  Responses ....................................................................................... 76
Trump-Invite .................................................................................. 77
Cue-bids .......................................................................................... 77
  Honor and shortness cue-bids ....................................................... 77
  First- and second-round cue-bids ............................................... 77
  How do you know if a bid is a cue-bid? ...................................... 77
  When a bid is not a cue-bid? ......................................................... 78
  Why do we use cue-bids? ............................................................. 79
  When is showing a cue-bid obligatory? ...................................... 80
  Must a cue-bid in partner’s suit be an honor? ............................. 80
Splinter ........................................................................................... 81
  What distributions may employ a splinter? ................................. 82
  Continuations over a splinter ...................................................... 82
  ‘6 of a splinter’ .............................................................................. 84
  How strong is a splinter? .............................................................. 84
Minisplinters in WJ05 ................................................................... 84
Auto-splinter .................................................................................. 85
Enemy Interference in Slam Auctions ............................................ 86
  Over Blackwood .......................................................................... 86
  Vs. double of a Blackwood response ......................................... 86
  Vs. double of a cue-bid ............................................................... 86

HANDLING ENEMY INTERFERENCE ........................................... 86
Vs. Takeout Double ....................................................................... 86
  General rules .............................................................................. 86
  Redouble ....................................................................................... 87
  Raises over a double of 1♥, 1♠ .................................................... 88
Vs. an Overcall in a Suit .................................................................. 88
  Free-bids in a new suit ............................................................... 88
  Jump-raises ................................................................................ 89
  Strong raises .............................................................................. 89
  LHO overcalls over 1♠ .............................................................. 90
  RHO overcalls over 1♠ .............................................................. 91
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2NT and a negative double</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vs. enemy interference over an opening 1NT</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vs. overcalls over our 2-level openings</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vs. overcalls of 2NT and higher openings</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reopening the auction</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE CONTESTED AUCTION</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Double</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showing possibility of playing in both unbid suits</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showing an unbid 4-crd major</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forcing the auction with a 5+-crd suit</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double instead of natural 2NT</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Double</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Cue-bid</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If the Western cue is doubled</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEFENSIVE BIDDING</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Rules</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-level Overcalls</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-level Overcalls, Non-Jump</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1NT Overcall</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-opening in NT</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jump-overcalls</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takeout double</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanatory double</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuations over a double</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After a double of 1♣</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bidding over a double, when third-seat bids</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balancing double (re-opening)</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double of a 2-level opening</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michaels Cue-bid</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jump Cue-bid</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vs. a Strong NT</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vs. a Weak NT</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vs. 3-level and Higher Openings</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balancing</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEFENSIVE BIDDING CONVENTIONS</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trap-pass</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trap-passing over an opponent’s opening bid</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trap-pass over an opponent’s overcall</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do we proceed over partner’s trap-pass?</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drury</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michaels cue-bid</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What hands make a Michaels cue-bid?</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuations over a Michaels cue-bid</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebensohl</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebensohl after our 1NT opening</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebensohl after an enemy weak 2♥, 2♠ opening and our double</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEADS AND DISCARDS</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second-fourth leads</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upside-down Carding</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lavinthal</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple Lavinthal</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return Lavinthal</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Lavinthal</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krakow discards</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reverse Smith Echo</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIMPLE DEFINITIONS OF SOME NOTIONS USED IN THE BOOK</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Any bidding system in bridge is a compromise between naturalness and strength-showing. Systems regarded as natural aim to show distributional information first. So when you play a system such as Acol, SAYC or 'better minor', you are not infrequently faced with the problem: “What is the total strength of our hands?”. Regular partnerships solve this problem by introducing some artificial bids (like artificial 2NT rebids or semi-natural jumpshifts). More advanced natural systems suggest some useful gadgets (like the forcing 1NT response in the 2/1 system, which has nothing to do with no-trump distribution). In effect, a system supposed to be natural consists of basically one natural bid – the opening – and a handful of gadgets that help to estimate the strength.

An antidote to those problems might be a system based on a strong club, like Precision. You let the $1\clubsuit$ opening mean any strong hand (16+), strictly limiting all the other openings, and then the rest of the bidding is much simpler. When you look at the convention cards of the top Indonesian players (most of them playing the Precision Club) you are surprised to see that the cards are almost empty! By this single treatment they can do well without most conventional bids!

The approach has two serious drawbacks. One of them is an artificial $1\diamondsuit$ opening, which is a “catchall” for all medium hands without a five-card major. The other is that if you open $1\clubsuit$ too often (instead of $1\spadesuit$, $1\heartsuit$ or $1\spadesuit$) you leave room for your opponents, and in competition you may soon find yourself too high to find a playable fit (not to mention the proper level).

Polish Club is a compromise between the two approaches. By upgrading the requirement of a strong club opening to 18 HCP, the system limits the $1\clubsuit$ openings to rare but important cases of really powerful hands. And in preserving the naturalness of the $1\diamondsuit$ opening, the system enables quickly finding a better minor fit if necessary. Furthermore, by limiting the openings other than $1\clubsuit$ to the range of 12–17 HCP, Polish Club makes it easy to estimate the total strength without the need for funny treatments/conventions.

The Polish Club bidding system is earning increasing popularity throughout the world. The system has gained this thanks to international achievements of Polish players as well as Internet bridge. This medium is very popular among Polish players, and their foreign competitors (as well as partners) try to learn the bidding system known outside Poland as the “Polish Club” in order to be able to defend it or play it. Inside Poland the system is known as Wspólny Język – sometimes abbreviated ‘WJ’ – which translates literally into ‘Common Language’.
The world’s top players are already familiar with the Polish system. The many-time American champion Jill Meyers in the “ACBL Bulletin”, when polled on the most useful bridge convention, offered not Blackwood or splinters, but “Polish Two-suiter” – $2\heartsuit$ and $2\diamondsuit$ openings to show 5–5 hands (actually, the convention has been adopted by Polish players quite recently, in response to the international ban on a more popular Wilkosz $2\diamondsuit$ opening that showed any two-suiter hand with at least one major).

This book describes a modern version of Polish Club, known already as WJ05 (short for Wspólny Język 2005). The origin of the system goes back to 1995. At that time there were a few “dialects” of the system inside Poland. Aiming to create a standardized version of the system (to be used in the bidding contest in Poland’s “Brydż” magazine), I prepared a poll among Polish experts on controversial treatments in the system. The most popular solutions became the basis for the system called WJ95. In the year 2000 a similar poll was circulated – this time some new controversial issues were addressed; further, the readership of the magazine were also asked to submit their opinions. WJ 2000 (translated into English by Daniel Neill, and posted on his Internet site was the result of the poll.

When the time came for another modernization I decided to give up the idea of a poll for once. The main rationale was that I had noticed the users of the system to be a little conservative. My idea, on the other hand, was to make the system approved internationally and I expected the poll to result in just the opposite (i.e. sticking to traditional Polish methods). Besides, I felt that after some long-time partnerships with Polish theorists of WJ (Piotr Tuszyński: “Players should stick to the system down to the last detail”, and Piotr Gawryś: “System should follow players’ judgement.”), I thought I could add a little bit of my experience to the description.

WJ05 has ambitions to become popular and accepted outside of Poland. Treatments not sanctioned in international tournaments (such as the Wilkosz $2\diamondsuit$ opening) or undesirable for natural bidders (such as e.g. the complicated definition of the WJ2000 $1\diamondsuit$ opening) have been swapped out for methods easier to adopt (“Polish Two-suiter” and the 4-crd $1\diamondsuit$ opening, respectively).
The basic feature of the Polish Club is the three-way 1♣ opening. It is either preparatory, kind of a weak no-trump opening (12–14), natural unbalanced in the range of 15–17, or strong (18+). Such a treatment requires that responder not pass with any hand. Therefore, the 1♦ response is artificial and most often shows a negative hand (diamonds are bypassed with positive hands).

The system is based on 5-card major openings and a strong no-trump (15–17).

There is no full agreement on the 1♦ opening. Some players like it to show 4 cards, some like it to be a 5-card opening, but the majority (as voted for WJ2000) prefer the mixture: 5-card, unless unbalanced: 4441 or 4♠, 5♣. The two-level openings differ between dialects of the system. 2♣ is played either as Precision or Acol. 2♦ used to be played as the Wilkosz two-suiter but nowadays it is more commonly treated as the weak Multi. 2♥, 2♠ are played as either weak twos or two-suiters. 2NT is most popularly unusual (for the minors) but some players prefer it to be strong, natural. The treatments adopted in WJ05 (hopefully the most popular nowadays) are summarized in the next part.

The main reasons for which you may prefer Polish Club to a more natural system like SAYC or better minor are the following:

- You are less likely to miss a game when a strong distributional hand opposes a very weak one and they happen to have a fit.
- It is easier to extract distributional information from a weak hand when it opposes a strong balanced hand.
- Determining total strength is easier in the subsequent auction after the 1-level openings which are limited from 12 to 17 (it actually allows using just two relatively narrow ranges: 12–14 minimum and 15–17 maximum, biddable with a jump or reverse).
- Jump-shift rebids show 5–5 distribution (as semi-forcing hands are opened with 1♣).
- Two-suited weak openings have a lot of merits, as will be shown later on.

The main difficulties you may come across if you decide to play Polish Club are:

- Bidding strong two-suiter hands with longer clubs.
- Bidding strong distributional hands after your 1♣ opening has been followed by aggressive bidding from the opponents.
Openings

1♦ opening – 4+ cards
The WJ2000 1♦ was opened with either 5+ cards, or 4+ cards if 3-suited or with 5 clubs. The 2005 version promotes a simpler definition. The opening shows just four or more cards. I think there are several good reasons for this change:
1. With the previous agreement responder didn’t know whether he could raise partner with 3 diamonds for fear of standing opposite a bad 4 cards. As a result he had to assume a conservative stance, taking into account that opener may have 4 cards and raise only with 4 cards himself.
2. One could suggest the 1♦ opening promise 5+ cards (like 1♥ and 1♠) – but then unbalanced hands with 4 diamonds would not be biddable.
3. Thanks to the 4-crd 1♦ opening, we lessen the ambiguity of the 1♣ opening.
4. Playing this version is easy to understand for new WJ-players; beginners won’t be forced to learn a complicated opening definition, and foreign bridge players see something nearer to what they are used to.

2♦ opening – Multi (weak with ♥ or ♠)
For years, the 2♦ opening was reserved for the Wilkosz convention. However, Wilkosz is not allowed outside Poland and as a result all Polish pairs playing outside of Poland or on the Internet have retired this convention. They use “Polish Two-suiters”: 2♥ (hearts + another), and 2♠ (spades + a minor). 2♦ is used as “mini-Multi”: weak with either hearts or spades. To me, this has a lot of merit: two-suit opening allows the partnership to quickly find thin distributional games or pre-empt the opponents (e.g. 2♥–[Pass]–4♥), and 2♦ Multi allows the strong hand to declare opposite a weak two in a major (4♥ with a long heart suit is better played by the other hand – the one with the short hearts).

2♥, 2♠ openings
As revealed above, 2♥ shows a 5–5 2-suiter with hearts and another suit (♠ or a minor), and 2♠ shows a 2-suiter with spades and a minor. Both openings show strength just below a 1-level opening (i.e. 6–11 points).
2NT opening

The 2NT opening shows a weak hand with both minors. Very strong no-trump hands are better handled with an artificial 1♣ opening.

4♦, 4♠ openings

We see the retirement of Namyats (4♦ showing solid hearts and 4♠ solid spades). 4♦ and 4♠ are put to very good use as natural preempts. Generally, opener is sure the hand is too weak and/or unbalanced for 3NT (all the more so opposite a passed hand).

Responses

Responses to 1♣

In WJ05 the response of 1NT shows a range of (8)9 to 11 points (the response denies a four-card major). Opener is no longer forced to pass with a maximum in the 12–14 range (in previous versions of WJ, the 1NT response showed 7–10 and opener was obliged to pass with weak no-trump).

Hands with 8 or less HCP and no 4-crd major respond 1♠.

WJ05 plays the 2NT response as forcing to game (12+) with no 4-crd major or 5-crd minor. One should never respond 3NT to a 1♣ opening so as not to preempt partner when he is strong. (In previous versions of WJ, a 2NT response was invitational, and 3NT had to be bid with game-forcing values without a 4-crd major or 5-crd minor).

Responses to 1♥, 1♠

Over 1♥, 1NT and 2NT show 7–10 and 11–12 HCP respectively. The 3NT response to 1♥ has its place (1♥ is totally natural) so there is no reason to give it up. With an unsuitable hand for declaring NT, we respond a natural, forcing 2♦ (inverted minor).

Over an opening 1♠ or 1♥, 2NT shows an invitational raise (previously it showed an invitational or better raise). The basic idea is to quickly distinguish whether game or slam is the goal. In the first case it's usually not good to exchange much information, as it helps the opponents' defense too much – contracts should be bid chiefly on power (honors and distribution). In the slam zone, without precise information you don't (often) have the tools to reach the proper contract. A tactical strategy (concealing information from the enemy) is not useful in the slam zone because defense against higher contracts is usually easier and bad slam contracts are bound to be set more often than bad games or partscores. Since success in slams depends a lot on distribution, shortness-showing bids have been expanded in use. WJ05 distinguishes 2 types of splinters over a 1♥ and 1♠ opening: weak (3♠ over 1♥, 3NT over 1♠) with 9–12 HCP, and strong, 13–16 HCP – shown “naturally”. Thanks to this we don’t miss slams when a strong opener is opposite a hand with relatively low strength but side shortness.

2NT response to a 2♣ opening

A scheme over a 2♣ opening is proposed which is earning wide popularity, that frankly is difficult to resist. It’s based on the observation that it’s very rare for a
natural 2NT response to come along over an opening 2♠. More often with an invite, we have either a 4-crd major (so a 2♠ asking bid is preferred), or a club fit – so we can raise partner’s clubs. The new meaning of a 2NT response is a transfer to 3♥. It includes 2 possible hands: preemptive with clubs, or a GF 2-suiter without clubs. Besides the tactical aspect (preempts the opponents) there’s a sound constructive advantage: 5–5 hands were tough to sort out over a 2♣ opening.

Let us notice that this treatment fulfills the main criterion that should be met by any multiway, artificial convention: specific meanings should differ widely in strength. Another example of such a treatment is Lebensohl, which promises either a sign off or a game force. (When a convention allows for different meanings that do not differ dramatically, the bidding is bound to get mixed up, particularly when it is joined by opponents)

Thanks to this agreement, we gain lots of room: for example we don’t have to worry about how to bid strong 1-suiters. We first relay with 2♦, and subsequently bid our suit. This always shows a 1-suited hand, since 2-suiters are shown via 2NT. As a consequence, immediate 3♣, 3♠ responses lose their reason for being forcing and can be treated as invitational.

**Specific Auctions in Later Rounds of Bidding**

**Bubrotka**

One of the very specific treatments in Polish Club is *Odwrotka*. The 2♦ rebid in the uncontested acution 1♣ – 1major shows a strong opening with at least 3-card support in partner’s suit. The convention helps to find the fit and the total strength fast without giving information that could be useful only for the opponents. The classical treatment for *Odwrotka* is that responder reacts according to the scheme: 4–4, 5–5. That translates into: 2♥ = weak (6–10) with four cards in the agreed major, 2♠ = strong with four, 2NT = weak with 5, 3♠ = strong with 5, 3♣, 3♥ = weak or strong with 6 respectively.

Here, a new version of the convention is suggested. It is called *Bubrotka* to honor one of its authors, Stanislaw Bubu Gołębiowski. Using *Bubrotka* responder gives more information about his whole distribution in response to partner’s 2♦ relay.

We’ll admit now that there are several other substitutes for odwrotka “on the market” (in addition to *Bubrotka* we supply an alternative gadget for regular partnerships – nicknamed *odwyrtka*) – all are designed to quickly revert to natural bidding.

**Continuations over a 1NT opening**

WJ2000 featured a relay system (“relay Stayman”), but relay bidding hasn’t stood the test of time. Probably this is because:

- intricate bidding “trees” are generally a source of expensive mistakes,
- relay bidding makes it impossible to show values in any particular suit,
- relays aren’t fun – it is a memory drain, and it doesn’t allow responder to use his judgement.

In WJ05 Stayman is limited to just the initial 2♠ response. After that, it’s all more or less natural.
Slam bidding

In WJ05, the Blackwood responses are reversed. 5♣ shows 1 or 4 keycards, 5♦ – 0 or 3. The chapter on slam bidding gives arguments for this treatment.

A new convention included in WJ05 is Exclusion Blackwood (popular outside Poland for years now) – asking for Aces outside of a void suit.

After a 1♣ opening and 2♣, 2♦ responses

The 4-crd 1♦ opening causes some problems that are avoided with a 5-crd opening. It is necessary therefore in later bidding to sort out all the extra situations when opener has 4 cards, from when he has 5.

Gadgets

I risk adding a few gadgets to the non-competitive auction. I’ll call them by the last name of the players who invented them (Trybuła transfers, Wesolowski transfer), or developed them (Gawryś gadget). In selecting the gadgets I applied the following criterium: maximum gain with minimum memory load.

Handling Interference

After a 1M opening and enemy overcall, a jump-raise to the 3-level is preemptive; a cue-bid shows an invitational raise, and 2NT shows a GF raise (at least 4-crd support). A natural 2NT hand would instead first double and then bid 2NT on the next round.

The alternative treatment (assumed e.g. in WJ2000) – invitational-or-better cue-bid – was not retained for two reasons. The first reason has already been discussed: game auctions should exchange the least possible information, whereas slam auctions should communicate as much as possible and therefore it is crucial to determine the range as soon as possible. The other reason is that the old solution did not satisfy the above-mentioned criterium for a multiway bid: the different hands are two close in the strength range. Consequently, the ambiguity (either invite or force to game) makes life tough and may result in bad decisions (particularly the uncertainty about the nature of the subsequent passes and doubles).

Overcalls

Among the new things in this phase of the bidding, the reader can expect a suggested defense to the 2♦ opening (Multi or Wilkosz) and a defense to the weak NT.

Some treatments found in this book are continued untouched from WJ2000. However I’ve tried to make the booklet an interesting lecture even for those who have already read WJ2000 such as lots of new examples and more of my advice on how to use WJ in practice.
THE NON-COMPETITIVE AUCTION

Summary of Opening Bids

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opening</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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| 1♣      | 1) 12–14 balanced  
2) 15+, ♠  
3) 18+, any hand | 1) don’t have to open all 12’s  
2) hands too strong for a Precision 2♣ opening  
3) also GF hands |
| 1♥      | 12–17, 4+ cards | includes 4♥ –5♥ 12–14 HCP |
| 1♥, 1♠  | 12–17, 5+ cards | |
| 1NT     | 15–17 | |
| 2♣      | Precision | (11)12–14(15) 6♣ or 5♣–4M |
| 2♦      | 6–10, Multi | like a weak 2 in either major |
| 2♥      | 6–10, 5♥ + 5 other | |
| 2♠      | 6–10, 5♠ + 5 other | |
| 2NT     | 6–10, minors (5–5) | |
| 3 suit  | preempt | (6)7-card suit |
| 3NT     | gambling | solid 7-crd minor, nothing else |
| 4♣, 4♦  | natural | |

The non-competitive auction is described in order of opening bids – except for the 1♣ opening which is discussed at the very end.