New Minor Forcing (& Its Variations)

The Problem

The auction of concern resembles the following:

1♦ 1♠   
1N ?

After a minor suit opening, responder shows a 4+ card major. Opener then rebids 1N. The question is simple: How does responder continue?

Natural bidding (circa early-mid 1900s) suggests that responder’s jumps are game forcing, while rebidding a new suit at the two level shows constructive to invitational values.

While reasonable on some hands, there are several flaws to this structure. First, opener has difficulty distinguishing between true invitational hands and weak hands. In this sequence, responder would bid 2♦ with

♠KQxx ♥x ♦xxxx ♣xxxx

and

♠KQxx ♥xx ♦KQxxx ♣xx

Slightly more modern methods (1950-ish onwards) suggest that the jumps are invitational. In this structure, there is a problem with a hand like

♠KJTxxx ♥AQJx ♦xxx ♣x

Bidding 4♥ will cause opener to play in a 4-3 fit, which will occasionally be wrong. The alternative (2♥) is nonforcing. If the partnership plays 2♥ as forcing, then there is no way to stop at the two level holding

♠Kxxxx ♥Qxxxx ♦xx ♣x and similar.

Second, responder has no convenient way to investigate a 5-3 fit and stop below game. If he holds

♠KQxxx ♥xx ♦KQx ♣xxx

4♠ would make opposite

♠Axx ♥Axxx ♦JTxx ♣Ax   
  
The proposed solution offers significant benefits against a minor downside.

What is New Minor Forcing?

Playing New Minor Forcing, the pair adopts an artificial meaning to responder’s 2♣ rebid in the sequences

1♦ - 1♥/♠   
1N – 2♣

And to the 2♦ rebid after the sequences

1♣ - 1♥/♠  
1N – 2♦

Essentially, responder’s rebid of the other minor is ARTIFICIAL. It promises INVITATIONAL or better values, and is FORCING ONE ROUND.

The artificial rebid is responder’s choice with any invitational or better hand. Weak hands with proper distribution may make rebids at the two or three level. For example,

1♣ - 1♠  
1N – 2♥ shows 5-4+ distribution and less than invitational values

1♣ - 1♠   
1N – 2N shows 4♠ and invitational values

1♣ - 1♠   
1N – 3♦ shows 4+♠ and 6(5)+♦ with less than invitational values.

Some direct jumps look open to interpretation. Consider the following:

1♣ - 1♠   
1N – 3♠ 3♠ should, arguably, be a slam try. Responder could go through an invitational

sequence (2♦) or a game forcing sequence (2♦…3♠). With a 2♠ rebid available for weak hands, 3♠ should be slammish with a 6+ card suit.

1♣ - 1♠   
1N – 3♥ 3♥ falls under the same thoughts as 3♠. However, it may be more important to distinguish between 5-4 and 5-5 hands with invitational values. Regardless, this is definitely NOT just game forcing – responder could start with 2♦, bidding 3♥s later.

1♣ - 1♠   
1N – 3♣ 3♣ is invitational with 5(4)+♣s. Responder generally does not have 5♠.

Responding to NMF

Opener responds to NMF very naturally. Jumps imply extra values. In addition, opener should prefer to show a 4-card major responder may hold over supporting partner’s major. Some examples will clarify these ideas.

1♣ - 1♠   
1N – 2♦   
2♥ shows 4♥ and minimum values (i.e. would not accept an invite). Opener may have 3♠.   
  
1♣ - 1♠   
1N – 2♦   
2♠ shows 3♠ and denies 4♥, minimum values.

1♣ - 1♠   
1N – 2♦   
2N shows <3♠, <4♥, and minimum values.   
  
1♣ - 1♠   
1N – 2♦   
3♣ shows 5+♣ and maximum values. Opener won’t have 3♠ or 4♥.

1♣ - 1♠   
1N – 2♦   
3♦ is an odd bid. Maybe opener is maximum, 2245 with values in the majors…  
  
1♣ - 1♠   
1N – 2♦   
3♥ shows 4♥ and maximum values. Opener may have 3♠.   
  
1♣ - 1♠   
1N – 2♦   
3♠ shows 3♠ and denies 4♥, maximum values.   
  
1♣ - 1♠   
1N – 2♦   
3N shows a maximum hand without 3♠ or 4♥.

When opener shows maximum values, the auction is game forcing. Otherwise, responder’s next bid clarifies the nature of his hand. For example,

1♦ - 1♠   
1N – 2♣   
2♦ - 2♥ shows invitational values, 5+ ♠ 4+ ♥   
 2♠ shows 5-6♠, invitational values   
 2N This is an odd bid – what it should mean is unclear.   
 3♣ This is game forcing with 4♠ and 5+ ♣   
 3♦ Game forcing, 4+♦   
 3♥ Game forcing, 5+ ♠ 5+ ♥

One nuance worth discussing is the auction   
  
1♣ - 1♥   
1N – ?

Responder’s thought process depends on whether opener will rebid 1N with 4♠ or not (there’s good arguments both ways). If opener denies 4♠s, responder won’t look for a ♠ fit. However, if opener can conceal 4♠s, responder can distinguish his major suit holdings as follows  
  
1♣ - 1♥   
1N – 2♦ for 4-5 invitational/game forcing hands

2♠ for 4-4 invitational hands   
 3♠ for 4-4 game forcing hands

A great discussion point emerges after trying to bid these hands:

♠ KQxx ♠ AJx  
♥ Kxx ♥ QJxxx

♦ Qxx ♦ Kx  
♣ Qxx ♣ xx  
  
Applying the same guidelines after a 1♠ opening would lead to the auction

1♣ - 1♥   
1N – 2♦

2♠ - ?

Responder gets stuck either passing, bidding 2N, or bidding 3♥ (which looks forcing, but it’s unclear). A quick solution is to switch opener’s priorities after the 1♥ response: Opener shows 3♥ first, and 4♠ only without 3♥. This will keep the pair at a manageable contract every time. The only thing sacrificed is missing a 4-4♠ fit when there are fits in both majors… not a huge loss.

Another question that arises for partnerships is which minor is artificial after   
  
1♥ - 1♠   
1N - ?   
  
I suggest 2♣, only because it provides more space. There’s little obvious advantage one way or another.

The other common problem sequence is:

1♦ - 1♠   
1N – 3♣

Opener has two hands that might be shown this way: weak 4-6 hands (♠KQxx ♥x ♦xx ♣xxxxxx) and invitational hands without 5♠ (♠KQxx ♥xx ♦Qxx ♣AT9xx). The sequence is playable either way – proponents of “weak signoff” would argue that responder might try 2N with the second hand. On the other hand, the opponents are more likely to intervene when responder holds the 1st hand, and the 2nd hand will not belong in NT when the opponents run ♥s (and they don’t always overcall with bad hands with 5♥s). This situation requires solid partnership agreement.

Finally, the auction

1♣ - 1♦   
1N – 2♣/♦

Is NOT NEW MINOR FORCING. Opener doesn’t have a major suit fit to look for.

NMF Variations: Two Way

Many expert pairs use both minor suit rebids artificially to provide clear distinction between invitational and game forcing hands. It also partially solves some of the issues encountered with weak hands that would like to sign off in a minor suit.

Take this auction,

1♣ - 1♠   
1N - ?

Now, 2♣ is artificial and shows INVITATIONAL VALUES. 2♦ is also artificial, and shows GAME FORCING VALUES.   
  
Now, bidding remains in place after 2♦ in the same way it was with regular NMF. Opener bids naturally and jumps with extra values.

The bidding after 2♣ is different, but very simple: Opener is required to bid 2♦, after which responder has the following rebids available:

Pass A weak hand with 6+ ♦. This is the main reason why opener’s 2♦ rebid is forced.   
2♥ 5♠, 4♥, invitational values  
2♠ 5♠, <4♥, invitational values  
2N \*\* Needs discussion.   
3♣ 4♠ 5+♣, invitational values  
3♦ 4♠, 5+♦, invitational values  
3♥ 5♠, 5+♥, invitational values  
3♠ 6+♠, invitational values  
3N A special two-way trick. This shows 5(332) shape and gives opener a choice to play 3N or 4♠.

Because all of these “strong” hands are covered by 2♣ and 2♦, rebids at the two level imply less than invitational values. A direct 2N call shows invitational values with 4 cards in the major.

Direct bids at the 3 level are defined as natural slam tries. The advantage is to relieve opener of the burden to determine whether his bids are natural or cuebids.

One small downside that exists is that the partnership is in an awkward spot when responder has 45xx distribution (responder must rebid 2♠, bypassing the possibility of a 2♥ contract). Another small problem is that opener does not get to provide input about his hand shape prior to responder’s rebid. This leaves responder with slightly less information about opener’s hand. The flipside is that in the invitational sequences, opener gains captaincy, which is helpful considering that responder’s hand will be more distributional, and the balanced hand will be more suitable to determine how the values fit between both hands.