



AN HONORS eBook FROM MASTER POINT PRESS

Nick Hughes

Symmetric Relay

Featuring Scamp and Spam

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Master Point Press
214 Merton St. Suite 205
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
M4S 1A6 (647) 956-4933
info@masterpointpress.com

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First Section

Basic Stuff

The basic method, with reasons and examples

1 **Origins**

Why strong club – what is relay? – our method – gains and losses – mutterings

2 **Honeymoon**

Easing into relay – Honeymoon & its limitations

3 **The relay structure**

Hand types – core & residue – 1-suiters – canapé – 2-suiters – Roman hands – balanced hand structure

4 **Majors rule**

Soapbox – relay & 4-card majors – canapé & the 4-3 fit – the discomfort zone – 1♦, 1♥ & 1♠ openings

5 **Minors – leftovers**

1NT – 2 of a minor – higher openings

6 **The strong club**

Responses – flat hands – over the negative – chain breaks

7 **Relaying to slam**

Slam Points – Denial Cue Bidding – 13 hands

8 **After partner passes**

Third seat changes – passed hand responses

9 **Interference**

The Rule of 3 – ditching relay – TNT – high level Sputnik – we open 1♣ – F2NPR – choice of games

Chapter 1

Origins

Strong club systems are as old as contract bridge. The game's inventor devised the first strong club system, the *Vanderbilt Club*. There are many advantages.

When opener is strong, there is time and space to find a fit:

♠ AK965	♠ 104
♥ K943	♥ QJ1072
♦ AK5	♦ 984
♣ 8	♣ 963

WEST	EAST
1♠	No

Rare but embarrassing. Strong clubbers will get to game after West opens 1♣. East will show a weak hand then bid a contented 2♥ over the 1♠ rebid.

Here is a more common mishap:

♠ J765	♠ K108
♥ K8	♥ 104
♦ AKQ10	♦ 62
♣ AQ2	♣ K106543

WEST	EAST
1♦	1NT
3NT	No

A heart lead followed by a shoulder shrug. West was unlucky to hear 1NT but a 1♠ response would also lead to an ugly auction, with the wrong hand as dummy. Good systems strive to make the strong hand declare.

In a strong club system, other openings are limited – typically 11-15 pts – with many benefits.

Opener can compete freely with a limited hand, knowing responder won't get carried away.

A limited opening puts responder in the box seat:

♠ A 9	♠ 8 7
♥ K Q 10 6 3	♥ A J 5 4 2
♦ 8 5	♦ K 7 4 2
♣ J 10 5 3	♣ A 2

The strong club pair bid 1♥ : 4♥.

West had a routine opening in a strong club system and East sped to game as an each way bet, knowing slam was remote. Yet 4♠ is good for North-South, harder to reach after this *barrage*.

A limited opening helps responder do sums and stay low:

♠ A J 8 5 4	♠ 6
♥ 10 7 2	♥ Q 8 4 3
♦ A K 7 2	♦ 9 4 3
♣ 4	♣ A K 9 7 6

WEST	EAST
1♠	1NT
2♦	No

A dull hand for sure. Game is highly unlikely opposite 11-15 so East takes the low road. A Standard West could have a 17-count for 2♦, so East has to bid 2NT.

After going down in 2NT, East says to West "Have you heard of Gazilli?" That's one systemic hole plugged.

There are drawbacks.

A strong club can be derailed by a pesky preempt:

WEST'S HAND	WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
♠ K Q 9 7 4 3	1♣ ¹⁶⁺	2♥	No	4♥
♥ 4	?			
♦ A K 3				
♣ A J 2				

No choice. You bid 4♠ with fingers crossed, hoping to catch some support. The Standard bidders are laughing – they opened 1♠ then happily doubled 4♥, or bid 4♠ if they caught a raise.

Point taken but these awkward hands are not common and gains make up for some of those. Take this:

♠ A 6 3	♠ 7 2
♥ K Q 6 5	♥ A 10 8 3
♦ A 2	♦ 9 8 6 4
♣ A J 8 5	♣ Q 10 6

WEST	NORTH	EAST
1♣ ¹⁶⁺	2♠	?

East made the normal takeout double opposite 16+ so they reached the making 4♥. At the other table, West's natural 1♣ opening didn't impress East and 2♠ was controversially passed out.

Sometimes the strong clubbers cope better with a high preempt. Take this, from an old World Championship:

♠ Q 9 7 6 4	♠ A K 8 5
♥ 9	♥ A Q 6
♦ A K 7	♦ 9 2
♣ A K 6 2	♣ J 9 8 4

WEST	NORTH	EAST
1♠	4♥	4♠

What else? Now look at the strong clubbers:

1♣ ¹⁶⁺	4♥	Dbl
4♠		4NT
5♠		6♠

Strong club is the way to go – particularly if you add *relays* ...

What is a relay?

A relay is a bid that asks a question.

In relay auctions, one player describes shape and strength while partner repeatedly asks "What else do you have?"

Natural systems make some use of relays – Blackwood plus queen ask, Checkback. Stayman is a relay – responder asks via 2♣ to get opener to reveal shape.

A few pairs play *Relay Stayman*¹, where responder can keep asking to check for a second suit, perhaps revealing the entire shape.

1 See *Chapter 18 – Arithmetic* for a possible structure.

This might be crucial:

WEST	EAST	EAST'S HAND
1NT ¹⁵⁻¹⁷	2♣	♠ Q 5 2
2♠	?	♥ A K J 5
		♦ K Q 10 4
		♣ J 2

What now? 3NT is obvious if opener has strength in clubs:

♠ A K 4 3 ♥ Q 2 ♦ J 7 6 ♣ K Q 10 4

but if opener's minor is diamonds, you might belong in a suit:

♠ A K 4 3 ♥ Q 3 2 ♦ A 9 3 2 ♣ Q 4

Now 5♦ is safe enough, while the matchpoints go to those in four of a major. If we change the ♣Q to the ♣A, there are 12 easy tricks and 7♦ is a good spot.

A relay pair should have no problems reaching that 7♦. East would find out that partner had 4-3-4-2 shape, then locate all the key honours. Slams like this are routine for a competent relay pair.

System design

With relay systems, the cheapest response is often set aside as a relay. This has a BIG impact on the structure of opening bids.

If the 1♠ response to a 1♥ opening is an asking bid, it's clearly harder to find a spade fit. In many relay systems, the 1♥ opening **denies four spades**,² making a spade fit less likely, so losing the natural 1♠ response is less of an issue.

Our method

Most games are bid via relays. The relayer keeps making the cheapest bid to get partner to describe further. Here's a relay auction:

WEST'S HAND	WEST	EAST
♠ 6	1♥	1♠ ^R
♥ A Q 10 6 5	2♦	2♥ ^R
♦ K 6 4	2NT	3♣ ^R
♣ K 9 8 6	3♦	

2 **Transfer** openings avoid this issue – at a cost. See *Chapter 16*.

In our system – *Scamp*³ – 1♥ shows four or more and 11-15 pts. East's three bids are all relays, asking about shape. In response:

- 2♦ showed a club suit, as well as 5+ hearts
- 2NT showed a singleton or void spade
- 3♦ showed the complete shape: 1-5-3-4 in that order

All this is distinctly unnatural and off-putting. You might envisage having to memorise pages of artificial sequences to learn relay but that's not so. A few basic schemes cover everything.

In fact, relay systems are simpler than many of today's "natural" systems, weighed down as they are by an array of gadgets.

Relay structures are designed to unravel all shapes by 3NT. There are 300 hand patterns to be described, ignoring the 1% freaks, so the space needs to be used efficiently. Flick to *Chapter 3 – The Relay Structure* – to see how this is achieved.

Relay gains

Relays takes the guesswork out of many slams. Often the asker knows describer's exact shape, plus the honours in each suit:

♠ A K J 6 5	♠ Q 8 4 2
♥ A 7	♥ K 8
♦ A 9 4	♦ K 7 3 2
♣ Q J 10	♣ K 9 3

Slam has no play but it's cold if we move one of East's small cards to clubs. A relay pair would stop safely on these cards – ideally in 4NT – and easily bid slam opposite the hand with four clubs.

Relay methods can get the partnership to the best game on hands where natural bidders are forced to guess:

♠ A K 9	♠ J 7 5 4
♥ Q J 10 6	♥ K 3 2
♦ 7 5	♦ A 4
♣ A K 6 5	♣ Q 9 7 3

West discovered that partner held a positive with 4-3-2-4 in that order, then selected 4♥. Despite the diamond stopper, 3NT has little play while 4♥ is best of the rest. It's a grope in Standard or Precision.

3 Strong Club Accenting Majors. Yes, we had a dog called Scamp.

When the contract is normal, the defence can be testing if the asking hand remains hidden and unknown. Opening leads can be genuinely blind. You find yourself on lead against 3NT with

♠ 10 6 ♥ Q 6 5 4 ♦ Q 10 7 5 ♣ K 8 6

after dummy has shown 4-5-2-2 shape and declarer's hand is unknown. If you lead a diamond into declarer's ♦AKJ64, partner may not be amused. It's an ugly guess that you would not have to make against most opponents.

Having said all that, relay plays no role in the majority of auctions.

WEST	EAST	EAST'S HAND
1♥	?	♠ 7 6 3
		♥ A 7
		♦ Q J 10 6 5 4
		♣ 7 5

In Standard, you respond 1NT to 1♥, hardly the ideal start. In relay systems, most strong hands go via relay so responder is free to bid 2♦ with this – long diamonds and around 6-10 pts, not forcing. Perfect.

Relay losses

There are hands where natural methods fare better, in main because relay sequences provide copious information on shape, but not texture.

You might bid the same way with ♠ A75432 as with ♠ KQJT32 and sometimes it's hard to find the stoppers for 3NT. There are solutions but they remain a concern.

Relay systems focus on games, slams and major fits, so sometimes we reach the wrong partscore. For instance:

♠ 7 4	♠ Q 8 3 2
♥ A K J 5	♥ 6 3
♦ K 9 4 3	♦ A 8 7 5 2
♣ 10 8 6	♣ Q 7

We would probably fail in 1NT here. Our West would open 1♥. East responds 1NT, because 1♠ would be relay and the diamond suit is too flimsy. Standard pairs reach 2♦ easily. Tough but rare.

The big losses occur when someone forgets the system. Sometimes there is no recovery ...

Who invented relay?

In Australasia, the early work was done by New Zealanders. In the 1970s, Roy Kerr – a mathematician – devised a *symmetric* shape-showing structure and the *Kiwi Club* was born. Paul Marston of *Moscito* fame designed systems using the method, with contributions from other leading NZ players.

Kerr did not invent relay. In America and Europe many top pairs had developed their own home-grown relay methods. The early American guru was Dave Cliff, whose work spawned systems like *The Ultimate Club*.

Kerr's main contribution was to impose symmetry, making relay more efficient and easier to learn.

Mutterings

Relay systems are unpopular with some writers and administrators. In Australia, former international Dick Cummings once headlined his column in the *Sydney Morning Herald* with "Let's Ban Relays". In many ACBL⁴ events you cannot play a full relay system, though that is changing.

Some reckon that such artificiality is against the spirit of the game. It offends that a less-talented pair might win with "underhand" methods.

Many older players would like to see bidding development halted at their comfort level. They have adopted transfer responses and tolerate Multi Twos, but relays are beyond the pale.

"Relay systems stunt the development of bidding judgement."

*"It's boring to play against a relay pair;
their bids mean nothing to you."*

Admittedly, it is dull to play against a slow relay pair, especially if they get their auctions wrong. You can't learn relay at the table. This means spending time bidding boards at home or on-line, or easing into relay by starting with *Honeymoon* ...

Crude and effective

W/Nil	♠ J 9 8 4 3 ♥ 3 2 ♦ 9 7 6 2 ♣ J 9		
♠ Q 10 2 ♥ K J 6 5 ♦ Q 4 ♣ A 8 7 5	♠ AK 7 5 ♥ 10 8 ♦ K J 8 ♣ K Q 10 2	♠ 6 ♥ A Q 9 7 4 ♦ A 10 5 3 ♣ 6 4 3	
WEST 1♥ ⁴⁺ No	NORTH No 4♠	EAST 4♥ Dbl	SOUTH Dbl End

Our 1♥ opening shows 4+ and 11-15 points. Perhaps South should have passed 4♥ but East might have been a lot weaker. North could hardly sit.⁵

+500 for us with a quiet -140 in 3♥ from the other table.

Acot Two-ish

♠ AK 10 7 6 ♥ 9 ♦ AK 9 ♣ K Q 6 2	♠ Q 8 2 ♥ 6 5 4 3 ♦ 10 8 ♣ J 9 8 4
WEST 1♣ ¹⁶⁺ 1♠ 4♠	EAST 1♦ ⁰⁻⁷ 2♠

Having shown 0-7, East was happy enough to raise.

⁵ and avoid a red card lead !

RELAY IN ACTION

As bidding sophistication continues to grow, many top pairs are turning to relay systems, where one partner asks questions and then places the final contract based on the answers. Often these methods are tied to a strong club approach: methods such as the Ultimate Club and Moscito have been around for decades. The symmetric relay is an approach that is increasingly popular in Australia; it can be attached to more or less any strong club system.



NICK HUGHES is a bridge club manager, writer and teacher from Sydney. He has won a few national events and played enough serious bridge to become a Grandmaster.



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