

"Would you open 1NT with this hand ?" I was asked a couple of weeks ago :

♠AKxx
♥xx
♦KQxx
♣Jx

Yes, definitely. Some players are reluctant to open 1NT when they have a weak doubleton but don't let it put you off. If you open One Spade, what are you going to rebid if partner responds Two Hearts? A 2NT rebid shows 15-16 points and you are a couple of points short of that. A Three Diamond rebid would be game-forcing, showing at least five cards in spades and four (or five) in diamonds. This is even worse - it misleads partner as to the strength and the shape of your hand.

Opening One Diamond is no better. If partner responds One Heart you have a choice of two rebids, either One Spade (which would show at least five diamonds) or One No Trump (showing a stronger hand than you have and not mentioning the spade suit).

Despite the weakness in hearts, you have to open 1NT. The point to remember is that a 1NT opening bid shows a balanced hand within a certain point range. It does *not* promise an honour card in each suit. In fact, if you do have an honour card in each suit, your hand might *look* very suitable for a 1NT bid but it will be short of playing strength. Compare the hand above with this one :

♠KJx
♥Kxx
♦Kxxx
♣Kxx

Which of these two hands would you prefer to have for a 1NT opening bid ? The first hand is better. Almost all of the high cards are in the two longer suits and the honour cards are supporting each other. This increases your chances of being able to develop tricks. In bridge, technical merit is more important than artistic impression. Computer analysis agrees with this and suggests that the first hand is worth 13 points whereas the second is worth 12 points.

Exactly the same applies to opening 2NT bids, although with 20-22 points in your hand you are far less likely to have an unguarded suit. If you have the right number of points, don't let the presence of a weak suit deflect you from opening 2NT :

♠KQJx
♥AKJx
♦AQx
♣xx

Open 2NT. The weak doubleton in clubs is not quite as bad as it looks. Partner will very likely bid 3C (Stayman) if he has a four-card major suit, so no problems there. If partner does not have a four-card major suit, he is likely to have at least three cards in clubs and perhaps more. This reduces the chance of the opponents running off the first five or six tricks in clubs.

Another common question involves opening 1NT when you have a five-card major suit. Some players never do it, others think nothing of it and some are influenced by the quality of the five-card major suit. If you are in the 'never do it' camp, do you really think that opening One Heart and rebidding Two Hearts with this hand paints an accurate picture for partner :

♠AQx
♥Jxxxx
♦KQx
♣Jx

Not for me, thanks. An opening 1NT bid looks a far more accurate description.

If you play a weak No-trump, balanced hands in the 15-19 point range have to open in a suit. With a 4432 shape, you often have to decide between a major and a minor suit opening bid :

♠AQx
♥KJxx
♦Qx
♣AJxx

The modern style is to open the major suit. The reason is that your rebid is (very likely) going to be in No-trumps. A balanced hand either opens 1NT (or 2NT) or else rebids No-trumps. It does not bid both suits. So, if you are likely to bidding one suit only, it makes sense to prefer the major over the minor. That way, there is no danger of missing a 4-4 fit in the major suit. You might miss out on a 4-4 fit in clubs but, as I was told ages ago, "you won't win much playing in clubs."

Mike