



The Unusual No-trump

THE unusual no-trump is a great toy and is used by many players as such – something to be tried out for a while, then put back in the box when they lose interest in it. And while to some extent it is a toy that can merely cause a distraction, when it is used well it is more of a weapon with which to blast the opponents.

The unusual no-trump takes the form of a 2NT overcall of (typically) a one-level opening bid, but *only in the direct seat*: after (1♥) – Pass – (Pass), a 2NT bid is best used to show a strong balanced hand. Unlike most overcalls it is almost always used on destructive hands that are aimed at tearing the opponents' bidding in two. This is not to say you can't bid constructively after an unusual 2NT bid, just that since the minor suits are frequently outbid by the majors it is used on hands that want to intervene; if you happen to bid and make a game it is just an added bonus.

What Do You Need to Bid The Unusual No-trump?

Broadly speaking, the unusual no-trump shows at least 5-5 in the two lowest unbid suits – the minor suits. (If the opponents have opened a minor suit, then 2NT would show hearts and the other minor)

It shows 'competitive values', which is a good way of saying you need to have some values but not that many. A lot of people get over-fixated about the number of points you need to make a bid and ignore their location, when in reality the latter is far more important than the former.

Consider this hand, for example:

```
♠ 5
♥ 4 3
♦ K Q J 8 7
♣ Q J 9 7 5
```

This hand is perfect for a (non-vulnerable) bid of the unusual no-trump, as you have two good suits that you want partner to bid or to lead if you are outbid, and you have no defensive values.

Change the hand to this:

```
♠ K
♥ Q 5
♦ K Q 8 6 5
♣ 9 7 5 3 2
```

Now the hand is totally unsuitable. One of your suits is significantly better than the other and you have too many points in your short suits. The king of spades and queen of hearts will surely be of little value to partner when he is doubled for penalties in 3♣, but you can be sure that they will stop the opponents making a slam; so that when you go for 1100 you won't be rescued by any lucky results on the score-sheet.

Effectively, when you bid the unusual no-trump you are making a pre-emptive bid (in two suits rather than one), so you must make sure you have as *pure* a hand as possible – good quality suits and little defence outside. A good question to ask yourself is: 'Are my points in my long

suits?' If the answer is no, then don't bid! It would be much better to bid on this hand . . .

```
♠ 7 5
♥ Void
♦ J 10 9 7 3 2
♣ Q J 10 7 6
```

. . . than on this one:

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

. . . as on the second hand you have far too much defence, points where partner won't expect them. Facing an average 4-3-3-3 6-count on the first hand, if you are doubled and go for a penalty the opponents will have a game or slam on; on the second you might be losing a mega-score against nothing.

Does the Vulnerability Matter?

I mentioned earlier that a certain hand was suitable for a non-vulnerable overcall – does vulnerability really make that much of a difference? The answer to this question is not only yes, but even more so than usual. The difference, of course, is not only practical, it is also psychological because when you are vulnerable the opponents will be much keener to pull the trigger and double you for penalties than when you are not. (In this respect it is similar to a pre-emptive three-level opening). So when you make a vulnerable overcall make sure your suits are of good quality and, if you can, try to be 6-5. That will normally give you an extra trick if you come to play the hand.

All of the following hands are suitable for a vulnerable 2NT overcall:

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Hand A	Hand B
♠ 5	♠ 9 8
♥ 4	♥ 5
♦ Q 10 9 7 5 4	♦ K Q J 10 7
♣ A K 7 6 4	♣ K J 10 6 5

Hand C
♠ A 2
♥ 3
♦ Q J 10 6 5
♣ K Q 10 8 5

Problems You Need to Consider

It is only fair to mention the downsides of the unusual no-trump. When you tell the world that you have a 5-5 shape, you are effectively giving the opponents a blueprint of your hand – it may give them clues should they come to be declarer. Therefore, if you know you're going to be outbid, be wary of bidding on weak hands, as all you will do is give the opponents help. (This is especially true if you are playing against very good declarer players, but if you are playing against poor declarer players by all means bid on rubbish – so long as you can get away with it!)

One of the main dangers of the unusual no-trump is the problem it causes over

artificial and short clubs. Let's say the bidding starts like this:

Oppo 1 **You**
1♣ 2NT

Which two suits are you showing with your 2NT bid? The answer, of course, depends on the meaning of 1♣. If 1♣ is natural, promising a club suit, then by bidding 2NT you are showing hearts and diamonds (probably with emphasis on the diamonds, as with a good heart suit you might well choose just to bid 1♥). If 1♣ didn't say anything about clubs (such as a strong club, 16+), then 2NT would show the minors. And what about over a five-card-major style, such as better minor? In that case I would treat the 1♣ bid as natural and have 2NT showing the red suits, as above.

There is more of a controversial decision over a 1♣ opening that shows all sorts of balanced hands but, to avoid misunderstandings, I would suggest that a 1♣ or a 1♦ bid that could be short should be treated as natural. Only play 2NT over a conventional minor that could be based on a void (such as a strong club or a Precision diamond) to show the minor suits – that avoids all danger of a calamity.

Finally, remember that the unusual no-

trump is essentially a pre-emptive weapon – it doesn't apply over a weak two, a Multi 2♦ or a pre-emptive opening. Over such openings 2NT (and 3NT) are needed to show natural bids.

Let's review the dos and don'ts of the unusual no-trump:

Do:

- Make sure you are at least 5-5 with good suits that (even if you are out-bid) you want partner to lead.
- Bid on hands that are 'pure' with a high percentage of their points in the long suits.
- Take extra care when vulnerable; if in doubt, don't be a hero.

Don't:

- Use the unusual no-trump fourth in hand – it doesn't apply in the protective seat.
- Bid 2NT over a short club and expect partner to guess which two suits you have – make firm agreements and stick to them
- Pre-empt a pre-empt; use the unusual no-trump over an enemy one-level opening, not over a weak two or three.

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