

The 1NT Opening (Continued)

I AM often asked about the fundamental strengths and weaknesses of the Strong No-trump *versus* the Weak No-trump, some of which I covered in my last article.

The key really is that the auction very rarely goes pear-shaped when starting with a 1NT opening as 15-17 (very occasionally partner has absolutely nothing, I suppose, but this is quite rare). Those Weak No-trump devotees amongst you will all know only too well how often it can actually go wrong. If doubled, it can be horrendous – everyone these days spends ages constructing a ‘wriggle’ or some such variation (yuk!). But you can also often receive a bad score when *not* doubled – and then no system of wriggling can save you!

Another very important adjunct of playing a Strong No-trump is that the very frequent Weak No-trump type hands are opened at the one level with 1♣ or 1♦, avoiding the problems above of going several down either doubled or undoubled. It also therefore provides much more room for auction development as well as finding major-suit fits.

Opening 1NT with or without a Five-card Major

The debate has long raged about whether to open 1NT when in range holding a five-card major suit. My personal view when playing a *Weak* No-trump is that to open 1NT when holding a decent five-card major is simply a losing proposition. I really believe that Acol needs to be handled carefully to compete with the other systems (mainly Five-card Major, Strong No-trump based) played globally. By opening 1NT you deny the five-card heart or spade suit that the rest of the world would routinely find simply by opening it. I do subscribe to the view that with a weak five-card major suit you should still open 1NT when playing 12-14. I teach a combination of two factors:

- Two honours make the suit acceptable to show;
- A hand rich in controls (aces and kings) should consider opening 1♥/1♠ more often than when full of soft values (queens and jacks)

However for the Strong No-trump I fervently do *not* hold the views just expressed. You simply must, in my view, open most hands in range with 1NT whether holding a five-card major or not. Thus Hand 1 should open 1♥ not 1NT when playing a Weak No-trump whereas Hand 2 should open 1NT when playing Strong:

Hand 1	Hand 2
♠ A 6 3	♠ A 6 3
♥ K Q 10 7 4	♥ K Q 10 7 4
♦ K 8 5	♦ K 8 5
♣ J 6	♣ A 4

I know that some people put lots of work into playing ‘Puppet’ or Five-card Major Stayman when playing a Strong No-trump. I do not share their enthusiasm: in my view, there is a lot of other work developing methods over 1NT with and without intervention that comes first. I think just getting on with opening 1NT will give you a far greater percentage of good results. You *must accept* with any change in method that the system will generate the odd bad board – known as a ‘system fix’.

Talking of being fixed by the system, here is a hand from a recent local club duplicate:

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Game All. Dealer North.

♠ A 10 6
♥ A K Q 5 3
♦ 8 4
♣ Q 7 6

♠ Q J 8 2
♥ 7 6
♦ Q 10 3
♣ A J 10 5

♠ K 9 7 5 4
♥ J 4 2
♦ K J 2
♣ 8 4

♠ 3
♥ 10 9 8
♦ A 9 7 6 5
♣ K 9 3 2

Partner and I bid 1NT, passed out, making eight tricks on the obvious spade lead. This scored a complete bottom as every other North-South managed 140 or 170 in hearts. The reason I am showing this hand is to attempt to give a balanced view of the pros and cons. I don't want to be one of those authors who cherry-pick perfect examples to demonstrate whatever it is that they are advocating at the time!

No-trump Rebids

Because we have a 1NT rebid as 12-14 and 2NT as 18-19, it works absolutely brilliantly to play a Strong No-trump. The occasional system fix as detailed above is a *very small price to pay* for having a better, more integrated system.

Responding to 1NT without Intervention from the Opponents

Examples of hands responding to a 15-17 1NT:

<p>Hand A</p> <p>♠ A Q 6 3 ♥ Q 7 4 ♦ A K 6 3 ♣ K 5</p>	i)	Partner	You
		1NT	2♣
		2♦	6NT
	ii)	Partner	You
		1NT	2♣
		2♥	?

- i) Here with a full 18-count facing a Strong No-trump we can insist on slam. Nothing can be lost however by bidding Stayman first in case a major-suit fit should come to light. Invariably 6♥/6♠ prove easier to make with these hands.
- ii) If you are about to bid 6NT – *stop and think again*. You might still have a spade fit – and I have just said 6♠ may be cold with 6NT failing – surely we should explore further. Some use Baron with these hands. I simply recommend that after 2♥ you can use 2♠ as forcing for one round with a four-card spade suit.

<p>Hand B</p> <p>♠ K 8 5 2 ♥ Q 9 7 6 4 3 ♦ 2 ♣ 9 5</p>	i)	Partner	You
		1NT	2♣
		2♦	2♥
	ii)	Partner	You
		1NT	2♣
		2♥	3♥/4♥?

You can use Stayman rather than simply transferring to hearts since you hold both majors. If you catch a fit in either suit you are probably worth a raise or jump to four if feeling frisky! (In practice, this is probably more likely if partner bids 2♥ rather than 2♠.)

Hand C

♠ A J 8 4
♥ K 5 2
♦ A 7 6 2
♣ K 4

♠ 7 2
♥ Q J 8 7 3
♦ 8 4 3
♣ Q J 6

Possible Acol auctions might be:

a)	Partner	You
	1♠	1NT
	Pass	

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b)	Partner	You
	1♦	1♥
	1NT	Pass

c)	Partner	You
	1♦	1♥
	1♠	1NT
	Pass	

All failing dismally to find 2♥ which is trivial for those playing a Strong No-trump and Five-card Majors via:

Partner	You
1NT	2♦ (transfer)
2♥	Pass

There! That wasn't too difficult, was it! There are so many hands where the Strong No-trump routinely gets you to the best contract.

Here's another: holding a weak hand with a six or seven card minor, if partner opens a major in Acol you respond 1NT. Partner always seems to have 15-16 balanced and passes and you play in the wrong contract. But with a hand such as D:

Hand D

♠ 5 2
♥ 6 3
♦ K 8 5
♣ Q J 8 7 6 2

When you hear partner open 1NT you simply transfer into your minor (see page 72 in the *October issue*). It is rarely a worse contract than 1NT and *nearly always* scores better. There are many, many hands like this, I assure you.



Upgrading and Downgrading Hands

Whichever basic system you choose to use, you should be aware of the need not to rely solely on the Milton Work Count to instruct you on what to bid!

There is the need to both upgrade or downgrade hands on occasion. I have to admit that I downgrade hands considerably less than I upgrade. I guess basically when bidding I am a 'glass is half full' man rather than 'glass is half empty'!

Downgrading: this quite literally means deducting a point mentally, i.e. holding a 15 HCP hand and calling it 12-14 etc. Reasons to downgrade are:

1. 4-3-3-3 shape;
2. No intermediates;
3. Two honours doubleton (A-Q, K-Q, Q-J etc.).

Upgrading: much more my cup of tea! This literally means mentally adding an extra HCP to your total. Reasons to upgrade are:

1. A good five-card suit (usually three of four top honours is an automatic upgrade, e.g. A-Q-J-x-x or K-Q-J-x-x);
2. Terrific intermediates (nines and tens, particularly in longer suits);
3. Very good controls, particularly when showing very strong hands. Thus Hand 3:

Hand 3

♠ A K 8 3
♥ A 3 2
♦ A K 10 7
♣ A 2

might well consider showing itself as 23-24 rather than 20-22 due to the magnificent controls.

Many ranges can be upgraded by a point:

- 14 becomes 15 (i.e. a good 14 opens a Strong No-trump);
- 17 become 18 (i.e. a good 17 is *too good* to open a Strong No-trump).

There are enormous gains to be had by adopting this approach. (What?! You don't already? – well, you must start!)

Other ranges also work for upgrading: good 19-point hands becoming 20 and opening 2NT, for example. One observation I will make while concluding this topic is that I find it always works well to upgrade when holding five-card minor suits;

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with major suits be a little bit more circumspect.

Dealing with Natural Intervention after 1NT

Obviously you will already have methods to deal with intervention over your 1NT opener whether you play Weak or Strong. I refer you to my article on Lebensohl in the February 2013 issue (pages 26-27) if you need any ideas.



A few reminders. Firstly I think it vital to play double as take-out whether the opponents overcall at the two or three level (the four level is a matter for individual partnerships to decide). For example:

Partner	Opp1	You	Opp 2
1NT	2♥	Double ¹	

¹ Take-out

And:

Partner	Opp1	You	Opp 2
1NT	3♥	Double ¹	

¹ Take-out

If you normally use Lebensohl (or Rubensohl or anything like that), it can still be used when playing a Strong No-trump. You lose the ability to bid a natural 2NT but gain an awful lot of definition to more than compensate for this loss.

So if the opponents make a natural overcall at the two level, then:

- New suit at the two level is to play (typically at least five cards and 4-7 HCP);
- New suit at the three level is natural and forcing to game (not just to play as in standard methods);
- Bidding an immediate 3NT *shows a stopper* in the opponent's suit and is of course natural (some refer to this as FASS – Fast Arrival Shows Stopper);
- Bidding 2NT *forces partner to bid 3♣*. This can then be passed with clubs or converted to a new suit;
- Bidding 2NT, then 3NT is natural but *denies a stopper*;
- After 1NT – (2♥), you can show a five-card

spade suit in three different ways:

- 2♠ = non forcing, to play;
 - 3♠ = game forcing;
 - 2NT then 3♠ = invitational.
- g) Bidding the opponent's suit acts as Stayman:
- Bidding it directly shows a stopper in their suit (plus four cards in the other major);
 - Bidding it via 2NT denies a stopper in their suit (but still shows four cards in the other major).

Dealing with Artificial Intervention

After Astro/Asptro variations, so for example after:

Partner	Opp1	You	Opp 2
1NT	2♣ ¹		

¹ Hearts and another suit

I recommend a similar approach to the one outlined above:

- New suit at the two level = to play;
- 2♥ = three-suited (short hearts), i.e. take-out;
- Double = values (some choose to play it as showing clubs, i.e. a double of an artificial bid. This is not my personal preference but is up to you!);
- Again 2NT = Lebensohl, initially demanding 3♣ etc.

Here's an example to demonstrate:

Hand 4

♠ K 7 6 3
♥ K 5 2
♦ 7
♣ A 9 6 5 2

Partner	Opp1	You
1NT	2♣	3♥

If 2♣ shows hearts and another suit, then you can use 3♥ here (a cue-bid) as Stayman with a heart stop; you're showing four spades and a heart stop. Without a heart stop, the route chosen would be to bid 2NT first, and then a Staymanic 3♥.

After a Landy/Multi-Landy 2♣ showing the majors, very simple arrangements should apply. Just because

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the opponents have announced both majors should not stop you exploring major-suit contracts of your own. Hence both 2♥/2♠ and 3♥/3♠ should all be played as natural in my opinion.

Use 'double' to show values (generally if the opponents then bid, I recommend a double from either side to then be take-out not penalties). So:

Partner	Opp1	You	Opp 2
1NT	2♣	Dble	2♠
Pass	Pass	Dble	

The second double is for take-out.

After the Opponents Double 1NT with an Artificial Meaning

Sometimes the opponents have an agreed method where they use double as something other than penalties (particularly over a Strong No-trump).

Here I recommend to use *system on* – that is, still to use Stayman and transfers etc.

If they double for penalties, first of all bear in mind that this does not happen very often against a Strong 1NT. However, you can choose to use whatever methods you want or are familiar with, though in practice using redouble as strong and all other bids as natural seems to be pretty efficient to me.

The only complication I will add is that if *opener redoubles*, this should be some sort of rescue mechanism – I use it to show a five-card minor suit when I do not want unilaterally to remove the double to find that partner was more than happy with his 6 or 7 count or whatever.

Responding to a 15-17 1NT Quiz

Problem 1

♠ 5 2
♥ Q 8
♦ K J 7 5 4 2
♣ 7 6 2

- | | | | |
|----|----------------|--------------|----------|
| A. | Partner
1NT | Opp1
Pass | You
? |
| B. | Partner
1NT | Opp1
2♣ | You
? |
| C. | Partner
1NT | Opp1
Dble | You
? |
| D. | Partner
1NT | Opp1
2♠ | You
? |

Problem 2

♠ A J 7 6 2
♥ 6 3
♦ A 8 2
♣ J 9 5

- | | | | |
|----|----------------|--------------|----------|
| A. | Partner
1NT | Opp1
Pass | You
? |
| B. | Partner
1NT | Opp1
2♥ | You
? |
| C. | Partner
1NT | Opp1
2♠ | You
? |
| D. | Partner
1NT | Opp1
3♦ | You
? |

Problem 3

♠ Q J 6 2
♥ 5
♦ Q 8 5 2
♣ J 9 5 3

- | | | | |
|----|----------------|--------------|----------|
| A. | Partner
1NT | Opp1
Pass | You
? |
| B. | Partner
1NT | Opp1
Dble | You
? |
| C. | Partner
1NT | Opp1
2♦ | You
? |
| D. | Partner
1NT | Opp1
3♥ | You
? |

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Problem 4

♠ 7 4

♥ A Q 6 3

♦ K J 8 5

♣ J 7 4

A.	Partner	Opp1	You
	1NT	Pass	?
B.	Partner	Opp1	You
	1NT	2♥	?
C.	Partner	Opp1	You
	1NT	2♠	?
D.	Partner	Opp1	You
	1NT	3♠	?

Answers

1. a) A choice here. With a decent six-card suit you might fancy leaving 1NT and hope to score well. However, in the long run I am sure you will score best by transferring to diamonds (whichever method you use) and then outscoring 1NT about 75-80% of the time.

b) Just bid 2♦. This is simply to play.

c) Lots of options here. You could redouble to announce the balance of the points, you could pass and hope 1NT doubled is successful. You could run to 2♦ or even jump to 3♦. I quite like this last effort – it makes it *so much harder* for the opponents to find a possible major-suit contract.

Jumping to 3 of a suit should be played as pre-emptive, not strong and forcing, after a penalty double (this should actually be the case whatever no-trump range you employ).

d) An opportunity to compete in diamonds. You can bid 3♦ directly if not playing Lebensohl, but if you are you must bid 2NT at this juncture. This requests partner to bid 3♣ which you will convert to 3♦. This is your only way to play in diamonds so partner will get the message and pass (hopefully!).

2. a) 2♥, a straightforward transfer then 3NT to give opener a choice of contracts.

b) Bid 3♠. This is natural and forcing to game, showing a five-card suit. With a six-card suit you would most likely just bid 4♠ directly.

c) Interesting! You can bid 3NT to show a spade stopper – or if feeling hungry you can

pass and hope that partner can re-open with a take-out double, with their likely doubleton spade. You can then pass this double out to collect a decent penalty. This is only really the sort of action you might take when needing a good result in a pairs tournament, since partner may not double – then your penalty will be considerably less than the game bonus for 3NT!

d) 3♠. After a jump overcall bids should be played as *forcing* in my opinion. (You must agree this with your partner of course, since the default *without* discussion is usually just competing values but not forcing.)

3. a) Pass – why try to improve the contract? If it ain't broke – don't fix it!

b) Again the choice is to pass (no five-card suit to take out into) or to find an aggressive redouble. It looks a bit thin to me but not ridiculous to redouble.

c) Pass – assuming 2♦ was natural. Try to defend.

d) Double – for take-out. These doubles can and should be played potentially quite light in my opinion. Clearly partner needs to know this style so he should not pass these doubles very often playing you for a stronger responding hand. You will gain many part-score swings if you adopt this method, but obviously if your partnership passes the doubles too readily a quick couple of -670s will probably deter you!

4. a) 2♣ – Stayman. Easy-peasy.

b) 3NT – natural *with a heart stopper*.

c) Either a take-out double, or 2NT then 3♠ to show four cards in hearts *without a spade stopper*.

d) Double – for take-out. *Perfect!* To play this as penalties is really so handicapping for your side; you end up having to double anyway (warts and all) and often conceding a doubled part-score or receiving an inadequate penalty for the game you could make but not bid! In my opinion, you simply *must* play these doubles as take-out. □