The Strong and Weak 1NT Bid - A Three -Tier Approach

By Neil H. Timm

The most popular range for the 1NT opening bid in the United States and for pairs playing the 2/1 system is to use the **15-17 high card points (HCP)**, though historically, 16-18 HCP is also used. These ranges are considered a "strong" 1NT opening and shows a primarily balanced hand, which means it has no voids and if one has a singleton, it must be an A/K/Q.

In the U.K. and most of Europe for pairs playing the ACOL system the mini-range or "weak" 1NT opening bid is more popular and uses the **12-14HCP** range.

Both strong and weak 1NT ranges have their advantages and disadvantages. The strong 1NT bid is less frequent and safer because it is less likely to be doubled for penalty. However, the weak 1NT is more frequent allowing partnerships to enter the bidding more often (about 3-times as often as the strong 1NT bid) but is frequently doubled and requires an escape sequence or a series of runout bids.

For partnerships that open 1NT=15-17, a balanced 12-14HCP hand is shown by opening the better minor and then bidding 1NT. This is not the case for pairs using the weak 1NT=12-14. Instead, for these pairs a minor suit opening bid is followed by 1NT and shows 15-17HCP; bidding sequences are reversed.

Another major difference between the two approaches is that over inference (e.g., X or 2♣) for strong 1NT bidding systems are frequently ON; however, given the preemptive nature of the weak 1NT bid it is best to play that systems are OFF over any interference.

There appears to be no preferred method for pairs playing strong club systems since the 1♣* bid may show 17+HCP/16+HCP/15+HCP.

With these systems I have found the following frequent 1NT agreements.

With 17+ strong 1♣* pairs often use the 14-16 1NT range
With 16+ strong/Precision 1♣* pairs often use the 13-15 1NT range
With 15+ strong 1♣* pairs often use the 10-12/12-14 weak 1NT range

What can we say about these strong club pairs?

The **14-16 HCP** range blends weakness with strength and allows 1♦/1M bids to 11-13HCP and to better define other hand ranges. It allows opening 1NT with 14-16 points and 2NT with 20-21 points, while leaving a 1NT rebid range for 17-18 points, and a 2NT rebid for 19-20 points.

The **13-15HCP** balanced semi-strong range (used in the original Wei Precision) allows the 1♦/1M 11-13HCP bids to be very unbalanced. However, 12-15HCP is becoming more popular among Precision players.

The **10-12/12-14HCP** mini/weak 1NT range is very effective with IMP scoring and used more widely in team events. In Matchpoint games the bid is doubled frequently and requires a reliable escape bidding sequence (a runout convention); and 4-4 major suit fits are frequently missed when playing in a major is better than playing in a NT contract.

There is no optimal 1NT range; however, a three-tier approach has significant advantages.

(a) 10-13 in first and second seats, when not vulnerable.
(b) 14-16 when venerable in first and second, or not vulnerable in 3rd seat.
(c) 15-17 when vulnerable in third seat, and always in 4th seat.

The weak mini-like 1NT=10-13HCP frequently gets one into the auction, the strong 1NT bid is used once partner has passed, and the optimal 14-16 NT range allows one to reach a game contract more often.

With the weak mini-like range, don't play transfers. If you have a game, you generally want responder to be the declarer. Also, due to the preemptive nature of 1NT, you want to get in and out of the auction as soon as possible with weak hands - transfers give the opponents too many opportunities to enter the auction. Thus, 2M or 3m responses should be to play.

With (a), 2♣ shows any invitational hand. Opener shows a 4-card major, and with two bids 2NT, but with a minimum bids 3♣. Without a major, Opener bids 2♦* or invites with 2M or 3m.

2♦*	forcing Stayman and game-going hand or better
2M	≤ 4-card major – to play
2NT	4-4 in majors with minimum
3m	5-card minor with 4/5+hearts
3M	5-card suit with slam interest
4m	Texas Transfers game interest only
3NT	4-4 majors, max

A simple runout over the penalty X of 1NT=10-13HCP is the "Mitch-like" Interference Approach

XX*	Bid your best suit 4-card suit
2♣	Garbage Stayman when 4-4/4-3 in the majors
2♦*	Transfer to hearts with 5+hearts
2♥*	Transfer to spades with 5+spades
2NT*	Bid your best Minor with 5-5/5-4 in the minors

For a list of runouts bidding conventions follow the link:

https://www.bridgebum.com/weak_1nt.php

For a discussion of simple changes to your 15-17HCP agreements when playing the more modern 14-16HCP, Robert Todd recommends:

(1) Continue to use Stayman and Transfer
(2) Invite game with 9HCP
(3) Force to Game with 10-16HCP
(4) Investigate slam with 17-119HCP
(5) Bid slam with 19+HCP

For a discussion of his points following the link:

https://www.nvba.org/php/Robert_Todd.php

and click on the topic: 14-16 Notrump

Bruce Thompson (2024) provides an empirical analysis of 1NT ranges; for his analysis, follow the link:

https://www.esther-bridge.com/pdf/NT_range.pdf