

Twos and Transfers

Chapter 7: Opposition 1NT

Do you play Landy or Hamilton over an opponent's 1NT opening bid? If you do, and don't want to do anything else, don't bother reading the next two or three chapters. Hamilton or Landy are adequate enough. But if you want to try my Evil bids in conjunction with your own 1NT opening as well, read on.

Bidding over an opposing 1NT can often produce great results if you have an appreciation of scoring and tactics. It is seldom that you will gain many match points by sitting back and defending 1NT in a match point session, unless every pair is playing in 1NT and your defence is better than others, or your opposition's declarer play is worse. In most situations where the points are fairly evenly shared between you and opponents, competing will bring you the good results if you a) have a basic grip of mathematics and bridge scoring; b) have the best system to bid your hand in conjunction with partner's, and c) have an appreciation of the value of finding the right trump fit to play in.

There is more to it of course but knowing that passing out a weak 1NT should be the last resort is the first step. The second step is to compete, when feasible, at the two level in such a way that you find your best TRUMP fit. Your, or your partner's, declarer play will also need to be of the highest quality. Sometimes, you may need to find your best defence as well, if opponents are competing.

Competing against 1NT by being able to show only ONE suit is a totally inefficient and ineffective exercise. Even in the old days, 50 plus years ago, the more savvy players realised this, and devised systems for bidding over a 1NT opening. Systems like basic Landy (2C for the majors) were most popular but they all required the overcaller to have at least 5-4 in two suits. If you have read, or will be reading, about my opening "Evil Twos" you will see that even 4-4 is sufficient in most circumstances, especially if that shape includes the HEART suit. Back in the old days there was a system by the name of ASTRO for overcalling 1NT, and then improved to "Pin Point Astro", which comes about as close as possible to my "Evil Twos" opening bids and overcalls over 1NT. Google it for interest if you want to.

Without going into too much detail, I will suggest the following system over an opposing 1NT:

2C Clubs and hearts

2D Diamonds and hearts

2H Hearts and Spades

2S Spades and a minor (must have at least FIVE spades)

2NT Both minors (should be at least 5-4)

This system over 1NT manages to cover the biggest gap in most other systems, the FOUR card heart suit! The four card heart suit is in fact the most neglected as well as, in my opinion, most biddable of all the suits over 1NT, which is why it is such a benefit to be able to include it in any *two* suited combination when deciding to enter the bidding over an opponent's 1NT.

Few people bother to work out that minus two not vulnerable is better than opponents making 2H, 2S, or 3C or 3D, and 1NT often makes two for 120. Even two down, if not doubled, will often score well. So, even a hand like

♠ 84

♥ AQ72

♦ 942

♣ K643

is worth bidding 2C if you are not vulnerable and opponents are. This is of course simplifying things and other factors will come into the equation, especially penalty doubles, but with two suited overcalls, penalty doubles are not that easy or obvious to find when your opponents weren't going anywhere over their 1NT opening.

Now let's just get to grips with the basic system of "Evil" overcalls. Whether you choose to graduate to the "Evil Two" opening twos as well, that is another option that we will explore at a much later time. In the meantime, I strongly recommend the "Evil" overcalls over 1NT.

What we do need to take a look at while we are looking at the "Evil" overcalls, is the matter of escape when your weak 1NT is doubled. Most people, when doubled in 1NT, do not play Stayman and Transfers, and a bid at the two level is a takeout to that suit. That makes sense, but it also makes sense to have some more flexibility. You can add in the same system as you use for overcalls, if you have two suits to escape to, and usually you do. Thus, 2C will have clubs and hearts, 2D diamonds and hearts, and 2H hearts and spades. Being able to escape to two suits of course means that you can't escape to ONE, so something has to be done to make that possible. The REDOUBLE can serve that purpose, all that means is that it is no longer possible to redouble for penalties when you clearly have the balance of power. But making doubled overtricks, if opponents pass, should score well enough anyway so the redouble to show a good hand is pretty much redundant.

The good thing about this system is that both the opener and responder can make these takeout bids when doubled, and opponents have no certain way of knowing how good your fit may be, and whether they should double and try and collect a penalty, or bid something themselves.

Let's take a look at some fairly average hands that you might have when there is a 1NT opening bid by an opponent:

♠ A73

♥ K987

♦ K8542

♣ 2

If the bidding has been 1NT on your left, pass, pass, it is probably right for you to bid 2D irrespective of vulnerability. If your right hand opponent is first to bid and opens 1NT, not vulnerable it is still worth coming in with 2D. Vulnerable, I would be wary but may still risk it at match points.

Let's take a look at another hand:

♠ AQ73

♥ KQ98

♦ KQ85

♣ 2

This one will present you with an interesting problem. You could double, which would be in effect a penalty double; you could overcall 2D, or you could overcall 2H, which is probably the best option given that there is a likelihood that there is at least a 4-3 fit in either major and it will score better than 2D even if there is a diamond fit and no 4-4 major suit fit.

And another that may present you with a different sort of problem:

♠ A74

♥ QJ872

♦ K82

♣ A5

Most people would bid 2H with this hand, but your system does not cater for that. One option is to double and hope that your 14 count works as well as a 15 count, you haven't overbid by much, have you? We do tend to double with similar hands and only 13 or 14 high card points, and make some allowances for that possibility. This hand is not ideal for that because a heart lead may turn to custard. I would certainly double if my hearts were QJ1087.

But oddly enough, passing with such a hand when there is a 1NT opening on your right won't work out that badly as a rule, especially if opponents are vulnerable and go one or two down, and 2H will often fail when 1NT also fails. Not every hand is suited to every system, and judgement is often required.

With difficult hands it is usually best to take the pessimistic view, so passing a 1NT opening with this particular hand is probably the way you should go. Not being able to overcall with 5332 hands will instil discipline when it is needed.

Next, we will take a look at when an opponent doubles your opening of 1NT.

Partner has opened 1NT and the next hand has doubled.

.♠ 8432

♥ 8764

♦ K43

♣ Q9

Would you pass, or bid 2H to escape to a major? This one is difficult because you do have SOME points and your hearts and spades are about as bad as they could be. What you need to realise is that a) left hand opponent may now bid and b) PARTNER, who has opened 1NT can also bid if he wants to, or can do so. Here is what the opener actually held when this deal occurred some time ago:

♠ K9

♥ AQ92

♦ 972

♣ K543

When I passed the double as did by my left hand opponent, my partner now bid 2C. This was the usual “Evil” bid, with clubs and hearts. I was able to bid 2H and we still found our heart fit, so either of us could have engineered the escape to 2H. And as it happened, we made 2H when the defence was not perfect, with most other pairs down in 1NT or opponents making 2NT or 2S their way!

And finally, another extreme case where inferences needed to be taken for the best result:

I held this terrible assortment, but at least we were not vulnerable and opponents were:

♠ 97

♥ 2

♦ Q8742

♣ QJ753

Partner opened 1NT! Right hand opponent doubled. I considered redoubling and calling it a single suit takout, but which suit? And there was the chance that opponents would bid, so I passed. My left hand opponent also passed, but partner now emerged with REDOUBLE! Right hand opponent now bid 2S and when LHO bid 4S, when it was passed to me, I bid 4NT! My partner's redouble had shown a single suit takeout and because it had to be a MINOR suit (we do NOT open 1NT with a five card major) I knew we had a 5-5 fit in one of the minors and the sacrifice would be almost certainly a profitable one. Partner bid 5D and this was his hand:

♠ Q5

♥ J93

♦ AJ953

♣ A62

I need not tell you the rest, do I?