

NO TRUMPS PARTNER?

Chapter 14: Spoilt For Choice

In this and some of the following chapters we will look at some more 1NT hands from recent play and see how best to cope with both your own and opponents' 1NT openings.

BOARD 5 DEALER North N-S VUL

North

♠ A Q 4

♥ Q 8 7

♦ A 8 4 3

♣ J 10 2

West

♠ K 10 5

♥ A J 10 5 3

♦ 9 6 2

♣ 8 6

East

♠ J 9 8 7 3

♥ K 6

♦ 7 5

♣ A K 9 4

South

♠ 6 2

♥ 9 4 2

♦ K Q J 10

♣ Q 7 5 3

Don't you just HATE to have to open the North hand 1NT, VULNERABLE at that? But, if you are playing a 12-14 1NT opening, you don't have much choice, do you? Fortunately, the way the hands are, if North ends up playing it, there are six tricks there for NS. Just down one, for -100 and a better score than all the scores of 140 for those EW pairs who end up in 2S.

Should East overcall 2S? Well, who knows? Given that EW are not vulnerable, it may be worth it. But, given that NS ARE vulnerable, it may also be worth it to pass and hope to score 200 if there is a part score on for EW.

A LOT of very close 1NT hands result in +100 one way when it could have been +90 the other way, but also +100 when it could have been +140 if you compete. Or +200 if you DOUBLE and defeat 1NT. Clearly, the +200 is the most satisfactory, but also the most difficult to obtain. Let me first remind you of an earlier chapter, where I suggested that it is imperative that you have a competitive tool against a weak 1NT opening. A competitive tool that allows you to show a hand 'playable' in TWO suits. Not that it would make much difference on this particular hand, since East could bid 2S if that was a natural single suited bid. But WOULD you bid 2S, and SHOULD you?

It's not always an easy decision to make, and much depends on your expectation of the quality of declarer's play, partner's defence, and your own faith in YOUR declarer play should you end up playing the contract.

In due course you will get the feel of when to enter the fray and when not to, but now that we have seen that defence CAN be considerably improved, and can be more productive than you initially may have thought, there are more options open to you. These options will be explored in more detail.

Let me go back to an earlier proposal for a system that allows you to compete with a hand 'playable' in two suits, and to make a penalty double on hands with 15+ HCP.

The system I earlier suggested is:

2C to show clubs and hearts

2D to show diamonds and hearts

2H to show the majors, and

2S to show spades and a minor.

If you like, you can add:

2NT to show whatever you wish, both minors being one obvious and easy to remember option.

Because there will be times when you hold a balanced hand of say 12-14 HCP and a five card suit, AND you won't feel like passing, I now suggest adding one more option to the penalty double.

That is, the double of 1NT MAY be done with a balanced hand including a 5 card suit and ONLY 11-14 HCP. You may think this is risky, and also that it is confusing since partner won't know what you have. Well, let me tell you that yes, it may be more hair raising, it may be more nebulous, but ... it does give you more options than you had before, and with your newly found brilliant defence against 1NT contracts, it can be quite profitable on the balance sheet.

So, having been given a licence to double with an 11 count, or to bid a hand playable in two suits, or to PASS if you feel like it, which would YOU do with the East hand when North opens 1NT? That is what all the Norths did do when the hand was played in a recent session.

Let me give you some guidelines for a start. It is GENERALLY a good idea to compete if you have a hand that is playable in two suits. The hand doesn't need to be wonderful, nor does it need to have two five card suits, or even 5-4. You will normally get away with doing it with as few as 10 HCP, and sometimes even less.

If you're not vulnerable, competing is safer. If you're vulnerable, you should take care. And if you have a balanced hand with that 13 or 14 count and a five card suit, you will often do well to pass. Which is why I have left out the option of a single suited two level overcall out altogether.

If you have 15 or more HCP, DOUBLE irrespective of your distribution or anything else, and then worry about what will happen next. If you have a hand with fewer than 15 HCP and just one five card suit, you have the option of doubling also. With those sort of hands, I would suggest that it is too dangerous to double SECOND in hand immediately over a 1NT opening, but in any other position, you can give it a go.

Coming in with a competitive bid over a 1NT opening, though, is probably best done as soon as you can, as you may not get another chance. Note that even a 5-4 hand and a 13 or 14 count can double a 1NT opening in suitable circumstances, treating it as a single suited hand with one five card suit!

There are, as the title of this chapter suggests, options galore!

Now we can look at the whole hand again and see what options there are for you if North opens 1NT.

(hands repeated for convenience)

BOARD 5 DEALER North N-S VUL

North

♠ A Q 4

♥ Q 8 7

♦ A 8 4 3

♣ J 10 2

West

♠ K 10 5

♥ A J 10 5 3

♦ 9 6 2

♣ 8 6

East

♠ J 9 8 7 3

♥ K 6

♦ 7 5

♣ A K 9 4

South

♠ 6 2

♥ 9 4 2

♦ K Q J 10

♣ Q 7 5 3

After three passes, North opens 1NT. At the given vulnerability, the best option is for East to compete. It is better to compete with a POOR spade suit than a good one. WHY? Because, if partner has useful cards in it, the hand will play well. If partner does not, but has some values outside spades, it will take too long against a 1NT contract to establish spade tricks and defeat the contract by two. Either way, you can have a reasonable expectation that you will make 2S or go down just one or two undoubled, and either way it will be a good match point score. The option of DOUBLING is not so good, because not only do you have a bare minimum for that, but your five card suit is not a good one.

If South were to make a weak takeout, in either 2D or 2H, and this was passed back to East, East would not be able to move because a bid of 2S now would, rightly, be interpreted as a stronger hand by partner. So, let's get in quickly and bid 2S, showing spades and a minor. That silences everyone, and East plays the hand in 2S. After South starts with the obvious lead of the DK and continues with the queen and jack, declarer should be able to negotiate an overtrick, or at least make the contract of 2S.

BOARD 18 DEALER East N-S VUL

North

♠ Q 7 4

♥ K 6 4

♦ K 8 4

♣ K Q 8 7

West

♠ A 6 5 3

♥ Q J 10 3

♦ 10 9

♣ 10 6 2

East

♠ J 10 2

♥ A 9 5

♦ A Q 5

♣ 9 5 4 3

South

♠ K 9 8

♥ 8 7 2

♦ J 7 6 3 2

♣ A J

After three passes, should North open 1NT? If so, what is the best defence against it? Or should EW compete, and if they do, HOW? Those are some interesting questions indeed. Personally, I would open the North hand with a weak 1NT because everyone else will, and I have more faith in my ability to play the hand as well as faith in the lack of defensive ability by opponents. But, in a top class field, passing THAT 13 count out is not at all a bad idea!

Let's say North does open 1NT and it is passed out. What is the best defence? Following the "4D" principle of defence against 1NT, East should ask the question: "If I were declarer in 1NT, how would I most likely begin if I were able to lead first?" Don't be mesmerised by the AQx. That lead should be saved for special occasions, when it is the BEST lead. This time, there is a better lead. If you were declarer, your most likely first play would be the JACK OF SPADES, wouldn't it? That is because you would hope to establish spade tricks, whether partner had KQxx or AQxx or K9xx. The diamonds and hearts would provide you with STOPPERS while you develop the spades. There is a POSSIBILITY that you would start on the club suit, but your imagination SHOULD be able to tell you that the spade suit is the one with the most potential. OK, let's see what happens when you do lead the JACK OF SPADES.

BOARD 18 DEALER East N-S VUL

North

♠ Q 7 4

♥ K 6 4

♦ K 8 4

♣ K Q 8 7

West

♠ A 6 5 3

♥ Q J 10 3

♦ 10 9

♣ 10 6 2

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♦ A Q 5

♣ 9 5 4 3

South

♠ K 9 8

♥ 8 7 2

♦ J 7 6 3 2

♣ A J

When East leads the jack of spades and dummy is placed on the table, it should be easy enough for West to diagnose the lead as either from J10x or J10xx.

When declarer plays low from dummy, West should also, but ENCOURAGE by playing the SIX if EW are using a standard signalling method. Declarer wins the queen and more than likely will lead a club to the jack and then a diamond to the king. This loses to East's ace and East, having seen West's signal, continues with the TEN of spades. When declarer covers with dummy's king, West ducks again!

Yes, East's lead of the spade jack has been unfortunate, because it has provided dummy with an extra spade stopper as well as an entry, but a good defence will recover from such setbacks. West should be looking at declarer's pips and have the confidence that East has a third spade. So, West ducks once more. Then, when East gains the lead with the queen of diamonds, East leads the two of spades and finally West wins the ace. After cashing the last spade, West leads the queen of hearts through declarer's king. Declarer has to duck twice, since playing the king earlier will result in TWO down! Great rewards for a patient and 'four dimensional' defence. There are a lot of other things that might happen if North plays in 1NT. There are variations on the SJ lead, like East might decide to not win the DA when one is led to the king. This gives declarer a diamond trick but kills any hope of more than one diamond. In practice, virtually all declarers made at least seven tricks in 1NT. That even happened on a CLUB lead which is the 'book' lead of 'longest suit against No Trumps'.

How does a CLUB lead do any damage? By removing declarer's entries to the diamonds, even though the club suit can be accessed via the queen of spades after unblocking. Just ducking the DA once will also defeat 1NT with careful defence. Another interesting point. If East decides to lead a club and decides to lead the NINE ('top of nothing') to avoid confusion, declarer can, in a desperate situation, win the ace to start with, and then overtake the jack and run the clubs without needing an entry to hand. That is why leading a nine, or even an eight from such a holding can often turn out to be a very expensive sacrifice of a potentially winning card. Equally bad can be the lead of a nine or eight as a middle card from e.g. 108xx or Q9xx or similar. Leading MIDDLE cards should only be done from three card suits when you play 'MUD' (middle, up, down) and then, only when the top card is NOT an honour.

Follow the variations in the defence, and work out the logic. You can see that DECLARER would indeed lead the jack of spades in trying to develop tricks in the spade suit. The only variation is that declarer would next lead the TWO of spades, in case the singleton king pops up. East, as a defender, cannot afford to do this as West may place East with a doubleton spade and four hearts and win the spade ace too early. There are some things that declarer can see better, other things that the defence can 'see' better!

One final comment: I held the East hand, but after North opened 1NT after three passes, I DOUBLED. This was harmless enough, since partner KNEW that I did not have a 15+ hand, and the only thing I could have was a balanced 11 count or a balanced hand with a five, possibly six, card suit and a 10 or 11 count. As it happens, South decided not to remove to 2D and the hand was played in 1NT DOUBLED. Somewhat hair raising, but the double did make our defence easier. West was able to 'see' my hand and did not win the spade ace prematurely. Declarer, when West led the queen of hearts through, covered in desperation and that was +500 instead of just +200, but either way was a top board since, in a field of 19 tables, only three declarers failed in 1NT, undoubled, and by one trick only.

BOARD 5 DEALER North N-S VUL

North

♠ Q J

♥ Q 8 7 5

♦ 9 6

♣ 10 9 7 4 2

West

♠ 6 4 2

♥ K J 9 6

♦ A Q 7 2

♣ Q 3

East

♠ A K 9 4

♥ A 4

♦ K 8 5 4 3

♣ J 8

South

♠ 10 8 7 5

♥ 10 3 2

♦ J 10

♣ A K 6 5

This time, an off shape 1NT opening that got what it deserved. One of the country's best pairs were EW and East opened a 13-15 1NT. Maybe the modern trend is to be clever asses and open 1NT with that shape, maybe the 'sophisticated' bidding system that EW used necessitated that, who knows? West used Stayman and over East's 2S response went straight to game in 3NT. What else was there to do, anyway?

South was clearly going to lead a club, but WHICH club? Some Souths followed the rule of 'fourth highest', but is the fourth highest from THIS holding in fact best? If you ask yourself, once more, how would South start as DECLARER, the answer would be that South would be more likely to lead a TOP club if South was trying for five tricks. North might have Jxxx or Jxxxx or even, as on this hand, 10xxxx. When would South, as DECLARER, ever start with a LOW club lead? But, if South had FIVE clubs to the AK, the correct card to lead would be a low one, whether it is fourth or fifth highest. That is because it is far more likely that partner (dummy if you are South as declarer) will have either Qx or xxx or even Jxx or xx. In ALL these cases the only lead that gives South the chance of four club tricks is a low one. Either the suit would get blocked on the lead of a top card, or there would be no COMMUNICATION back to the South hand. So, when East, an international, had the pip when South started with a top club, was he either ignorant or merely ungracious?