

NO TRUMPS PARTNER?

Chapter 2: The Weak 1NT Opening

Just by coincidence, the first session of the year, in a mixed grade event, produced some hands which were particularly good at illustrating the potential benefits, as well as the pitfalls, of the Weak No Trump.

Let me first start with defining a 1NT opening as MOST Acol players play it. It is done on BALANCED hands with 12-14 HIGH CARD POINTS.

The definition of 'balanced' is that there is no singleton or void, nor more than ONE doubleton. ACOL players also do not open 1NT as a rule with a five card heart or spade suit, even if the hand is 'balanced'. However, they do regularly, if not always, open 1NT with a 12-14 count and a five card MINOR.

Now let's have a look at a couple of Weak No Trump hands from the last session and see what we can learn from them.

The first thing you must learn if opponents open 1NT is how to punish them if they have overstepped the mark. How can you tell if they have? With no great difficulty at all! Let's look at it in the simplest possible terms.

1NT means SEVEN tricks. Nobody expects to make seven tricks from 12-14 HCP alone. You need 20 or so to do that. So, the hand that opens 1NT with a 12-14 count does so in the hope that partner will produce sufficient points to enable them to make 1NT. Remember that the other hands are an unknown quantity at this stage.

If an opponent opens 1NT with 12-14 HCP in the hope that it might make, what would YOU need to have in order to have a hope that you will DEFEAT it? Here is where the answer is quite simple.

If YOU have a BETTER hand than the person who bids 1NT, then YOU can expect that your side will defeat 1NT, because having more points than opponents should mean making more tricks. Therefore, if you have 15 or more HCP, you have a better hand than the opening 1NT hand, and you can hope to DEFEAT 1NT.

If you expect to defeat a No Trump contract, the simple answer is: You DOUBLE. This should apply to ALL cases where an opponent bids NO TRUMPS. There should be no confusion with such things as Takeout Doubles, Negative Doubles, Optional Doubles, etc. Here, we are talking about a very basic concept, the PENALTY DOUBLE when an opponent opens 1NT.

After a 1NT opening and a penalty double, there are still two hands that are an unknown quantity, the partner of the 1NT opener, and the partner of the hand that has doubled.

You can see why it helps to have a better hand than the opener to double 1NT, can't you? Yes, the partner of the opener may have more support for them than your partner has for you. If that is the case, YOUR side may be the ones in trouble, but the weak 1NT opening always has been a 'two edged sword' and it's up to you to ensure that either you use the sharper edge or don't use it unless you have to.

You do NOT have to use a weak 1NT opening yourselves, but you WILL have to combat it if opponents choose to use it. The first step to combating it is to be able to double, for PENALTIES, if your side has the balance of power. The simple 'rule' is to double with ANY hand of 15+ HCP, and some hands with a very good suit and one or two less HCP. Let's take a brief look now at what might happen after you double 1NT.

Firstly, let's think about what your partner might have, and what he/she might do when you double. Because you have shown that you have at least 15 HCP, partner needs to have a MINIMUM of 6 HCP to be sure that your side has the 'balance of power'.

With the balance of power, you should make at least one more trick than opponents, therefore you should defeat 1NT and score well from the penalty you receive. Therefore, with 6+ HCP partner will PASS and your side will DEFEND the doubled 1NT contract. If partner has a 5 count, chances are that you still have the balance of power, and partner should also pass the double with a balanced hand. However, with fewer than 5 HCP and a five card or longer suit, partner should decline the invitation and bid their suit. Unless you have a much better hand than you might have, or a very good suit of your own, that is where you should let matters rest.

Sometimes, when you double a 1NT opening, partner will have a really poor and balanced hand with no five card or longer suit to run to. That is when partner may just have to pass and hope for the best, but, hey, you can't win them all can you?

That brings me to some of the BENEFITS of opening a Weak No Trump.

The major benefit is that the partner of the 1NT opener has sufficient information available to know what to do next. If opponents do enter the bidding, THEY too can be punished when it is the partner of the 1NT opener that turns out to have the balance of power.

Let's go back to the point where you double with your 15 HCP. If the partner of the opener has at least 10 HCP, they can REDOUBLE, and now it is YOU who are in trouble! Your side will have to run to avoid a redoubled contract making, maybe with overtricks, and once you start running you may have nowhere to run to! That is where the double edged nature of the 1NT opening comes into play.

In practice, there are very few players at Junior, or even Intermediate levels of play who know how to make the best of either their own, or opponents' weak 1NT openings. So, if you are one of the few pairs who do, you can expect to score many match points more than those who have not learnt what the Weak 1NT opening is about.

During the next chapters I will follow some Weak No Trump openings, and you will see, in time, whether YOU want to open a Weak No Trump yourselves, and what may be best for YOU when opponents open a Weak 1NT. Let's start with a couple of this week's Weak No Trump hands, from the last session of play.

Board 24 Dlr W NIL VUL

♠ A Q 2	
♥ K J 8 6	
♦ A 10 4	
♣ J 7 5	
♠ K 8 7 5	♠ 9 4 3
♥ Q 2	♥ 9 5 4
♦ K 9 8	♦ J 6 5 3 2
♣ A 10 8 3	♣ 9 4
♠ J 10 6	
♥ A 10 7 3	
♦ Q 7	
♣ K Q 6 2	

There were eight tables in play, and at FIVE, the contract was 1NT by West. One West escaped for one down for a top score, two were down three, and two were down four. NONE of these contracts was doubled. At one table the contract was 3NT played by South, and at one it was 3NT played by North. And at one, it was 1NT doubled by West, down three.

The 'two edged sword' of the Weak No Trump is well illustrated here. At the tables where West opened 1NT and was allowed to play there, none of the Norths knew what to do and passed. Even the best defence resulted in only +200 compared to the easy 3NT or 4H game that NS have available.

At the tables where North or South played in 3NT, one made five for a second to top, and one made just three for the third top score for NS. At these tables West opened 1C (for whatever reason) and NS reached 3NT, so one might say that the 1NT opening succeeded, by keeping NS out of their game. But, if you look at the one table where North DOUBLED 1NT, that is where the top result was achieved, and easily enough as well.

Three down was easy, even without the best defence. Yes, North did have the absolute minimum for the double, but what North did have was a better hand than West for starters, and that is what mattered. This time South came to the party well and truly, and the 1NT opening was very costly for EW. East should probably have run to 2D, having a five card suit. This would still have been three down, but the advantage of running to a five card suit when doubled in 1NT is two fold. Firstly, you MAY strike a good fit with partner, and secondly, they may not know how, or whether to, double you for penalties.

It is worth noting that none of the NS pairs bid to 4H, despite the 4-4 fit in that suit. After a 1NT opening by West, that may not be surprising, but if West opens 1C or 1S, the heart fit should be found, albeit not easily!

Just one word about the PLAY of the hand if NS play it in 4H or 3NT. All declarer needs to do is to count West's POINTS. If West has opened the bidding, West must have every missing point other than possibly the jack of diamonds. That should make the declarer play a breeze, shouldn't it?

Board 6 Dlr E EW VUL

♠ A J 9 6 2
♥ A K Q 4 2
♦
♣ A J 2

♠ 8 5 3	♠ K Q 7 4
♥ 10 9	♥ J 3
♦ J 9 8 5 4	♦ A Q 10 3
♣ Q 10 3	♣ K 5 4

♠ 10
♥ 8 7 6 5
♦ K 7 6 2
♣ 9 8 7 6

You may think that opening a weak 1NT is too dangerous. This time East has a stronger 1NT, either 13-15 or 15-17. Fortunately for the ACOL players, East is too strong for a 1NT opening and should open 1D, which comes to no harm after West passes. Where there was a 1D opening by East, this was passed round to North, who doubled for takeout and then showed a very strong hand with a cue bid in diamonds. South was not at all interested and NS ended up in 4H. But even when East did open 1NT, NS failed to capitalise.

After 1NT, pass, pass, double from North, only one South decided to 'grin and bear it', others running to either 2C or 2D, the end result being 4H by North in the best cases, and only part scores in the worst. One North just bid 2H and that was it!

If EW are playing a 15-17 1NT opening and North doubles, South should also pass. Why? Because North should have the UPPER end of the opening 1NT to double (as in the case of the 12-14 point 1NT opening), and South has no five card suit to run to. More trouble for the 1NT opening, even a stronger one. And, yet again, trouble that most pairs can avoid if opponents either do not know what to do, or are too timid to follow the guidelines!

Warning:

By following my guidelines for No Trump bidding and play, you WILL come to grief from time to time. But, if you learn to follow them properly AND improve on your declarer play and defence, you can expect to score at least 3% more in a normal session of bridge. And yes, that is JUST on the No Trump hands alone, given that you play in an environment where most pairs will be playing a Weak No Trump.