

NO TRUMPS PARTNER?

Chapter 03: Crime and Punishment

I have already mentioned, briefly, how you can try and punish opponents for having the temerity to open a weak 1NT ahead of you. Now, I will, just as briefly, show you what you can do to compete against opponents' 1NT opening without getting punished for YOUR crime.

When one of your opponents opens 1NT, unless you have the 15+ HCP that is sufficient to make a penalty double, you will have to enter the bidding at the Two Level if you want to compete. If you do so with a poor hand and a poor suit, you could land in trouble. If you have two suits to choose from and choose the wrong one, you could also land in trouble. My recommendation therefore is:

With a poor five card suit and fewer than 15 HCP, PASS and defend. With TWO suits, find a way to bid them BOTH, and if you haven't got one, then PASS and get together with your partner after the session and discuss how you CAN show partner TWO suits in ONE bid over a 1NT opening!

It did not take long for the more sophisticated players to work out that just bidding 'naturally' over a 1NT opening is not a profitable method to combat the 1NT. However, being able to show TWO, or maybe even THREE, suits, can be a VERY profitable exercise. That is why there have been so many different systems invented to deal with an opposition 1NT opening. I certainly won't describe, or discuss, more than a couple of them. If, after what I will be recommending, you are still not happy with your defence to the 1NT opening, you can start looking for the perfect answer.

As a rule, it pays to double a 1NT opening with 15+ HCP, and it also pays to compete against a 1NT if you have a two suited hand where you can give partner the option of two suits. You can, given the appropriate circumstances, successfully compete and steal the contract from right under opponents' noses without them knowing that you are doing so. Later, they may find that you have got away with murder, and many opponents will not even realise that you have got away with anything at all when they score +50 or +100 when you or your partner fail to make your contract. How to get away with this 'blue murder', and how to punish opponents when THEY try doing it to you, is what we will be discussing in this, and later chapters. Hence, the title of this chapter.

Let's start with a very basic system over an opponent's 1NT opening.

With 15+ HCP, DOUBLE. Do this irrespective of the vulnerability or distribution of your points.

With fewer than 15 HCP and a balanced hand, with no worthwhile features, PASS.

With a suitable TWO suited hand in the 9-14 HCP range, try either LANDY, or what I am about to suggest as a second option.

LANDY. There are two versions of Landy. In original Landy, a bid of 2C was for the MAJORS, and all other bids were natural. In EXTENDED Landy, 2C is for the MINORS, and 2D for the MAJORS, with 2H and 2S being NATURAL overcalls showing 5+ cards and 11-14 HCP. You will note that Landy, as in fact most systems over a 1NT opening do, concentrates on being able to show both majors. That is an important facet of competing over a 1NT opening. You will also note that Landy does allow you to make a natural overcall in hearts or spades, whereas what I will suggest does not, unless you want to jump to the Three Level.

My suggestion over a 1NT opening is as follows (remembering that with 15+ HCP, you always DOUBLE, and compete with FEWER than 15 HCP).

You compete as follows: (call the 'system' what you wish)

2C to show clubs and hearts.

2D to show diamonds and hearts

2H to show both majors

2S to show spades and either minor.

This covers all possible two suiters except for the minors. With both minors, you can bid 2NT if you feel your hand is good enough.

As you can see, LANDY does allow you to compete at the Two Level by bidding a five card heart or spade suit. My suggestion does not. However, entering the Two Level with a marginal hand and a not so good suit does ask for trouble. Not being able to bid with just one five card suit and a scattered 13 count can be an advantage because it may stop you trying to compete with the wrong hands.

And, when you compete at the Two Level in one suit only, it is very easy for the partner of the opening 1NT hand to know that they can double and extract a penalty. Not so easy if every bid you make at the Two Level gives your partner an option of two suits. I suggest you try EXTENDED LANDY for a while, and then try my suggestion of two suited hands without an option of bidding a five card suit at the Two Level. You may find that it stops you bidding on unsuitable hands, and when you REALLY want to bid with a very good hand but fewer than 15 HCP, you'll benefit from upgrading the hand to a 15 count and doubling! As long as you and your partner know your options and trust each other, you won't go wrong either way. But, you will do better with some methods than others.

I believe that as a BASIC method, Landy is simplest and best, so try it for a while. Then try my suggestion and take a good look at your results and evaluate. I will also follow 1NT hands 'in action' over the next so many chapters. For your part, you should do something immediately if you don't have a way to bid two suited hands over an opponent's 1NT opening!

What sort of shape should you have to compete over 1NT, you might ask. While most people would suggest you should be at least 5-4 in the suits you show, I think there is great value in making the bids, when the circumstances permit, on 4-4 hands as well. Especially at the right vulnerability, and especially at MATCH POINTS, which we are talking about at the moment. TEAMS is a different game and requires quite different tactics than match point play.

It is quite surprising how often, when you have a 4-4 hand, you will find four card support for one of your suits. Or you may end up in a 4-3 fit which plays quite well (as long as YOU do!). And, most importantly of all, how often even failure in your contract will prove a success in terms of match points! I'm not suggesting dishonesty, but practising some sheer daylight robbery is quite a legitimate tool to use when opponents think they are getting one over you by opening a Weak 1NT!

Just as I was wondering where I'd go next with suitable hands to illustrate what I have been saying, by more coincidence, one of our panelists, Birdlover, has sent me a couple of hands from recent play. One was a disaster for opponents, one for them!

Let me first discuss the one that was a disaster for opponents, because it is very significant to my premise that it is important to be able to show two suits in your bidding over an opponent's 1NT opening.

Board 5 Dlr N NS VUL

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

North opened 1NT. East decided to wait and see what happened, and passed, expecting to maybe defend 1NT. South bid 2NT, which was a TRANSFER, asking North to bid 3C. North duly obliged, and South now ‘corrected’ to 3D. After two passes, East decided that maybe she should have bid in the first place! She bid 3H and that is where the contract rested. Not the most successful one for EW! Now, we don’t know whether EW were playing a system that could NOT show both majors, or whether East simply decided to hope to defend what obviously could have been a precarious and vulnerable contract for NS. The point is: if you can bid your hand NOW, why wait for later when it might be a darn sight more difficult?

East could also have ‘upgraded’ her hand to a DOUBLE. Had she done that, South would have removed to 2D and that, of course, would not have come to much harm, despite West's four to the queen. Yet again, we see the value of removing to a five card or longer suit. But, had East been willing, or able, to make one bid to say “I have both majors and fewer than 15 HCP”, EW would no doubt have reached their proper contract, which is 4S. This may not be foolproof but it’s a far better proposition than 3H!

Whether East bids 2C, or 2D, or 2H to show both majors, West responds with a bid of 3S and East has the maximum for their first bid, and bids 4S. Simple, really, isn’t it? Try floundering around without the ability to show two suits! Of course, if NS play ‘natural’ takeouts over 1NT, South will bid 2D, and after two passes, East WILL get the opportunity to make a takeout double.

Sometimes, it helps to know your opponents’ continuations over their 1NT opening, but by and large, the simplest thing to do is to have a way of bidding two suits, and do that at first opportunity unless you have a good enough hand to look for a bigger profit by doubling.

Board 6 Dlr N ALL VUL

♠ K Q 6

♥ 9 6 3

♦ A 9 6 4 2

♣ A 8

♠ 10 9 8 5 2

♥ A 7 5

♦ Q 5

♣ J 7 5

♠ J 3

♥ K J 10 8 4 2

♦ 7

♣ Q 10 5 2

♠ A 7 4

♥ Q

♦ K J 10 8 3

♣ K 9 6 3

This, in fact, was the first hand that Birdlover sent me, and he sent me just the NS hands, and asked how NS could get to the diamond slam. I tersely replied that if NS insist on playing Acol, and opening the North hand 1NT, there is no way they would get to 6D. I even commented to the effect that probably half the room would be stupid enough to land in 3NT down one when 6D was cold. The reply came back, asking if I was trying to provoke him! He, too, had fallen into the Acol trap of 3NT, and of course gone TWO down. OK, I do apologise for being rude, but I must repeat something I have said often enough: If you are going to play ANY system, surely you should be able to modify it sufficiently to avoid playing in 3NT, not making, when other games, or even slams, are far better propositions.

I should also mention here that at more than one table, it appears that East came in with a 2H overcall over North's 1NT. Where the NS pairs were smart enough to realise that they had neither a heart stop nor wasted values, they did bid to 6D. The less sophisticated ones still needed to look for a heart stop, and when South did this by bidding 3H over East's 2H overcall, North was forced to bid 4D and the 5D game was reached.

When East did NOT consider their hand worth competing on, many Souths just bid 3NT! East's hearts came in handy after all! And while we're talking about competing, that East hand DOES come close to a good enough hand to compete against a 1NT opening, despite the bare 7 count. We will revisit this hand later, but you may note that despite the EW combined 14 count, NS need to find the perfect defence to defeat 2H. That is the power of 'fit' and a good SIX+ card suit. Note also that South's queen of hearts and West's queen of diamonds are totally useless to them.

If East had had one fewer heart and one more CLUB, same point count, I would certainly have competed if we had a system to show both hearts and clubs. The increased chances of 'fit' in one of the suits makes competing worth while, and not all hands are going to be such extremes as this one. As for this one, it certainly is a very good illustration of why you need to be able to bid more accurately when partner opens 1NT, or have a system based on NATURAL suit openings. If North had opened 1D, it would not matter if East had overcalled 1H or 2H, South would IMMEDIATELY have been hearing 'slam bells' ringing!

In later chapters we'll look at these hands again, and similar ones, and see if we can get more mileage out of the 1NT opening, by either opponents or yourselves.