

Oxford Students' Bridge Association

Beginners' Lessons 2009

Lesson 2. The basics of Acol—1NT opening

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Introduction

Last week you learnt basic hand evaluation and card play technique as well as the requirements for Game and Partscore. Now we will leave Minibridge and learn about the Auction. The **reason** for making each bid is far more important to learn than knowing what bid to make (as that comes with practice) so, early on, I will be focussing on the decision processes involved in bidding and not on teaching you every bid and every sequence that exists. Card play technique is still important!!! *From now on, some material that I include in the notes (but not in the lessons) will be optional. I don't recommend you play this immediately, but it's up to you. This will be put in italic font, and is mostly concerned with choice of Game between 3NT and 5C/D or Slam bidding.*

What is an Auction?

Just like any other auction, it is a series of **bids** to try to **buy** the contract. In Bridge, an auction takes place clockwise around the table starting with the dealer. Each player makes a **call** (bid, pass, double or redouble – but we'll leave the last two until later). A bid, in its simplest form, is a statement as to the contract that you think you can make (so a bid of 2H says I expect to make 8 tricks in hearts), but is also used to **convey information** to your partner about the strengths and weaknesses of your hand. The first **bid** (but not pass) in an auction is known as the **opening bid**. From then on, each bid must be higher than all previous bids. For the purposes of the auction, the **denominations** (i.e., 4 suits and NT) are ranked: NT > S > H > D > C

To be legal, a bid must either be:

- In any denomination at a higher **level** than the previous bid (so a bid of 3D can be made over bids of 1X or 2X)
- In a higher ranking denomination at the same level (so 2H can be made over 2C or 2D, but not over 2H, 2S or 2NT)

If the auction starts with 4 passes, the hand is **passed out**. The cards are returned to the board (or reshuffled) and both sides get a score of 0 points. The auction ends when any bid, double or redouble is followed by 3 passes.

When to bid

As in Minibridge, you use the **Milton Work Point Count** as an initial assessment of your hand quality. Starting with the dealer, each person decides whether to **open** the auction. As a rough guide:

With 12 or more HCP you should open; with fewer, you should pass. (Hands with long good suits can be opened on a little less, but this is a good rule of thumb).

But what to open? For the next few lessons we will only be looking at hands where one partnership bids (the hands will be set up to make sure this is the case). If you play away from the lessons, I suggest that for now you treat **overcalling** (bidding after the other side has bid) in the same way as **opening** and pass if your opening bid is not available. We'll cover **competitive** bidding in week six – the priorities of the auction become different and the basics of bidding should be learnt first.

Once somebody has opened the auction, **opener's** partner can make a **response** to the opening bid that is designed to: place the final contract; send information back to partner; or ask certain questions about opener's hand. The purpose of this information is to establish 2 things:

- What denomination is best for us? (do we have an 8 card fit?)
- Do we have the strength for Game? (25 HCP for 3NT, 4H or 4S; 27 HCP for 5C, 5D)

Once strength for Game is found, then one member of the partnership must bid the best Game. If it is discovered that you do not have **Game-going** hands, then you sign off in the lowest possible Partscore (2S and 1S making 8 tricks both score +110 so there is no bonus for playing a higher Partscore than needed, but 2S making 7 tricks scores –50 whereas 1S making 7 tricks scores +80).

Which Game to play?

When Game values are found, the priorities should be, in order:

1. Play in Game in a major suit (4H/4S) with an 8 card fit.
2. Play Game in NT (3NT).
3. Play Game in a minor suit (5C/5D).

Today we will highlight this process by discussing just one of the 35 possible opening bids: 1 Notrump (1NT).

Bidding Systems

The meaning of bids is a matter of agreement within a partnership, but it helps to use a well-known 'bidding system'. In a given bidding system, there are lots of agreements, for example how many points a 1NT opening shows, and what various other bids mean. In this course, we will be using the Acol bidding system, the most popular system in Britain, while in other countries other methods are popular.

Opening 1NT

In Acol, a 1NT opening is made on a hand that satisfies the following criteria:

- A **balanced** hand. i.e., any of 4-3-3-3, 4-4-3-2 or 5-3-3-2 **shape**
- 12 to 14 HCP

Any bid that defines your hand as precisely as this is known as a **limit** bid. Any player making a limit bid should remain **passive** for the rest of the auction (i.e. partner is put in control, he/she makes the decisions or asks questions and the limit bidder only responds to those questions). Your partner knows far more information about your hand than you do about his/hers (just think how many hand shapes and strengths he/she may have) so is better placed to make the judgement.

Responding to 1NT

A bid after your partner has **opened** the auction is called a **response**. After you partner opens 1NT, you should re-evaluate you hand based on the knowledge you now have. Remember a contract is decided on the **combined** strengths of two hands, so what you thought was worthless might now be extremely valuable. Start by assessing you **point count**:

0 – 10 HCP. You have a maximum combined strength of 24 HCP, therefore not sufficient for Game so look for the best Partscore. You have 2 options:

- **Pass** with any hand lacking a 5 card suit. You will probably be best playing in 1NT since you are not guaranteed a trump fit as your partner may have a 2 card suit. Unstopped suits are not disastrous at this level, but losing trump control can be.
- Bid a 5 card (or longer) suit at the 2 level. You are guaranteed a 7 card fit (opener cannot be **void** or singleton) and it's likely that you find an 8 card fit. Trump control is very useful when combined HCP are poor. Opener **MUST** pass and accept your judgement that this is the best Partscore. This is known as a **weak takeout** (or **sign-off**) bid. Don't be afraid to do this with 0 HCP and a weak 5 card suit. It will usually play better than 1NT on those occasions.

13 – 18 HCP. Your combined strength is enough for Game (≥ 25 HCP) but insufficient for Slam (< 33 HCP), so you must bid Game, or **force** opener to bid Game. Your options are:

- **Bid 3NT on any hand lacking a 5 card or longer suit.** It will probably be the best Game.
- **Bid 4H or 4S with a 6 card or longer suit.** You are guaranteed an 8 card fit and this is likely to be the best Game.
- **Bid 5D or 5C with a 6 card or longer suit if you think this will play better than 3NT (e.g., if you hold a couple of unstopped short suits).** Remembering that you need to make 11 tricks for a minor suit Game. 4C and 4D are not used in this system. Judgement is required
- **Bid 3H or 3S with a 5 card suit** – an 8 card fit is not guaranteed. This is a **Game forcing** bid. Opener is **forced** to bid Game but is left to decide whether 3NT or 4H/S is likely to be best. Opener should bid 3NT if he holds only 2 cards in your suit, but 4H/S with a good 3 card suit or longer suit (judgement is

required with 3 small cards, but he/she should usually bid 4H/S).
• **Bidding 3C or 3D** asks the same question (opener should bid 5C/D with 3 card support), *but responder should accept only when he/she thinks that 3NT is unlikely.*

11 – 12 HCP. You have Game going values if opener is maximum (14 HCP), but not if he/she is minimum (12 HCP). You should **invite** opener to bid Game by bidding **2NT**. Opener will:

- **Pass with 12 – 13 HCP.** Game values are unlikely so **decline** the invite and settle for the Partscore.
- **Bid 3NT with 14 HCP** and any 4-3-3-3 or 4-4-3-2 shape or 5-3-3-2 with a 5 card minor.
- **Bid a 5 card major suit at the 3 level with 14 HCP.** This is **Game forcing** and accepts the invite to game but asks **responder** to choose between 3NT and Game in that suit (4H/S). **Responder** bids 3NT with fewer than 3 cards but the suit game with 3 or more cards.*

[many people will not open 1NT with a good 5 card major (i.e., one with at least 2 honours) so 3NT might be preferable if responder holds 3 small cards in that suit]*

In the rare cases where responder holds more than 18 HCP, Slam becomes possible. Full details of Slam bidding do not fit here, but in general for **responder's** hands without long suits:

19 – 20 HCP. Bid 4NT – **invites** opener to bid 6NT if maximum (14 HCP so guaranteeing a combined 33 HCP) or pass if minimum.

21 – 22 HCP. Bid 6NT – *guaranteed 33 HCP for Small Slam, but not the 37 HCP for Grand Slam.*

23 – 24 HCP. Bid 5NT. This is a **forcing** opener to bid 6NT if minimum and **inviting** him/her to bid 7NT if maximum (giving combined 37 HCP).

25 – 28 HCP. Bid 7NT. 37 HCP are guaranteed.

[With slam forcing hands and 5 card suits, you can use the forcing 3 C/D/H/S bids and then raise whatever Game opener chooses to Slam, but we'll discuss this in more detail later].

And just to finish... Passing your partner's forcing bids or bidding over his/her signoff bids is one of the biggest sins at the Bridge table!!!

At the end of the auction

After any bid, double or redouble is followed by 3 passes, the auction is over. The last bid becomes the contract and the side making it will declare. The person in that side who **first mentioned that denomination** (not necessarily the one placing the final contract) becomes **declarer** and his partner becomes **dummy**. The player to declarer's left makes

the opening lead **before dummy faces his cards**, and then the card play proceeds as in Minibridge.

Declarer play in Bridge

After dummy is faced, you will not have had a chance to inspect his/her cards when deciding the contract, so take some time to consider how you will approach the play. Start by counting **quick tricks**, then how you can definitely **set up** tricks and consider how many extra tricks you need to make. Remember the ways you can hope to gain extra tricks from long suits, relying on nice splits in suits, finessing and the **order** in which you should do this. And think about whether to **draw trumps** early in a suit contract. You can learn a lot about this from looking at hand records **after** you have played.

If the auction is **uncontested** (neither defender has bid as will be the case here), you may have little information about defenders' hands. However, you do know that anyone who passed before the opening bid does not have 12 HCP, so this limits **his/her honour holdings**. Remember that good declarer play and defence is about extracting all possible information available to you.

Key Points from Lesson 2

The example of opening 1NT was used to illustrate the decision processes used when bidding and about **active** and **passive** roles in an auction. It is these thought processes that are the important lessons to take away since we will be using them when discussing other bids next week. Whilst you will still not be able to bid the majority of hands that are dealt at the Bridge table with any great accuracy, you will at least be able to think what bids could be made (what if you're not balanced, or if you're balanced with more than 14 HCP). If you play any hands between now and next week, I suggest that you play Minibridge initially and, at the end of the hand, think about how you could have bid it if playing Bridge. Most important messages to remember are:

- Opening the auction on 12 or more HCP
- 1NT opening as a **limit bid** and consequences for who **controls** the auction
- Assessment of **combined** strength of a partnership's hands
- Weak takeout bids (also called **sign-off bids**)
- Invitational bids
- Game Forcing bids

—written by Rob Richardson, 2004

Bidding Summary

This will now be included at the end of every set of notes and will describe most bidding sequences you can have so far. Bids in (brackets) are to be used with judgement as their may be better bids with some hands. Bids not listed are not used in the system so far. Some abbreviations that appear are (which will be added to each week): cs = card suit, F = forcing, G = Game, bal = balanced, M = major, m = minor, sup = card support, Sl = slam.

Opener	Responder	Opener rebid	Responder rebid	
INT 12-14, bal	Pass 0-10, no 5-card suit	-		
	2C/D/H/S 0-10, 5+cards	-		
	2NT 11-12, invites Game		Pass 12-13	-
			3NT 14, no 5-card Major	-
			3H/S 14, 5cs, Forces Game	3N no 3 sup or 3 low cards 4H/S 3+ sup
	3C/D/H/S 13-18, 5-cards, Game-forcing		3NT no 3 sup	-
			4H/S 3+ sup	-
			(5C/D 3+ good sup)	-
	3NT 13-18, no 5-card suit		-	
	4H/S 13-18, 6+ card suit		-	
	(5C/D 13-18, 6+cards)		-	
	4NT 19-20 invites Slam		Pass 12-13	
			6NT 14	
	Higher bids in NT: Rare, but 6/7 to play, 5NT Forcing to 6NT, invite to 7NT			