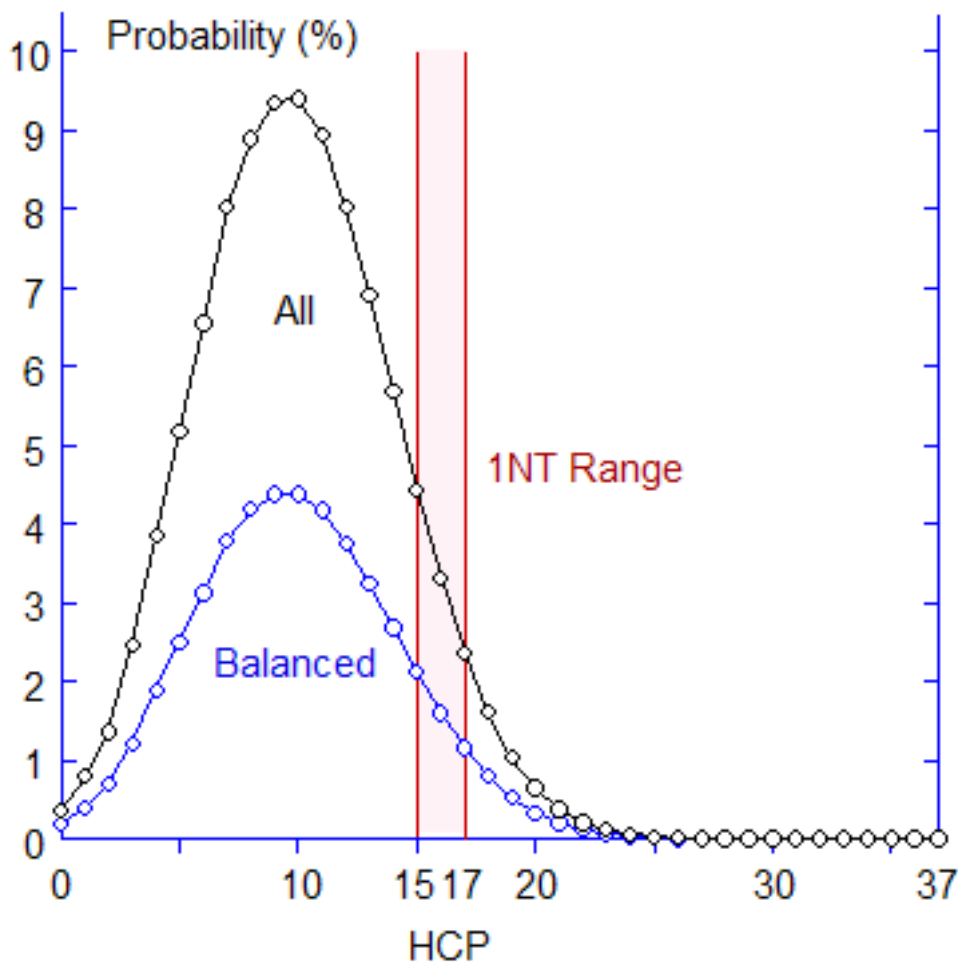


Weak and Mini Notrump

By Neil H. Timm

Playing the 2/1 Game Force System, one makes a 1-level bid with 11/12-19 points. Playing a strong notrump, one opens 1NT with 15-17 HCP and balanced distributions (4332, 4333, or 5322 when 5-3 in the majors) or with the semi-balanced distributions (2336 long minor or 2445 no major suit length) and no singleton or void. How often does this bid occur?

Looking at the distributions of HCP and hand patterns, what do you see? Clearly, the mode (most frequent occurrence) is near 10 not 15! To get into the bidding more frequently, it is better to play a weak notrump.



What range do you select? Any range that has a lower limit of less than 15 is considered a weak notrump range. The most popular ranges in the United States seem to be 10-12 or 12-14; however, some use 13-15 (semi-weak).

Why play the weak notrump? There are several **advantages**.

- (1) It occurs much more frequently than the strong notrump, this allows one to get into the bidding early.
- (2) It has preemptive value, forcing the opponents to the two level.
- (3) The bid immediately conveys to your partner that your hand is balanced and there tend to be fewer rebidding problems.
- (4) Because all balanced hands with minimum values are opened, constructive bidding and rebidding are enhanced.
- (5) Since all 15-17 hands are now opened one of a minor and forcing, responder must bid even with a weak hand. This often allows the partnership to find a fit, which may be missed playing the strong notrump.

What about the **disadvantages**?

- (1) You may get doubled and have no convenient escape, vulnerable.
- (2) Because you open strong hands with one of a minor instead of 1NT, the opponents tend to get into the bidding early when this is not the case for the strong notrump opening.
- (3) At times you may miss a minor suit fit and instead play a contract in notrump.
- (4) You may miss a suit contract that goes against the field or your contract may be wrong sided.

In general, the advantages far out-weigh the disadvantages.

When beginning to play the weak notrump system, the first decision you must make is to decide on a range. Playing the Precision Club, the common ranges are either 12-15 or 13-15 (since in Precision the 1♣* bid shows 16+ HCP). Playing the 2/1 Game Force System, a common weak range is 12-14 (the difference between weak and strong is just three points).

Playing 2/1 and a strong notrump all balanced 15-17 hands are opened 1NT, and all balanced 12-14 hands are opened the better minor and rebid 1NT. Playing the weak notrump is now simple you merely **switch** the meaning of these two bids!

Playing 12-14 Weak NT

12-14 Open 1NT (announce range)

| | |
|-------|---------------------------------|
| 15-17 | Open 1♣/1♦, rebid 1NT* |
| 18-19 | Open any 5-card suit, rebid 2NT |
| 20-21 | Open 2NT |

Observe that the 2NT range is identical to the range used in the 2/1 bidding system and requires no change to any conventions you may play (e.g. Jacoby, Texas, etc.). With the bid of 1NT or the rebid of 1NT, after 1♣/1♦, all your 2/1 Conventions apply. While the 1NT bid need not be alerted (only announced), the rebid of 1NT* must be alerted because we have switched the meaning of the bids, better minor and 1NT.

Note: playing 12-14 Weak NT, weak hands=0-9, invitational hands=10-12, and game-force hands= 13+, playing the strong notrump, weak=0-7, invitational=8-9, and game-force=10+, the difference of two points.

Playing the Weak NT, the bid if 2♣ are Stayman. Having a weak hand (0-9 points) you must play Garbage and Crawling Stayman when 4-4-4-1 and 4-3/4-4 in the majors, respectively.

For example with the following hands, one bids as follows.

♠K76 ♥873 ♦J1076 ♣1032 Bid 2♣ and after 2♦, bid 2♥ (pick a major- crawling Stayman)

♠Q872 ♥J754 ♦J863 ♣7 Bid 2♣ and pass 2♦/2♥/2♠ (Garbage Stayman)

Using the 12-14 ranges is simple because you keep all of your “strong notrump” conventions like transfers (2-way or 4-way), Stayman, and whatever 3-level conventions you play with NO CHANGE! With the opening bid or rebid of 1NT.

However, the opening bid requires one small change: you invite, bid 2NT (not playing 4-way transfers) game with 10-12 HCP instead of 8-9 HCP and bid 3NT over 1NT with 13 instead of 10 HCP. **So just do it and get into the bidding!**

Another Approach Playing 12-14

Open all 15-17 hands 1♣* and alert as forcing (at least two clubs), partner always bids 1♦ (which you announce as waiting). You now bid 1NT* (15-17), and partner can now bid Stayman with a 4-card major. Not having a notrump hand, bid your 4-card major. With a 4-card diamond suit, open the hand 1♦ (no alert). Partner knows you **do not have a balanced notrump hand**, but have at least four diamonds and that you are distributional. Again with 15-17 you can bid 1NT* (you may have 0-1 clubs) if partner bids clubs; however, partner may bid a major over 1♦, with 4-card support jump in the major to show 15-17 with a fit.

Mini or Kamikaze NT

While the transition to Weak NT is now very easy, playing the 2/1 Game Force System, and allows one to open 1NT more frequently than the strong (15-17) notrump convention, it is not the best range playing Matchpoints. The best weak notrump range playing Matchpoints is 10-12 also called Mini NT or Kamikaze NT. Why? YOU GET TO BID MORE OFTEN! However, playing in team games with IMP scoring or if partner has passed the best range to use is 12-14. Once partner has passed with perhaps 0-9 HCP, bidding 1NT with 10-12 HCP is just too risky, vulnerable or non vulnerable. Hence here is what we do:

Use Mini NT (10-12) in the 1st and 2nd seats and Weak NT (12-14) in the 3rd and 4th Seats.

Having decided to play the Mini NT in the first two seats, our next problem is to decide on how to fit it into our 2/1 bidding system. Opening the bidding 1NT is simple; it follows the same rules as the strong/weak notrump openings. Open 1NT with 10-12 and balanced distributions (4332, 4333, or 5322 when 5-3 in the majors) or with the semi-balanced distributions (2336 long minor or 2445 no major suit length) and no singleton or void.

Fitting the Weak NT into our 2/1 System was easy; however, with the Mini NT one has to decide how to bid balanced hands with 13+ HCP. Keeping with the weak notrump approach, we use the diamond bid to show either diamonds or a balanced notrump and the club bid becomes short (0-2) and must be alerted. The bidding scheme follows.

Playing 10-12 Mini NT (1st and 2nd Seats)

| | |
|-------|---|
| 10-12 | Open 1NT (announce range) |
| 13-15 | Open 1♦* (without a 5-card major), rebid 1NT* (if balanced) |
| 15-17 | Open 1♣*, rebid 1NT* |
| 18-19 | Open any 5-card suit, rebid 2NT |
| 20-21 | Open 2NT |

Note that the club bid for both the Mini NT and Weak NT are the same; however in the Mini NT case it must be alerted as may be short (0-2) and announced as forcing. And, we must also now alert the diamond bid as, may be short (0-2) and forcing. One makes the 1NT response as soon as possible for both bids with balanced hands; however, if partner bids a major over the diamond bid, the 1NT bid is bypassed if the major can be supported with 4-cards.

If you open 1♦* and partner bids 1♥ and you have 4 spades you do not bid it, but instead bid 1NT* to show a balanced hand. Now responder uses the Checkback bid of 2♣* which asks do you have 4 spades or three hearts in that order. The bid of 1♠ is used to show an unbalanced or semi-balanced hand with spades and diamonds.

Observe the overlap in the 1♦* and 1♣* ranges playing Mini NT, this is not a mistake. It is needed to handle awkward hands. Consider the following hand in the third seat where partner has passed.

♠AQ76 ♥A3 ♦KQ9532 ♣10

You hold 15 HCP, but would not open it 1♣*, and rebid 1NT*. Instead you must open 1♦*. If partner bids 1♥, rebid a 1♠ (unbalanced hand); if responder bids 1NT, you can correct to 2♦. (Some times you may have to use this gadget even if you were 4-2-4-3 in the 3rd or 4th seats, if partner has passed).

Note: playing 10-12 Mini NT weak, weak hands=0-11, invitational hands=12-14, and game-force hands= 15+.

Playing the Mini NT the bid of 2♣ remains Stayman. However, having a weak hand (0-11 points) you must again play Garbage and Crawling Stayman when 4-4-4-1 or 4-3/4-4 in the majors, respectively, identical to the Weak NT scheme.

Using either the Weak or Mini NT ranges, it is not critical that the strong hand play the final contract. Thus, many suggest that one not use transfers and to replace the Stayman convention with Two-Way Stayman (marked in red on your Convention Card). Because this requires new bids that are not used playing the 2/1 System, I am not recommending this approach; you may add this latter, if you choose. Let's make the transition to weak notrump easy.

Opponents Interfere

When the opponents interfere over your Mini/Weak NT, after a double (take-out/penalty) or 2♣, play that all your conventions are on, like transfers and Stayman. When the double is for penalty, one needs an escape sequence. They are called runout schemes. There are for example Dont, Brozel, Helvic and many more schemes. A very simple scheme follows.

Simple Runout

To keep it simple, if the double is for penalty one redoubles for penalty, bids a 5-card suit immediately, or passes*. The pass must be alerted since it asks partner to bid his 5-card suit or to bid 4-card suits up the line or to re-double. After a redouble opener bids 4-card suits up the line to try to find the best fit, if 4-3-3-3, one bids 3-card suits up-the-line.

Competing over Mini/Weak NT (Any Seat)

Competitive bidding over a strong notrump is geared toward finding a part score or to sacrifice; games are unlikely. Hence, you often interfere with a weak hand. Over the Mini/Weak NT a game is a possibility so doubles and bidding must be constructive and disciplined. What systems should you use? Many employ Landy.

Landy

| | |
|---------|---|
| 2♣* | Both Majors 4-4, 5-4, 4-5, or 5-5 (2♦ asks for longest) |
| 2♦/2♥2♠ | Natural |
| Double* | Penalty (14/15 HCP) |

While the convention is simple and easy to remember, let's look at Modified Landy. We assign point values to the bids, which helps partner.

Modified Landy

| | |
|---------|---|
| 2♣* | One or both majors 4-4, 5-5, 4-5 7-10 HCP (2♦ asks) |
| 2♦* | Both Majors (5-5) and 11-15 HCP |
| 2♥/2♠ | Natural 11-15 HCP |
| Double* | Penalty 14/15 HCP |

Other popular conventions one may employ are Mohan, Multi Landy and Modified Cappelletti, among others. Whatever your convention a double must be for Penalty not take-out. **Do not use Meckwell or DONT.**

By design, competing against Mini notrump bids can be difficult. Suppose the bidding starts 1NT—double—pass—pass, redouble—pass—suit bid. Your partner doubled the Mini NT, you passed with strength, the notrumper redoubled and his partner on your right started an escape sequence with a suit bid. A double by you would be for penalties but if your RHO has bid your small doubleton, what are you to do?

If you pass, partner will get another chance to bid but a pass by you would imply that your original pass showed weakness and you don't want that. So pass is not an option. A bid by you shows strength as well as a hand unsuited for a penalty double, but the question remains, should your bid be forcing or simply constructive?

One of the problems with bidding strong hands after a weak notrump opener is that you don't have a cue bid to announce strength. Now that they have started an escape sequence there is a cue bid available and it should show either flat or multi-suited hand, which is not suitable for a penalty double but is strong enough for game.

It is best that a minimum bid by you is constructive but not forcing, but that jump bids (below game) are forcing.

As a 2/1 Game Force player, Good Luck on your weak Mini/Weak NT Adventure.

A very good introduction is included in the book by Andy Stark (2006), *The weak notrump – How to Play it – How to play against it.* Masterpoint Press, Toronto, Canada.