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This Week in Bridge

(312) Responding to 1NT with a Weak Hand

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Level: 2

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General

When partner opens the bidding with 1♣, 1♦, 1♥, or 1♠ and we have a *weak* hand then we usually pass, as responding shows about 6+ points. It is reasonable for us to leave them in their suit at the 1-level because they have a trump suit to help them collect tricks. But when partner opens the bidding with 1NT (showing a balanced 15-17 points) partner may be stuck in a 7-trick notrump contract (more than half the tricks) with far less than half the HCP. Because 1NT is usually a poor contract opposite an extremely weak hand, we have tools that allow us to bid even with a hand as weak as 0 HCP. These bids are corrective in nature, trying to get our side to a better partscore. Let's take a look at these tools in more detail and see which types of hands we may choose to respond to 1NT with even with very few HCP.

Major-Suit Transfers ("Jacoby" Transfers)

With a 5-card Major suit we can use a Jacoby Transfer bid with even 0 HCP.

Jacoby Transfer Auctions with Weak Hands

1NT 2♦*
2♥* Pass

1NT 2♥*
2♠* Pass

Example 1

♠ XX

♥ XXXXX

♦ XXX

♣ XXX

1NT 2♦*

2♥* Pass

Opposite this hand, hopefully 2♥ goes down fewer tricks than 1NT.



Minor-Suit Transfers

We also have a way to transfer to a minor suit. We do this with a 6-card suit (not just a 5-card suit) because we are driving the auction to the 3-level (not just the 2-level like we do with a Major Suit Transfer).

- If we play 3-suited transfers, then we use 2♠* as a “relay” to 3♣ that can be used to sign off in either 3♣ or 3♦.
- If we play 4-suited transfers, then we use 2♠* as a transfer to ♣ and 2NT as a transfer to ♦.

Using Stayman as a Lie (“Garbage Stayman”)

Though Stayman usually promises 8+ points, we can sometimes use Stayman with an extremely weak hand. When we bid 2♣ Stayman, we know that opener can only rebid or answer with 2♦, 2♥, or 2♠. If we have length in all of these suits, we can plan to pass whatever partner answers. We call this action *Garbage Stayman*.

Shapes to Use Garbage Stayman

- 4-4-5-0
- 4/3-5-1
- 4-4-4-1

Here, if we bid 2♣ Stayman and partner shows a 4-card Major, we are content to pass and leave them in 2-Major. If they deny a 4-card Major by bidding 2♦, we leave them there and hope that with our ♦ length, 2♦ will be a better contract than 1NT.

Drop Dead Stayman

Many partnerships play a special bidding sequence where Stayman actually does not promise values.

1NT 2♣
2♦ 2♥*

This bidding sequence is called *Drop Dead Stayman* (or *Crawling Stayman*) and shows length in both Majors (at least 4-4) but does not promise any values. It asks Opener to choose between playing in 2♥ or 2♠ (asking them to bid their better 3-card Major). Responder can make use of this with 4-4 Majors, 4/5 Majors, or even 5-5 Majors.

Note: The 4/5 in the Majors hands can be more difficult, forcing Responder to choose between using a Jacoby Transfer or using Drop Dead Stayman.



Using 4-Suited Transfers

When we agree to play 4-Suited Transfers, 2♠ transferring to ♣ and 2NT transferring to ♦, then we agree with partner to a way to say that we like their suit (showing a decent holding in their suit, at least Qxx) and a way to say that we have a poor holding in their suit.

Examples of 4-Suited Transfer Options

1NT 2♠*

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- 2NT* “Gap” bid (step 1)
- 3♣ Bidding partner’s suit (step 2)

1NT 2NT*

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- 3♣* “Gap” bid (step 1)
- 3♦ Bidding partner’s suit (step 2)

Some partnerships play the “gap” bid (2NT over ♣ transfer and 3♣ over ♦ transfer) as the positive response (“I like it”), while others play bidding partner’s suit shows a positive response.

If we play the latter of the two approaches (agreeing that we bid partner’s suit when we like it and otherwise bid the cheapest bid – step 1) then we can use a transfer to ♦ to handle a weak hand with 5-5 in the minors.

1NT 2NT*

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- If opener bids 3♦, showing they like ♦, then we pass and let them play in their fit.
- If opener bids 3♣, showing they do not like ♦, then they are likely to have ♣. Thus 3♣ is likely to be a decent contract.

Example 2

♠ AKxx	♠ x
♥ Axx	♥ xx
♦ xx	♦ Jxxxx
♣ KQT9	♣ 87543

1NT 2NT

3♣* Pass

Here, 1NT would be a horrible contract, but 3♣ is a reasonable one.



Conclusion

When partner opens the bidding with 1NT, it is our job as Responder to drive the auction to the best final contract. This often includes inviting game, bidding game, or even exploring slam, but sometimes we also must determine the best possible partscore when we have fewer than invitational values – fewer than 8 pts. Make sure that you are comfortable with all your tools for looking for a better contract when you hold a weak hand. Then use these bidding tools to help your side reach the best spot when partner opens 1NT and catches you with extremely poor hand.