

Opening 1 No Trump

The opening bid of 1NT shows a **balanced hand** with **12-14 points** (in some bidding systems, the strength will be in a different range; here, we shall use what is often referred to in books as the “weak no-trump” opening).

We define balanced as:

- ◆ No singleton or void
- ◆ No more than one doubleton
- ◆ No 5-card (or longer) major suit

Under the above definition, the hand will usually either contain one 4-card suit and three 3-card suits, or two 4-card suits, a 3-card suit and a doubleton. Also, we may open 1NT with a hand containing a 5-card minor suit if, in other respects, it seems appropriate, e.g.

♠ K 10
♥ A J 8
♦ Q 7 6 5 2
♣ Q J 6

This hand could be opened 1♦; then the rebid (after, say, a 1♠ response) would have to be 2♦. However, an opening bid of 1NT seems to describe the hand well. The first sequence describes the hand as a minimum opening with a long Diamond suit, the second as a hand with 12-14 points and balanced in nature.

In an ideal world, we would hold an honour or two in each of the suits. However, in practice, some hands would be unbiddable if we applied that rule to them, e.g.

♠ 4 3 2
♥ A Q 10
♦ 8 5 3 2
♣ A K 8

This hand contains 13 points, and partner will not be too sympathetic if you fail to open the hand and a good contract (perhaps a game) is missed. However, unless you open 1 NT (despite the unattractive holding in both Spades and Diamonds) what will you do? Any opening bid other than 1NT will only lead to more problems.

So, if the hand fits our definition (balanced, 12-14 points) the correct opening is almost certainly 1NT. If the 1NT opening is avoided, there will come a time later on in the auction when no bid is sensible.

Responses to 1 No Trump

Since the opening bid is so well-defined, it is often possible for responder to make a decision straight away about the eventual contract. An example:

♠ K J 10 9 7 6
♥ 4
♦ 8 6 4 2
♣ J 2

With a limited hand, i.e. no game ambitions, together with a long suit, responder should show that he prefers to play with his long suit as trumps, rather than let his partner struggle in 1NT facing an unsuitable dummy. He should simply bid 2 of his long suit - sometimes called a weakness takeout (note that this method is not used when the long suit is clubs). Bid 2♠.

♠ K Q 10 9 7 6
♥ 4
♦ A 10 8 2
♣ K 2

With 12 points, the strong major suit and powerful distribution, responder should be confident that game will be a good contract. He knows that the Spade suit will be adequate as trumps even if opener has the minimum possible holding of 2 small in the suit, and the best bid is an immediate 4♠ which is likely to be a good contract.

Another occasion when it is sensible to place the final contract at once is when responder has enough strength in a balanced hand to know that 3NT will be a good contract. Since opener has at least 12 points, then 13 points facing this should be enough for a direct raise to 3NT. This response should have an upper limit of about 18 points; with more, there are real prospects of a slam.

With an unbalanced hand, responder should prefer to guide the bidding to play in a suit contract. The main question then is: at what level should we play?

With a 5-card major suit, the responder knows that there may well be a trump fit: opener has to have at least 2 cards in the suit, but may well have 3 or even 4-card support. If responder has enough strength to guarantee game values (12 points or more) then he can make a jump response of 3♥ or 3♠ (forcing). Opener will bid 3NT with only 2 cards in the major, but will raise to 4♥ or 4♠ with 3 or 4 of the suit.

What if responder has a 4-card major suit? If the opening bidder also has 4 cards in that major, then the combined 8-card trump fit will nearly always produce a superior game contract of 4 of the major rather than 3NT. Here is an example:

♠ K 7
♥ K J 9 4
♦ A 6 5
♣ Q 9 3 2



♠ A 6 2
♥ Q 10 5 3
♦ 8 2
♣ A K 8 4

West opens 1NT. Although East has a balanced hand, he should not simply raise to the obvious 3NT. If the 4-4 Heart fit is located, then a superior contract of 4♥ will be reached

The way to locate a 4-4 fit in a major suit is to introduce an artificial response of 2♣ to the opening 1NT. This is known as the **Stayman Convention**. It says nothing about Clubs as

a suit, but instead asks a question: "Do you have a 4-card major suit?" The opener replies to the question as follows:

2♠ I have a 4-card Spade suit
2♥ I have a 4-card Heart suit
2♦ I have no 4-card major suit (it says nothing about the Diamonds!)

Occasionally, opener will hold both 4 Hearts and 4 Spades. It does not really matter whether he replies to the 2♣ enquiry with 2♥ or 2♠, as long as the partnership remember that the 2♣ enquiry implies the presence of a 4-card major suit in responder's hand (why would responder ask the question if he has no 4-card major suit himself?). However, the standard response to a Stayman 2♣ with both majors is 2♥.

The one disadvantage of the Stayman convention is that responder can no longer use a 2♣ response to 1NT as a natural bid, suggesting that a 2♣ contract is better than 1NT. However, this is a small price to pay for the ability to locate a major suit 4-4 trump fit.

How strong do you need to be to use Stayman?

Since the Stayman 2♣ bid is a question, and in itself promises nothing specific, the only requirement is that the responder should not be embarrassed by any response that opener may make (and there are only three possibilities: 2♦, 2♥, and 2♠).

Usually this means that responder will hold enough strength to continue with a bid of at least 2NT if the response does not reveal a fit. However, exceptionally, responder may be able to pass any response and hope that the contract thus reached is better than if he had passed the opening bid of 1NT. Here is an example of this rare type:

♠ 9 5 3 2
♥ 7 4 3 2
♦ 10 9 7 5 4
♣ void

Responder does not wish partner to toil away in a hopeless 1NT contract, and could make a **weak takeout bid** of 2♦ so that his long suit may be of some use as trumps. However, what can go wrong if responder bids 2♣ (Stayman)? He will pass a 2♦ response (with the result that this will be the contract, just as if he had responded 2♦) but also pass a response of 2♥ or 2♠ leaving the partnership in a 4-4 fit which is certainly better than passing 1NT.

Here are some **typical Stayman sequences**:

1NT	2♣	(do you have a major suit?)
2♥ (Yes, Hearts)	4♥	(Good, so do I, and I have values for game)
No Bid		

1NT	2♣	
2♥	2NT	(Don't like Hearts, please pass or bid 3NT)

3NT (better than minimum)

1NT
2♥ 2♣
 2NT (as above)
4♠

(maximum, 4 Spades as well as 4 Hearts,
inferring the presence of a 4-card Spade
suit in responder's hand because he used Stayman)

Summary

The recommended structure of responses when partner has opened 1NT is:

	Balanced hand	Unbalanced hand	
less than Clubs 11 points	pass	bid 2 of a 5-card or longer suit * e.g. 1NT – 2♥ (this is usually called a weakness takeout bid)	* not
11 – 12 points	invite game with a bid of 2NT (perhaps using Stayman on the way)		
13 – 18 points	raise directly to 3NT (but don't forget Stayman)	bid 3 of a suit, forcing to game (at least)	
19 – 20 points	invite slam with a raise to 4NT	start with 3 of a suit (forcing), then explore slam possibilities (cue bids, etc)	
21 – 22 points	raise to 6NT	as above, but now you are going to investigate a grand slam!	
23 – 24 points	raise to 5NT (!) (opener bids 6NT or 7NT)	Have fun!!	