

Responding to Partner's 1NT Overcall (Why I Don't Play "Systems On")

Some of my frequent partners are reluctant to distinguish between my 1NT opening and my 1NT direct overcall. Granted, the point range we play (15-17) is identical for each of these bids, and the general shape of the hands are the same, but that is where the similarities end.

First, the objective in responding to a 1NT opening is frequently different than when responding to 1NT opening. When I open 1NT the number of HCP held by the other three players at the table is approximately 24 and there is a better than 50-50 chance that we will be exploring the opportunity for a game contract. But when I overcall 1NT, the HCP that are unaccounted for diminishes to approximately 11, and the game likelihood drops to about 1 in 4. Additionally, with the reduced probability of a game comes the increased prospect of undertricks and doubles. Often my highest priority when my partner overcalls 1NT is to find the safest landing spot. Clearly, a different objective suggests a different method.

Second, the presence of an opening bid preceding a 1NT overcall provides information not available to the 1NT opener. In addition to the location of some number of HCPs in the opposition camp, it helps to locate some of the strength/shape of the 1NT overcaller. When I overcall 1NT, I am promising some values in the suit opened; this, in turn, limits the number of honors I will hold outside the suit opened by the opposition. This is good news for possible NT contracts, but not particularly encouraging for suit contracts.

Third, the suit opening by the opponents provides a new bid that is not available to me when my partner overcalls 1NT. When the opposition is silent, I need to rely upon Stayman, Jacoby transfers, and other common conventional means to describe the strength and/or shape of my hand. Not so when the opponents open; I now have a convenient cue bid to use on strong hands without distinctive shape.

So what's wrong with playing "Systems On" over the 1NT overcall? If 2♣ is Stayman and 2♦ is a transfer, there is no way to play in a safe 2-level minor suit contract. With a long minor and a weak hand, the choice is now to pass the 1NT and pray, or to resign us to the 3-level (and a possible double). To me, this is an unacceptable choice.

And there's no *need* to make that choice. The advantage of the Jacoby transfer lies less in the fact that the lead comes into the strong hand or that the strong hand is hidden (everybody knows what's in that hand, anyway; I'd rather have the unknown hand hidden), than that the transfer is utilized on strong and weak hands alike, on 5-3-3-2 hands as well as 6-5-1-1 hands, and that nobody knows what kind of hand I hold as responder until my second call. That advantage disappears when the opposition opens the bidding.

So I like to play "Systems Off". Two level new-suit responses are drop-dead bids (do you remember back before you learned about Jacoby transfers?). 2NT is a standard 8-9 HCP raise. 3NT is, of course, to play. 3-level bids in a new suit promise a 5-card suit and a hand that can play either 3NT or 4 of the suit with any help at all from the NT overcaller. And the cue-bid of the opener's suit promises at least 8 HCP, no 5-card suit worth showing, and at least one (unbid) 4-card major. If I overcall 1NT and my partner cue-bids the opponents' suit, we will immediately look for a 4-4 major fit, knowing that we can play 2NT or 3NT otherwise.

I do, however, like to play Lebensohl when the opponents bid over my partner's 1NT overcall.