

Introduction to The Weak 1NT Opener – Part 1 of 3

This article is the first of three introducing the weak 1NT opening bid (12-14 HCP). In this article, I will discuss uncontested auctions in which there is a weak NT opening. In the second article, I will discuss how to bid if you play the weak 1NT opener and you hold a strong NT. In the third article, I will discuss how to handle the auction when the opponents compete over your weak 1N opener.

Although I do not recommend it for beginners, once you have gained some experience and feel comfortable playing the 2/1 system, you may wish to experiment with the weak NT. Although I suppose it is possible to play the weak NT and not play 2/1, I know of no player who plays SAYC and the weak NT. I therefore recommend that if you decide to play the weak NT, you should also play 2/1.

Why Play The Weak NT?

I have played the weak NT for most of my bridge career. I feel it gives me a big advantage over those who play strong NT, and am not sure why more players do not adopt it.

Here are some of the advantages of the weak NT:

- Opening 1NT gives your partner a big advantage. It is a very descriptive opening bid, and often responder immediately has a very good idea of what the final contract should be. If you open 1NT with 12-14 HCP, you will be opening 1NT much more often than those who play the strong NT.
- Opening the weak NT results in a much more natural system than using strong NT. With the strong NT, when your partner opens one of a minor, he can have a wide variety of hand types, from a weak balanced hand to an unbalanced hand with a long minor. Playing the weak NT, when you open one of a minor, you usually have at least 5 cards in that minor, because if you had the weak balanced hand with a 3 card minor, you would have opened 1NT.
- Opening 1NT is somewhat preemptive. If the opponents want to compete, they have to bid at the 2 level.
- Your partner is much better equipped to compete, since he has a very good idea of the total partnership assets, whereas the opponents are in the dark.

Some of you may be concerned that if responder has a very weak hand when partner opens 1N, you will get doubled for a big penalty. Although this is theoretically possible, it hardly ever happens. In my 40 years of playing the weak NT, I would guess I have gone for a big penalty less than a dozen times after opening a weak NT. There are several reasons for this. It is difficult for the opponents to double low level contracts, particularly in modern bridge which tends to emphasize bidding over defending. Also, even with a bad hand, if responder has a reasonably long suit (5 or more cards), your side usually will not go down that much if you play in that suit. So the possibility of incurring a large penalty is so small that it does not represent any real detriment to playing the weak NT.

Requirements for Opening 1NT

In this section, I will present the requirements for opening a weak 1NT. I strongly recommend that you follow these recommendations religiously, and remain disciplined when you open 1NT. Although the modern tendency is to relax the strict requirements for the strong 1NT opener, the same reasoning does not apply if you play the weak NT. Relaxing the strict requirements allows you to open more hands 1NT (at the cost of losing some of the precision of opening 1NT). However, playing the weak NT, you will have many more opportunities to open 1NT, so you need not sacrifice the precision of the 1NT opener to increase its frequency.

Similarly, it is imperative that if you have a hand that meets the requirements for opening 1NT, you must open that hand 1NT. If you do not, you will be forced to lie on your subsequent bids. Also, since you did not open the weak NT, your partner will make certain assumptions about your hand that are incorrect.

Here are the requirements for opening the weak NT:

- You have 12-14 high card points.
- You have balanced distribution, with no more than one doubleton and no singletons or voids. Specifically, the allowable distributions are 5-3-3-2, 4-4-3-2, or 4-3-3-3.
- You do not have a 5 card major. If you open the weak NT, you are guaranteeing you do not have a 5 card major. Playing the strong NT, many experts advocate opening 1NT even with a 5 card major, because it is very difficult to describe your 15-17 points otherwise. However, playing the weak NT, this problem does not exist.

With 5-3-3-2 distribution and a 5 card minor, it is a matter of judgment as to whether you open 1 of a minor or 1NT. In general, I prefer to open 1NT if at all possible. However, if your minor suit is particularly strong (e.g. AKQxx), you can open your hand one of that minor.

Here are some example hands:

♠Axxx
♥Kx
♦AJxx
♣xxx

This is a classic weak 1NT opening bid.

♠xxx
♥Qx
♦KJx
♣AQxxx

I strongly prefer opening 1NT to 1C. You have points in 3 suits.

♠AKx
♥xxx
♦xx
♣AQxxx

Even with this hand, I would open 1NT rather than 1C.

♠Axx
♥xx
♦xxx
♣AKQxx

This hand could be opened 1C, since your clubs are so good. However, I might still open it 1NT, particularly in match points.

♠Axxx
♥Qxxx
♦KJx
♣Ax

Even with two 4 card majors, you still must open this hand 1NT.

♠Axx
♥Qxx
♦Axx
♣Qxxx

I would hesitate to open this hand 1NT even though it meets the requirements. It does not meet the rule of 20 (12 HCP + 7 cards in 2 longest suits = 19), so I might not open it particularly in 1st or 2nd seat. However, I do open 1NT with 4-3-3-3 hands and 13 or 14 HCP. I dislike 4-3-3-3 hands, and mentally subtract a point when I encounter them.

♠Ax
♥Kx
♦Axxx
♣Qxxxx

You should open this 1C rather than 1N since it does not have the correct distribution. Some experts advocate opening this hand 1D so you have an “easy” rebid of 2C over the expected one of a major from your partner. However, I do not like that approach, because now your club and diamond distribution is very ambiguous (you could have 4 diamonds, 5 diamonds, 4 clubs, or 5 clubs). Playing weak NT, if the auction proceeds 1D-1H/S-2C, you are guaranteeing 5 diamonds and 4+ clubs. Granted, if you open this hand 1C, you may have to rebid an anemic 5 card club suit, but your partner understands this is part of the system.

♠10xxxx
♥Qx
♦KJx
♣AQx

I recommend you open this 1S rather than 1N. Remember, opening 1NT denies holding a 5 card major. You could make an argument that you should treat your anemic spade suit as a 4 card suit, but my experience tells me you will do better in the long run if you open this hand 1S.

Responding to the Weak 1NT Opener

Before getting into some specific recommendations on how to respond to the weak NT opener, let me just say that you can basically use your current response structure to the strong NT if you so desire. The main difference between the weak and strong NT is that the weak NT requires 3 less HCP (the 12-14 range is 3 HCP less than the 15-17 range). Therefore, if you simply add 3 points to the requirements for all your responses, you can use the same structure. If you consider 8-9 HCP as an invitational hand for the strong NT, you can consider 11-12 HCP as an invitational hand for the weak NT. Similarly, if you consider 10HCP as a game forcing hand for the strong NT, you should consider a 13 HCP game forcing for the weak NT.

Having said that, let me suggest one small adjustment. It turns out that if you have 12 HCP opposite 12 HCP, you are a favorite to make 3NT even though you are 1 point short of the 25 HCP recommended for bidding game. For those of you who play rule of 20 openers, this should make sense. You often open 12 HCP hands, and if your partner opens and you as responder have 12 HCP that meets the rule 20, you would force to game. So, if your partner opens 1NT and you have 12 HCP, I recommend you force to game.

Stayman

In general, Stayman is the same with the weak NT as it is with the strong NT. You should bid Stayman if you have at least one 4 card major and an invitational or game forcing hand (at least 10 HCP).

With less than 10 HCP, you sometimes may want to bid Stayman as well, with the appropriate hand. If you

are short in clubs and have 4 +diamonds and 3+ hearts and spades, you can play what is commonly referred to as “garbage Stayman”. You bid 2C, and pass partner's response, including 2D.

There is also a modification to garbage Stayman that I recommend. It is sometimes called “Crawling Stayman”. If you are 4-4 or 5-5 in the majors and have less than an invitational hand, you can still bid Stayman. If partner responds 2D, you then bid 2H. By agreement, this shows a weak hand with at least 4 cards in each major. Partner must either pass 2H or bid 2S if his spades are better than his hearts. Remember, partner must have at least one 3 card major, so you are guaranteed to play in no worse than a 4-3 fit even if you are 4-4. If you are 5-4 in the majors with a weak hand, I recommend you transfer to your 5-card major rather than bidding Crawling Stayman. Weak hands almost always play best in their longest suit (even if it turns out you are in a 5-2 fit and have a 4-4 fit in the other major). You should also consider using Crawling Stayman with 4-4 in the majors and 5-9 points, particularly in match points, because you will often end up in the same 4-4 major suit fit as those not playing weak NT.

Note that there is no reason to play puppet Stayman, since partner cannot open 1N with a 5 card major.

Here are some example hands (assume your partner opens 1NT):

♠Axxx
♥Qxxx
♦Ax
♣Qxx

Bid 2C Stayman. If partner bids a major, bid game in that major. If partner bids 2D, bid 3N.

♠Axxx
♥Qxx
♦Ax
♣xxxx

Bid 2C Stayman. If partner bids 2S, invite by bidding 3S. Otherwise bid 2N (invitational).

♠Axxx
♥Qxxx
♦xx
♣xxx

Bid 2C Stayman. If partner bids a major, pass. If partner bids 2D, bid 2H asking partner to pass or bid 2S with better spades.

♠Axxx
♥xx
♦Qxxx
♣xxx

Pass. You do not have an invitational hand, nor a hand suited for garbage Stayman.

♠xxxx
♥Qxx
♦Jxxxx
♣x

Bid 2C Stayman. Pass partner's response, including 2D.

4 Way Transfers with Pre-Accepts

You can play the weak NT with whatever transfer methods you prefer. This includes simply playing major suit transfers, or playing 2S as forcing 3C from opener, which you will either pass or correct to 3D.

However, 4 way transfers with pre-accepts work particularly well with the weak NT. Let me first explain the mechanics (assume your partner opens 1NT):

- If you bid 2D or 2H, these are normal major suit transfers, guaranteeing at least 5 cards in the major being transferred to.
- If you bid 2S, this is a club transfer guaranteeing 5+ clubs. Opener can either accept or reject the transfer. Partner should accept the transfer with one of the top 3 honors. To accept, partner bids 2N. To reject, partner bids 3C.
- If you bid 2N, this is a diamond transfer, and works similarly to the 2S bid. Opener can either accept or reject the transfer. Partner should accept the transfer with one of the top 3 honors. To accept, partner bids 3C. To reject, partner bids 3D. Note that you must trust your partner to remember that you are playing 4 way transfers, because if partner forgets that 2N is a diamond transfer and considers it invitational instead, he will pass or bid 3N, either of which is likely to be very wrong.
- With a hand suitable to invite to 3N (e.g. what would be a 2N bid had you not been playing 4 way transfers), first bid 2C (presumably Stayman at that point) and then bid 2N over partner's response. Note that the 2N bid must be alerted as your invitational sequence that does not guarantee a 4 card major. Additionally, if partner responds 2H, if you have 4 spades you should rebid 2S rather than 2N. Therefore a rebid of 2N over a 2H response denies a 4-card major.

Now let me discuss some specifics regarding major suit transfers:

- You should transfer if you hold any 5 card major, regardless of hand strength. The only exception is that if you are 5-5 in the majors with less than an invitational hand, you can use Crawling Stayman discussed above. You bid 2H over partner's 2D response, asking partner to pass or bid 2S with better spades.
- If you hold an invitational hand (10-11 HCP), you should rebid 3 of the major with a six card suit and 2N with a 5 card suit. If you hold a game forcing hand, you should bid 4 of the major with a six card suit (assuming you choose not to play transfers at the 4 level), or 3N with a five card suit. This is the same structure as you play over strong NT, with the point counts adjusted appropriately.
- There is some question as to whether partner should "super accept". If you are conservative by nature, you should play partner must always accept the transfer at the 2 level, in case you have a really bad hand. However, I prefer playing that partner should "super accept" to the 3 level with 4 card support; that has the advantage of getting you to some thin games, and also preempting the opponents even if you have a bad hand.

Here are some specifics regarding the minor suit transfers:

- With less than an invitational hand, the question is whether to play in 1N or 3 of the minor. My recommendation is as follows. With a 6 card minor and either shortness (singleton or void) or 6 HCP or less, transfer to the minor. With a 5 card suit, 5-9 HCP, and shortness (singleton or void), transfer to the minor. Otherwise, pass 1N.
- With game going points, simply bid 3N even with 5+ cards in the minor.
- With a 6-card minor suit with 2 of the top 3 honors transfer and bid game if partner accepts the transfer. Otherwise stop in 3 of the minor.

Here are some example hands:

♠AQxxx
♥xx
♦AQxx
♣xx

Bid 2H and bid 3N over partner's 2S response. You are showing game going points and a 5 card suit.

♠xx
♥AQxxx
♦Axxx
♣xx

Bid 2D. Bid 2N over partner's 2H response, showing invitational points and a 5 card suit. If partner bids 3H over 2N, bid 4H. If partner bids 3H over 2D (assuming you play super accepts), bid 4H.

♠xx
♥AQxxxx
♦Kxx
♣xx

Bid 2D. Bid 3H (invitational) over 2H.

♠AQxxxx
♥xx
♦Axxx
♣x

Bid 2H. Bid 4S over 2S. You have a rule of 20 opener (10 HCP + 10 cards in your 2 longest suits = 20), so you should bid game.

♠Axxx
♥Qxxx
♦xx
♣xxx

You could either pass or bid 2C Crawling Stayman. There are a couple of advantages to Crawling Stayman. If you have a 4-4 major suit fit, you will end up in the same contract as pairs not playing the weak NT. This can be particularly important in match points. And bidding Stayman makes it less likely the opponents will compete.

♠Jxxxx
♥Qxx
♦xx
♣xxx

Bid 2H and pass the 2S response. Always transfer to a 5 card major to play with less than an invitational hand (even 0 HCP).

♠Ax
♥Qxx
♦AJxx
♣xxxx

Bid 2C and bid 2N over partner's response. Playing 4 suit transfers, a direct 2N bid would be a diamond transfer, so this is the way to show an invitational 2N bid. In this sequence, you are not guaranteeing a 4 card major..

♠Axxx
♥Qxx
♦AJxx
♣xx

Bid 2C. If partner responds 2S, I would bid 4S but 3S is acceptable if conservative. If partner responds 2D, bid 2N. If partner bids 2H, bid 2S. This shows an invitational hand with 4 spades. Playing 4 suit transfers, starting with 2C does not guarantee a 4-card major. So by bidding 2S over 2H, you are saying you do have an invitational hand with 4 spades. If partner is 4-4 in the majors he will be able to place the contract in spades.

♠Ax
♥Qxx
♦xx
♣AQxxxx

Bid 3N. You have game going points, and you should generally prefer 3N to 5 of a minor.

♠Ax
♥xxx
♦AQxxx
♣xxx

Bid 2N (diamond transfer). If partner bids 3C (accepting the transfer), bid 3N. If partner bids 3D (rejecting the transfer), pass.

♠xx
♥xxx
♦AQxxx
♣xxx

Pass. It should be easier to play 1N than 3D, so there is no reason to transfer.

♠x
♥xxx
♦AQxxx
♣xxxx

Bid 2N (diamond transfer) and bid 3D if partner responds 3C. There are 2 reasons for this bid. With shortness, it is usually better to play in a suit rather than NT. Also, the opponents have at least an 8 card spade fit (since partner has at most 4 spades), and you are making it hard for them to find their fit.

♠xx
♥xxx
♦xx
♣Qxxxxx

You have 2 choices here. You can pass and hope the opponents bid so that partner does not have to play 1N with 14-16 HCP between the 2 hands. Or you can bid 2S (club transfer), intending to play 3C. I

recommend you bid 2S, but the choice is not clear cut.