

Introduction to The Weak 1NT Opener – Part 2 of 3

This article is the second of three introducing the weak 1NT opening bid (12-14 HCP). In the first article, I discussed uncontested auctions in which there is a weak NT opening. In this article, I 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.

The Basic Approach To Showing A Strong NT

It is actually fairly simple to show a strong NT if you play the weak 1NT opener. You open 1 of a minor and rebid NT at the cheapest level. For example, if the auction goes 1C-P-1H-P-1N, opener is showing a strong NT (15-17 balanced with at least 3 clubs). Similarly, if the auction goes 1D-P-2C-P-2N, opener is still showing a strong NT (opener still rebid NT at the cheapest level).

There is one problem auction. If the auction goes 1H-P-1S-P-1N, opener is not showing a strong NT, but simply the same hand type as those who play strong 1N openers (balanced hand up to 14 HCP). So, if you have 15-17 and 5 hearts, you must open 1H, and you have a problem if partner responds 1S. However, this is no different from standard players who open 1H with a 5 card suit and 15-17 HCP. If this occurs, if you have a doubleton spade, bid 1N or 2H with 15 or a bad 16, 3H with a good 5 card suit and 16 or 17, and 2N with 17. With 3 spades, I suggest you raise spades to the appropriate level (2S with 15 or a bad 16, 3S with a good 16 or 17). With 4 spades, there clearly is no problem, as you have a spade fit.

There is one other important bidding difference between opening the weak 1N and strong 1N. Playing the weak 1N, you must bypass a 4 card major and rebid 1N in order to show your strength. Thus, if the auction goes 1C-P-1H-P-1N, opener may have 4 spades. Do not worry about missing a 4-4 major fit, because there is a method (checkback Stayman) described below for discovering these fits. Note that you only bypass a 4 card major if partner does not bid it. Thus, if the auction goes 1C-P-1H-P, you should bid 3H with 15-17 and 4 hearts.

Note that playing the weak NT gives you a better picture of the opener's hand after the rebid. For example, if the auction goes 1C-P-1H-P-1S, opener has 4 spades and 5+ clubs. The reason is because, playing the weak 1N opener, you only open 1 of a minor with either an unbalanced hand or a strong balanced hand. Since opener did not bid 1N over 1H, he must have the unbalanced hand. Note the contrast to those who play the strong NT, where you know much less about opener's hand; opener could have as few as 3 clubs.

Here are some example hands:

♠Axx
♥Kxx
♦AJxxx
♣Ax

Open 1D. Over a 1H or 1S response, bid 1N. Over a 2C response bid 2N..

♠Ax
♥Kxxx
♦Kxxxx
♣Qx

Open 1D. You must bid 2D over a 1S response by partner. You cannot bid 1N because that shows 15-17. Similarly, over 2C, you must bid 2D, because 2N shows 15-17.

♠Axxx
♥Kx
♦AJxx
♣Axx

Open 1D. Over 1H, you should bid 1N, not 1S, to show 15-17. Over 1S you should bid 3S. Over 2C you should bid 2N.

♠Kx
♥Axxx
♦AJxxx
♣Ax

Open 1D. Over 1H, you should bid 3H.. Over 1S and 2D, you should bid 2H, a standard reverse showing 5+ diamonds, 4 hearts and 16+ HCP.

♠Kxxx
♥Axxx
♦Ax
♣AJx

Open 1C. Over 1D, you must bid 1N to show 15-17, bypassing both 4 card majors. Do not be concerned over missing a 4-4 major fit, because the section below on checkback Stayman will demonstrate how to find your 4-4 major suit fits.. Over 1H bid 3H; similarly, over 1S, bid 3S.

Checkback Stayman

Before going into detail about how to respond when partner opens one of a minor, I will discuss checkback Stayman. This is because an understanding of checkback Stayman is critical to the discussion of responses to one of a minor opening bids.

Checkback Stayman is used by responder to discover whether an opener who has rebid 1N has either a 4 card major or 3 card support for a major previously bid by responder. The mechanics are simple. Over a 1N rebid by opener, if responder bids 2C, that is checkback Stayman (even if the opening bid was 1C). If opener has a 4 card major, he bids it. Similarly, if opener has 3 card support for the major bid by responder, he bids it. If opener has neither, he bids 2D. If opener has both a 4 card major and 3 card support, he bids the 4 card major.

For example, the auction 1C-P-1D-P-1N-P-2C is checkback Stayman, asking opener to show a 4 card major. Similarly, the auction 1D-P-1H-P-1N-P-2C is checkback Stayman, asking opener to show either 3 card heart support (with 4 hearts opener would have raised hearts) or a 4 card spade suit.

Most of the time, responder bids checkback Stayman with invitational or game forcing values. If responder has a weak hand with one 5+ card major, he simply rebids the major to play. An example of this is 1D-P-1H-P-1N-P-2H.

However, responder can also bid “garbage” checkback Stayman, using the same concepts as discussed in the first article in this series. If responder is short in clubs and has length in the other 3 suits, he may pass any response by opener, including 2D. If responder has at least 4 cards in each major, intending to pass any major suit response by opener, he can bid 2H over a 2D response, asking opener to pass or correct to 2S with better spades.

Many of you are familiar with the “New Minor Forcing” convention, which is similar to checkback Stayman. If you use that convention, over a 1N rebid, responder bids the minor suit not opened to check for 3 card support or the other 4 card major. For example, the auctions 1C-P-1H-P-1N-P-2D and 1D-P-1H-P-1N-P-2C are both new minor forcing. You may wonder why I recommend checkback as opposed to New Minor Forcing. The reason is that checkback gives responder much more flexibility than new minor forcing, particularly with the use of garbage checkback Stayman.

Assume the auction has gone 1C-P-1H-P-1N. Here are some example hands illustrating the checkback Stayman principles discussed above:

♠Kxxx
♥Axxx
♦Axx
♣xx

Bid 2C. Bid 4S if partner responds 2S. Otherwise bid 3N.

♠Kxxx
♥Axxx
♦Qxx
♣xx

Bid 2C. Bid 3S if partner responds 2S. Otherwise bid 2N.

♠Kxxx
♥Axxxx
♦xx
♣xx

Bid 2C (garbage checkback). Pass if partner bids 2H or 2S. Bid 2H if partner bids 2D, asking partner to pass or bid 2S with better spades.

♠Kxx
♥Axxxx
♦Kxx
♣xx

Bid 2C. Bid 4H over 2H. Bid 3N over 2D or 2S. Note that if partner has both 4 spades and 3 hearts, he will bid 4H, because he knows that your checkback Stayman bid guarantees 5 hearts in this auction; you did not raise spades, so the only reason for you to bid checkback is if you have 5 hearts.

♠Kxx
♥Axxxx
♦Jxx
♣xx

Bid 2C. Bid 3H over 2H. Bid 2N over 2D or 2S. Note that if partner has both 4 spades and 3 hearts, he will bid 3H (or 4H with a maximum), based on the same reasoning as in the last example.

♠Kxx
♥Axxxx
♦xxx
♣xx

Bid 2H (to play).

Responses to One of A Minor Openers

The responses when partner opens one of a minor are more clearly defined when you play weak 1N openers. This is because you must take into account that partner may have a strong NT hand (although a majority of the time opener will have an unbalanced minimum).

One consideration is whether or not to bypass diamonds to bid your 4 card major. Playing strong 1N openers, the modern tendency is to bypass diamonds. However, playing weak NT, this is not always the case. You should bypass diamonds to bid your major if you intend to pass a 1N rebid by opener. However,

if you intend to bid checkback Stayman over the 1N rebid, then you should bid 1D; this will allow any major suit fit you have to be played with the strong hand as declarer.

Another consideration is the 1N and 2N responses. I recommend you tend to avoid these whenever possible, because you would prefer the contract be played by partner if he has a strong NT. Note that I recommend you still play inverted minors. Therefore, with 10+ points and 4 card support, you should raise to the 2 level; note that, unlike when playing strong 1N openers, this is very safe, because partner either has the strong NT or a 5+ card suit. Over a 1D opener, I will also favor a 2C bid over a 2N bid if I have a choice; I will often bid 2C with 3-3-3-4 distribution and 10+ points. With 5 card support and less than 10 points, I recommend you make a jump raise to the 3 level, even if you have a balanced hand. Again, this is very safe and quite effective. Opener often has an unbalanced hand with a 5+ card suit, so you have managed to preempt the opponents. And if partner has the strong NT, playing in an 8+ card fit at the 3 level is fine.

Assume partner opens 1C. Here are some example hands:

♠Kxx
♥Axxx
♦Axxx
♣xx

Bid 1D. You intend to bid checkback over the 1N rebid, and the final contract will be either 4H or 3N.

♠Jxx
♥Axxx
♦Axxx
♣xx

Bid 1D. You intend to bid checkback over the 1N rebid, since you have an invitational hand..

♠xxx
♥Axxx
♦Kxxx
♣xx

Bid 1H. You intend to pass the 1N rebid, so you must not lose your heart fit.

♠xx
♥Axxxx
♦Axxxx
♣x

Bid 1H. If you have a 5 card major, you should bypass diamonds and bid the major. Since you have an invitational hand, you intend to bid checkback over the 1N rebid, and bid the heart game if partner has 3 card heart support.

♠xx
♥Axx
♦Axxx
♣Kxxx

Although 1D is possible, I would bid 2C. This gives partner a better idea about your point count, and also makes it harder for the opponents to find their major suit fit. I would not bid 2N.

♠xx
♥xx
♦Axxx
♣Qxxxx

Bid 3C. You will often have a 10 card fit (if partner opened an unbalanced hand), and 3C should be reasonable even if partner has a strong NT.

♠xxx
♥xxx
♦Axx
♣Qxxx

You must reluctantly bid 1N with this hand, as no other bid is appropriate.

For this last example, assume partner opens 1D:

♠Qxx
♥Qxx
♦Qxx
♣KQxx

I would bid 2C, giving partner a chance to bid 2N. However, 2N is a reasonable alternative.