

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

This article is the third of three introducing the weak 1NT opening bid (12-14 HCP). In the first article, I discussed uncontested auctions when there was a weak 1NT opening bid. In the second article, I discussed how to bid if you play the weak 1NT opener and you hold a strong NT. In this article, I will discuss methods for bidding when the opponents interfere over a weak 1NT opening bid.

Bidding When the Opponents Double

In this section, I will discuss a method I invented for competing when the opponents double the 1NT bid. The method applies whether the double is made directly (by responder's right hand opponent) or in balancing seat (by responder's left hand opponent after 2 passes)..

It is based on the DONT convention played by many pairs when competing over 1NT opening bids. I have therefore named this approach "DONT Runouts". It lets you to find the best place to play when the opponents have doubled your partner's weak 1NT opening bid.

The method is very flexible and allows for the following:

- If responder has a long suit (5 or more), you can play at the 2 level in that suit.
- If responder has 2 suits (as little as 4-4), you can play in your best fit at the 2 level.
- You can play in 1N doubled if responder has a sufficiently strong hand.

The system works as follows. Partner opens 1N and RHO doubles, or partner opens 1N, LHO doubles after 2 passes, and RHO passes. As responder you have the following choices:

- You pass if you want to play 1N doubled (typically a balanced hand with at least 8 HCP)
- With a single suited hand (5 card suit or longer), you redouble. Partner is forced to bid 2C, and you bid your suit (or pass if your suit is clubs). With spades, you have the option of bidding 2S directly, which jams the opponents.
- With two suits (and you may have as little as 4-4), you bid the lower ranking suit. Partner passes with 3 card support, and bids the next higher suit with a doubleton. Since partner cannot open 1N with 2 doubletons, you are guaranteed to play in a 4-3 fit at worst. For example, with diamonds and spades, you would bid 2 diamonds. If partner has a doubleton diamond, he bids 2H. You then correct to 2 spades.

I recommend you play this system even if RHO's double is not penalty (for example, showing a single suited hand). It is simpler and more consistent, and allows you to compete effectively.

If you prefer the "new" DONT, you can modify this system appropriately. In the new DONT, 2H and 2S are single suited hands. Therefore, redouble shows either a single suited minor, or hearts and spades (if responder corrects 2C to 2H, it shows hearts and spades). The advantage of the new DONT is that with a single suited major, you can compete more effectively.

Here are some examples (assume partner has opened 1N and RHO has doubled):

♠XX
♥XX
♦KQxx
♣XXXXX

I recommend 2C (showing clubs and another suit). Even though you have a 5 card club suit, it is weak and your diamonds are strong.

♠XX
♥XX
♦Kxxx
♣xxxxx

In this case, I recommend you redouble, showing a single suited hand. With a very weak hand, you are better playing in the weak hand's long suit.

♠Kx
♥Jx
♦KQxx
♣xxxxx

You should consider passing with this hand, With 9 points, you are willing to play 1N doubled.

♠Axxx
♥Qxxx
♦xx
♣xxx

Bid 2H, showing hearts and spades. As mentioned above, you can be 4-4 and show 2 suits. If you play the new DONT, redouble and bid 2H over 2C.

♠KQJxxx
♥Axx
♦xxx
♣x

Bid 4H (transfer) if you play Texas, or 4S if you don't. This is the same as what you would have done with no double. There is no point in letting the opponents find out if they can compete.

♠KQJxx
♥Axx
♦Qxx
♣xx

Bid 3S (natural and forcing). This gives partner a choice of games. At first blush, you may feel that not being able to transfer is a problem, However, the advantage of a transfer over a strong NT (hiding the strong hand) does not really apply over a weak NT, since both hands are the same strength.

Bidding When The Opponents Overcall

With the strong NT, I recommend when the opponents overcall that you play systems on and "stolen bid doubles". This means that all bids by responder retain the same meaning as if there had been no overcall, and a double means "the opponent made the bid I wanted to make (he 'stole' my bid)". This is a very simple and effective approach.

However, with the weak NT, it is more likely the points are evenly divided between the two sides, and you need more flexibility in competing for part scores. Therefore, I recommend you play the Lebensohl convention if you play weak 1N openers. It is somewhat more complicated than systems on, but it is a lot more flexible.

Before I get into the specifics, let me explain the general guidelines behind Lebensohl:

- Bids at the 2 level are natural and to play.
- Bids at the 3 level are natural and forcing to game.

- A bid of 2N is completely artificial and forces opener to bid 3C. It is used for several purposes. The most common is to play a partial at the 3 level when the opponent has bid a suit higher than the suit in which responder wants to compete. Another less common usage is to indicate responder has a stopper in the suit bid by the opponents. If responder forces to game after bidding 2N (as described below), he is showing a stopper. If responder forces to game without bidding 2N, he is denying a stopper. Lebensohl adherents call this “Slow Action Shows Stopper” (SASS).

In the next few paragraphs, I will describe how responder handles various hand types.

Responder wishes to play a partial in a 5+ card suit

If the suit is higher than the suit bid by the opponents (for example, responder has spades and hearts were overcalled), responder can simply bid that suit at the 2 level. As indicated above, 2 level bids by responder are natural and to play.

If the suit is lower than the suit bid by the opponents (for example, responder has diamonds and hearts were overcalled), responder bids 2N, a completely artificial bid. Opener must bid 3C. Responder can pass if he wishes to compete in clubs. Otherwise, responder can bid his suit (diamonds in the example) and opener is required to pass. Note that this treatment only applies if responder's suit is lower than the overcalled suit. In the above example, if responder bid 3S over opener's forced 3C bid, that has a whole different meaning, as explained below (if responder wanted to play in a spade partial, he would simply bid 2S).

Responder has a 5 card suit and game forcing values

Responder simply bids the suit at the 3 level. For example, assume hearts were overcalled. Responder can bid 3C, 3D, and 3S, all of which are natural and show game forcing values.

Responder has a 4 card major and game forcing values

A cue bid by responder is Stayman, indicating at least one 4 card major and game forcing values (the cue bid is at the 3 level). However, there are 2 different Stayman sequences. A direct cue bid indicates that responder does not have a stopper in the overcalled suit. A bid of 2N followed by a cue bid indicates that responder does have a stopper (SASS).

Note that if the overcalled suit is clubs, the 2 different Stayman sequence approach does not work. That is because opener bids 3C over 2N, so obviously responder is no longer able to cue bid 3C. So with clubs overcalled, 3C is still Stayman, but whether or not responder has a stopper is undefined.

Responder Wishes to Raise to 3N

The only issue to consider is whether or not responder has a stopper in the overcalled suit. With a stopper, responder bids 2N, and bids 3N over opener's forced 3C bid (SASS). With no stopper, responder jumps directly to 3N; if opener does not have a stopper, he bids his lowest 4 or 5 card suit.

Responder has a 5 card suit and invitational values

If responder's suit is below the overcalled suit (for example, the overcalled suit is hearts and responder's suit is clubs or diamonds), responder must make a unilateral decision. He can either bid 3 of the suit and force to game, or bid 2N to play a 3 level partial.

However, if responder's suit is higher than the overcalled suit (for example, the responder's suit is spades), then he can use the Lebensohl 2N sequence. Over opener's forced 3C, responder bids 3S. This shows an invitational hand with spades. Note that with less than invitational values, responder would bid 2S. With game going values, responder would bid 3S directly. So the 2N sequence followed by 3S specifically shows an invitational hand.

Responder has no 5 card suit but would like to compete for a partial

In traditional Lebensohl, double is for penalties. However, I recommend that you play a double by responder as “competitive”, showing a balanced hand willing to compete (approximately 8-10 HCP). In general, opener should bid his lowest 4+ card suit in response to the double. On occasion, opener may pass with good defense and length (usually 4+) in the overcalled suit.

Some may argue that this approach gives up the ability for responder to punish the opponents for a bad overcall. However, in my experience, responder holds a balanced competitive hand much more frequently than a penalty double, so this approach works out better in the long run.

Here are some examples (assume partner opens 1NT and RHO overcalls 2H):

♠KQJxx
♥Axx
♦Qxx
♣xx

Bid 3S, forcing to game.

♠KQJxx
♥xxx
♦xxx
♣xx

Bid 2S, to play. Partner must pass.

♠xx
♥xxx
♦Qxx
♣KQJxx

Bid 2N, and pass partner's forced 3C response.

♠xx
♥xxx
♦KQJxx
♣Qxx

Bid 2N. Over partner's forced 3C, bid 3D, indicating that you wish to play in 3D. Partner must pass.

♠KQJxx
♥Axx
♦xxx
♣xx

Bid 2N. Over partner's forced 3C, bid 3S, indicating a hand with spades and game invitational values.

♠KQJx
♥xx
♦Qxxx
♣Axx

Bid 3H. This is Stayman, showing game going values, 4 spades, and no heart stopper.

♠KQJx
♥Axx
♦Qxxx
♣xx

Bid 2N. Over partner's forced 3C bid, bid 3H. This is Stayman, showing game going values, 4 spades, and a heart stopper.

♠Axx
♥xx
♦Qxx
♣KQJxx

Bid 3N. This is a natural NT raise, but denies a heart stopper.

♠xx
♥Axx
♦Qxx
♣KQJxx

Bid 2N. Over partner's forced 3C, but 3N. This is a natural NT raise, and shows a heart stopper.

Competing Over the Weak NT

In this section, I will briefly discuss some guidelines for competing when the opponents open a weak 1N.

It is certainly possible to play one of the standard conventions, either DONT or Cappelletti. Cappelletti has the advantage of allowing you to make a penalty double. DONT has the advantage of allowing you to more effectively compete at the 2 level; some of the Cappelletti bids (2H, 2S, and 2C when your suit is clubs) force you to the 3 level. Of the two, I have a slight preference for DONT, as it allows you to easily describe more hand types, and giving up the penalty double is not costly as you rarely will get to defend 1N doubled.

However, recently I have begun playing simple natural overcalls. That seems to work quite well. I overcall with the same values as I would had the opponents opened 1 of a suit. I use a double to show a reasonably strong balanced hand, 14 or more high card points; partner should generally pass with any balanced hand of 7 or more points (unless vulnerability dictates that your side will do better bidding game than beating 1N two or three tricks). With an unbalanced or weak hand, partner should bid a suit.