

DEFENDING AGAINST THE WEAK NT

The principle value of the Acol 1NT opening with a balanced 12-14 HCP is the pre-emptive nature of the bid. Like all pre-emptive bids it is essentially a gamble, risking the possibility that partner holds little or nothing in his hand and therefore the likelihood of incurring a severe penalty. Alternatively, partner may hold limited values without enough to try for game, in which case he will pass, confident that you have reasonable prospects to make your contract.

It is this last set of circumstances that make the weak no-trump opening difficult to defend against. When you and your partner have a combined holding that is sufficient to compete for a part-score contract against an opening 1NT, it can be difficult to avoid bidding too high, unless you have invested the time to reach an agreement as to how your partnership will bid relative strength. A number of conventional defences to the weak no-trump opening have been devised, but none of them can be described as being effective in all circumstances. Often their main value seems to be their effectiveness at confusing weaker opponents. For this reason it is important to understand the concepts underlying these conventional defences, even if you and your partner decide not to use any of them.

Because of the restrictions on space it is not possible to provide a complete analysis of all the conventional defences to an opening 1NT here. Instead, I will present a short analysis of three of the most commonly used conventions, known respectively as 'Landy', 'Modified Landy' and 'Asptro', as well as an analysis of the 'natural' defence. These should provide you with a grasp of the basic ideas underlying any defence and enable you to make a considered choice of your own.

(i) Landy

'Landy' is essentially an adaptation of the 'Stayman' convention. Over a 1NT opening:

- 'Double' shows 15+ HCP and is for penalties.
- '2♣' shows at least 4-4 shape in the majors and between 11-14 HCP.
- '2♦/♥/♠' promises at least a five-card suit and 11-14 HCP.

Like all defences to a weak no-trump opening, you can downgrade requirements for any of these bids if you are sitting in the fourth seat (the protective position) by 3 HCP, assuming, of course, that both your partner and your RHO have passed the opening bid.

Since these bids are essentially limit bids (except for the ‘double’) partner can now assess at what level the final contract should be played. The responses are as follows:

- Over the double - pass with 5+ HCP (8+ HCP if partner has doubled in the fourth seat). With less, bid your best suit and hope for the best.
- Over 2♦/♥/♠ - pass unless you are reasonably confident of making game in either 3NT or in partner’s suit or unless you have a singleton or a void in partner’s suit, in which case you should bid your best suit at the appropriate level.
- Over 2♣ - without enough to look for game you would respond with 2 of your best major. If you have no strong preference for either you should bid 2♦, asking partner to bid his preferred major. This 2♦ response is known as a ‘negative relay’.
To make a ‘positive relay’ you would bid 2NT over 2♣, asking partner to bid 3♣ with a minimum overcall and no strong preference for either major – 3♦ with a maximum and no strong preference – 3♥/♠ with a minimum and a five-card suit – 4♣ with a maximum and a preference for ♥s – 4♦ with a maximum and a preference for ♠s. Over any of these responses to 2NT, partner will be able to accurately assess the prospect for bidding the game in no-trumps or either major.

The obvious flaw with the ‘Landy’ defence is that it is impossible to show a five-card or longer ♣ suit, unless you are prepared to bid it at the 3-level. This flaw is common to all conventional defences to a weak no-trump opening. The off-setting advantage, of course, is that it is possible to make a competitive overcall to show two four-card or longer major suits with just one bid. Note that with 5-4 shape in the majors you would still make the 2♣ overcall, rather than simply bid your five-card suit.

(ii) Modified Landy

Modified Landy is an adaptation of Landy, which works as follows:-

- ‘Double’ shows 15+ HCP and is for penalties.
- ‘2♣’ shows both minors with 4-4 shape or better and 11-14 HCP.
- ‘2♦’ shows both majors with 4-4 shape or better and 11-14 HCP.
- ‘2♥/♠’ promises at least a five-card suit and between 11-14 HCP.

In fourth seat the requirements for all of these bids can be downgraded by 3 HCP. The responses are as follows:

- Over the double - pass with 5+ HCP (8+ HCP if partner has doubled in the fourth seat). With less, bid your best suit and hope for the best.
- Over 2♥/♠ - pass unless you are reasonably confident of making game in either 3NT or in partner's suit or unless you have a singleton or a void in partner's suit, in which case you should bid your best suit at the appropriate level.
- Over 2♣ - without enough to look for game, pass if your best minor is ♣s or correct to 2♦ if your best minor is ♦s. To make a 'positive relay' you would bid 2NT over 2♣, asking partner to bid 3♣ with a minimum overcall and a preference for ♣s – 3♦ with a minimum and a preference for ♦s – 3♥/♠ with a maximum, with a feature in the bid suit – 3NT with a maximum and no specific feature in either major. Over any of these responses to 2NT, partner will be able to accurately assess the prospect for bidding the game in no-trumps or either minor (or indeed, a slam!).
- Over 2♦ - without enough to bid for game, bid your best major. To make a 'positive relay' you would bid 2NT over 2♣, asking partner to bid 3♣ with a minimum overcall and no strong preference for either major – 3♦ with a maximum and no strong preference – 3♥/♠ with a minimum and a five-card suit – 4♣ with a maximum and a preference for ♥s – 4♦ with a maximum and a preference for ♠s. Over any of these responses to 2NT, partner will be able to accurately assess the prospect for bidding the game in no-trumps or either major.

Once again the improvements to the original Landy convention come at a cost. You are no longer able to make a negative relay to ask partner to show his preferred major at the 2-level and thereby can finish up in inferior contracts on occasion.

(iii) Asptro

One of the more effective defences to a weak no-trump opening is 'Asptro', which works as follows:

- 'Double' shows 15+ HCP and is for penalties.
- '2♣' shows 11-14 HCP, with ♥s and another suit, with 5-4 shape or better. *If ♠s is the second suit, then the ♠s are longer than the ♥s.*
- '2♦' shows 11-14 HCP, with ♠s and another suit, with 5-4 shape or better. *If ♥s is the second suit, then the ♥s are longer than the ♠s.*

- ‘2♥/♠’ is natural, showing 11-14 HCP and a five-card or longer suit, *without four or more cards in the other major.*

Once again, you can elect to reduce the requirements for all of these bids by a King when sitting in the protective seat.

Partner’s response to your overcall is based upon his strength and shape.

- Over ‘Double’ – partner passes with 5+ HCP (8+ HCP if you are in the protective position). With a very weak hand, partner either bids his own five-card suit or bids 2♣ to ask you to show your best suit.
- Over ‘2♣’ – with 0-10 HCP, partner will respond with 2♥ if he has three or more cards in the suit. With less than three ♥s he will respond with 2♦, which asks you to show your second suit at the minimum level. If your second suit is ♦s you will simply pass the 2♦ response, of course.

With 11+ HCP, partner will make the ‘positive relay’ of 2NT, denying four-card support for your ♥s (otherwise he would have raised you to game or invited with 3♥). Over 2NT you will show your second suit and partner will now be able to assess what the final contract should be.

A 2♠ response to the 2♣ overcall shows a weak hand with six or more ♠s and no tolerance for ♥s. *It is not an invitation to show your second suit, even if that suit is ♠s.*

- Over ‘2♦’ – A 2♠ response is weak (0-10 HCP) with tolerance for ♠s. 2♥ is also weak, showing reasonable ♥s and little tolerance for ♠s. With ♠s and a minor you will respond with 2♠ rather than your minor, since partner may elect to pass 2♠ if he has a doubleton. If he has less than two ♠s, he will now relay to 2NT, asking you to bid your second suit.

A 2NT response is strong without ♠ support, asking you to bid your second suit.

A 3♠ response is invitational, showing four-card support and asking you to raise to 4♠ with a maximum overcall.

A 4♠ response shows 13+ HCP and good ♠ support.

Once again, the major flaw with this defence is the difficulty of making a competitive overcall in either of the minors, unless you are prepared to bid to the 3-level.

(iv) The 'Natural' Defence

Defending naturally against a weak no-trump does allow you to show a five-card minor at a low level, which is a distinct advantage. The problem is that you have no mechanism to show a two-suited overcall, *unless you have the agreement that your overcall guarantees a second suit*. Adding this proviso allows you to overcall with much more confidence, since now partner can escape to your second suit if he has no tolerance for the first. With this proviso added, the overcall must now be alerted, of course. The alternatives are as follows:

- 'Double' shows 15+ HCP and is for penalties. Partner will pass with 5+ HCP or bid his best suit with less than this.
- 2♣/♦/♥/♠ shows at least five cards in the bid suit and at least four cards in a second suit. Partner will bid the next suit up as a 'negative relay' to your second suit and 2NT as a 'positive relay'. If partner bids anything other than one of these relays, it is to play, denying any tolerance for your first suit and unlikely to have much tolerance for your second suit.

Once you have made your overcall any further decisions about the hand should be left to your partner, since your overcall is essentially a limit bid. The only time you might reasonably be expected to bid again if partner makes a weak bid that is not a relay is when your second suit contains five or more cards and you have no tolerance for partner's suit. Again you should be prepared to reduce the requirements for any of these bids by a King if you are sitting in the protective seat.

Example 1

♠	A J 8 5 4
♥	K Q 9
♦	Q 10 4 3
♣	9

Landy:- After the opponent's weak no-trump opening, you would make the natural overcall of 2♠.

Mod Landy:- After the opponent's weak no-trump opening, you would make the natural overcall of 2♠.

Asptro:- You will make the overcall of 2♦, showing ♠s and another. If partner responds with 2♥, you will 'correct' to 2♠, promising five ♠s and four in a minor.

Partner will now take the appropriate action by either passing or bidding 2NT, asking you to bid your minor. Once again you will overcall 1NT with 2♠. This time however partner has the distinct advantage of knowing you have a second four-card suit and can make the negative relay of 3♣ or the positive relay of 2NT. Over either of these relays you will bid 3♦, of course.

Natural:-

Example 2

♠	9
♥	K Q J 8 4
♦	K J 10 5
♣	K 7 3

Landy:-

Over 1NT you would overcall 2♥. If partner responds with 2♠, showing a weak hand with no tolerance for ♥s, you should rebid 2NT to ask partner to bid a four-card minor or pass if he doesn't have one. You are likely to be in serious trouble if he does not have a minor, of course, but this is the risk involved in making competitive overcalls of the weak no-trump.

Mod Landy:-

As for 'Landy'.

Asptro:-

Your 2♣ overcall shows '♥s and another'. You should pass the negative relays of 2♦ and 2♥, which respectively deny and show ♥ tolerance with a weak hand. Over a 2♠ response you should pass, since partner is virtually certain to have a six-card suit. Over the positive relay of 2NT you will bid 3♦. Partner will now bid 3NT, 4♥ or 5♦, depending on which contract is the most suitable with his holding.

Natural:-

Your 2♥ overcall has the disadvantage that it conceals your strength in the minors. With one exception, if partner bids anything other than ♥s you must simply bid your ♦ suit and leave the rest to him. If partner responds with 3♣ over 2♥ he is showing a weak hand with long ♣s and a singleton ♥, at most. You will pass this with some confidence, secure in the knowledge that partner will have good play to make his contract.

Example 3

♠ K 9 4 2
♥ A Q 7 6 3
♦ K 7
♣ 9 8

Landy:- Over 1NT you would overcall 2♣, showing 4-4 or better in the majors. If partner responds with 2♦ you will rebid 2♥, showing preference. If partner responds with either 2♥ or 2♠ you will pass. If partner makes the positive relay of 2NT, you will rebid 3♥, showing a minimum overcall with preference for ♥s. If partner makes either 'invitational raise' of 3♥ or 3♠ you will pass, since you are minimum for your overcall.

Mod Landy:- Over 1NT you would overcall 2♦, showing 4-4 or better shape in the majors. Without enough for game partner will bid his preferred major. Over the positive relay of 2NT you will respond with 3♥, showing a minimum overcall with a five-card suit. If partner makes either 'invitational raise' of 3♥ or 3♠ you will pass, since you are minimum for your overcall.

Asptro:- Over 1NT you would overcall 2♦, showing '♠s and another' and anchoring to the shorter major. If partner responds with 2♥ you will pass, showing both majors and *longer ♥s than ♠s*. Sometimes you will have 5-5 in the majors, in which case you should 'anchor' to the weaker major, since if partner does not have good support for this you are more likely to be playing in your stronger major. If partner responds with 2♥ or 2♠ you will pass, since in either case he is showing a weak hand. Over the positive relay of 2NT you do best by bidding 3♥, showing a minimum overcall with 5-4 shape in ♥s/♠s. Partner can now pass or bid 3♠ or raise you to game in either major or bid 3NT, depending entirely on his own strength and shape.

Natural:- Your 2♥ overcall could well mean that you will miss finding a 4-4 ♠ fit, since partner is likely to pass with two ♥s and four ♠s. Nevertheless your contract is

likely to have reasonable chances to make the same number of tricks played in either suit.

If partner responds with the negative relay of 2♠ you will pass, of course. If partner responds with either 3♣ or 3♦ you *must* pass, since either bid promises a six-card suit and no tolerance for either ♥s or ♠s. If partner makes the positive relay of 2NT you should rebid 3♥ rather than 3♠. This 3♥ rebid simply says that you have ♥s and ♠s *with a minimum for your 2♥ overcall*. With a maximum you would bid 3♠ rather than 3♥. With six ♥s and four ♠s you will rebid 4♥ over 2NT, since even with a minimum for your 2♥ overcall partner is virtually certain to have enough to make game in one of your majors.

Example 4

♠	J 8 6
♥	7
♦	K Q J 4
♣	A Q J 4 2

Landy:-

Needless to say the only way of showing this type of hand is if you and your partner have the agreement that a 2NT overcall is 'unusual', showing both minors. This can be very dangerous with 5-4 shape, since you are very likely to end up playing in a 4-3 fit at the 3-level. This is going to go for a large penalty if partner has a very weak hand. On balance it is much safer to restrict the unusual 2NT overcall to 5-5 shape, at least. The second point about this hand is that you must have good prospects for beating 1NT and therefore it is much better to pass and defend.

Mod Landy:-

You would overcall 2♣, showing both minors. Partner will pass with a weak hand and better ♣s than ♦s or correct to 2♦ with better ♦s than ♣s. Over the positive relay of 2NT you will respond with 3NT, showing a maximum for your overcall, *but denying a feature in either major*. Partner will now assess the best contract.

Asptro:-

Again you cannot show this hand unless a 2NT overcall is your conventional method of showing both minors.

Natural:-

This is the type of hand where a natural overcall works best, since you can always show a five-card minor regardless of what your second suit is. Whether you should be bidding on this hand is a moot point, since you must have good chances to defeat 1NT. Certainly if the opponents are vulnerable it must be correct to defend, since a score of 200 or even 300 is very possible. If either of your minors was not such a ready source of tricks it would be correct to overcall 2♣.

On balance I think that the 'natural' defence is superior, because it allows a greater flexibility for showing more hand types at a lower level. All three conventional overcalls suffer because it is difficult to show a minor/major suit holding whenever the minor is longer than the major. The major cost with the 'natural' defence is that it is no longer possible to show a single-suited hand of any type, whereas with 'Landy' a single-suited ♦, ♥ or ♠ hand can still be shown at the 2-level and with 'Aspro' or 'Modified Landy' a single-suited major hand can be shown at the 2-level. While there are conventional defences that deal with these problems ('Pottage' and 'Brozel' are two examples) they often fall foul of the licensing rules and cannot be used in General License events.