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(161) Notrump: 1NT Overcalls

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Level: 1

Robert S. Todd

robert@advinbridge.com

General

A 1NT overcall in the direct seat, after RHO has opened the bidding, is similar to a 1NT opening bid in that it shows a balanced strong hand. But once RHO has promised a good hand by opening the bidding, we make this 1NT overcall a bit stronger than a 1NT opening bid – promising about 15-18 points. That is total points, high-card points plus length points and other re-evaluations.

Stopper in the Opponent's Suit?

In addition to promising a decent 15-18 points, a 1NT overcall also usually has a stopper in the opponent's suit. This is particularly true when the opponent has opened 1-Major, showing a 5-card or longer suit. When the opponent opens 1♦, that's usually at least a 4-card suit, so it is still important to have a stopper for overcalling 1NT (though not as important as when the opponent opens a Major suit.) But when RHO opens the bidding with 1♣, this may be done on a little as a 3-card suit (for some partnerships even a 2-card suit when 4-4-3-2), so it is reasonable to overcall 1NT without a club stopper (or with only half a stopper) if that is the best description of our hand.

Borderline Cases

When we have a close decision about whether to overcall 1NT or not it is usually because we have a balanced hand with about 15 total points.

Things to consider when making a borderline 1NT overcall decision, remembering that LHO has a penalty double available:

- Vulnerability – When vulnerable be conservative and overcall with 15+ to 18 points.
- # of Stoppers – The more stoppers we have the more aggressive we can be in overcalling.
- Positional Values – some cards may be upgraded for your position behind the opener.
- Other Options – Rather than 1NT, maybe a takeout double or overcalling a 5-card suit.



Example

♠ AQ93
♥ AQ93
♦ Q83
♣ J3
1♣ ___?

With this hand, when vulnerable, if RHO opens the bidding 1♣ it is best to make a takeout double, not overcall 1NT.

A Good Hand with a 5-card Suit

With a hand that is balanced with 15-18 points and a 5-card minor suit, generally it is better to play in notrump than in the minor suit. With a stopper in the opponent's suit it is normal to simply overcall 1NT – no other bid is worth considering.

Example

♠ Q93
♥ A4
♦ AQ943
♣ KJ8
1♣ ___?

With this hand we have 17 total points (16 high-card points and one length point) and a stopper in the opponent's club suit. The best bid is simply a 1NT overcall.

But when our 5-card suit is a Major suit then we have to decide whether is best to overcall 1NT or to overcall our Major suit. Surprisingly often, this is not a clear-cut decision. There is a balance between the convenience of describing our entire hand in both shape and strength with a 1NT overcall and the urgency to search for a Major suit fit.

Some guidelines to help with the decision:

- 1NT is usually the best bid with a powerful hand, 17-18 total points.
- A Major suit overcall is usually best if it can be made at the 1-level and our stopper in the opponent's suit is weak.



Advancing Partner's 1NT Overcall

We use the same tools to advance partner's 1NT overcall as when responding to partner's 1NT opening bid – Stayman, transfers, etc. This is called playing “Systems On”. The main difference in the 1NT overcall auction is that partner's range is a bit stronger, $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 more point on average. So as responder we bid slightly more aggressively, inviting with some good 7 point hands, and bidding game with some good 9 point hands, as our invitational range changes from 8-9 points down to 7+ to 9- points.

Conclusion

Overcalling 1NT is a good way to describe our entire hand, both in shape (balanced) and strength (a small range of 15-18 points). It also shows a stopper in the opponent's suit and does all of this at a low level – an excellent bid.