

Bidding Defence to 1NT

One of the most frequent bidding problems is how to deal with an opponent's opening (weak) 1NT. One of the principal advantages of the weak no trump is its pre-emptive value, and countering it should be an essential part of your defensive armoury.

The first counter measure, but unfortunately none too common, is to double. The double of a weak no trump is always for penalties and shows typically 16 or more points. Typical double of a weak no trump.

♠ A Q
♥ K J 7
♦ Q J 10 8 5
♣ K 10 4

You should be reasonably balanced for your double. Your partner, with 6 or more points will normally pass, expecting to defeat the 1NT contract by 2 or 3 tricks, scoring 300-800 points. Just occasionally, partner will have enough points (11) to make game – but that will probably score less than defeating the hapless 1NT. With 5 points or fewer, he will probably take the double out by bidding his longest suit.

The requirement to double is treated by many to be the same in either the immediate (LHO of the 1NT), or protective (RHO after 1NT – Pass – Pass) position. As you get more experienced, and with improved partnership understanding, you may consider reducing the requirements in the protective position to 13+ points. The reasoning being that partner could well have 10 or so points and the opening 1NT has robbed you of the opportunity to play in a part score – but for the moment keep your doubles up to strength.

But 16 point hands do not come your way that often, and even less frequently when you opponents open 1NT. The requirements to overcall in a suit after an opening 1NT are very similar to those to overcall say an opening 1♠. First and most importantly to bid a suit over 1NT it must be at least a 5 card suit – and it must have a degree of quality about it (QJ10xx is just about the minimum). And you should have a point count in the 9-15 range.

Do not bid rubbish suits – the point of bidding is to contest the auction and to suggest leads to partner. He will not be best pleased to lead his K from a doubleton and find you with 5 cards to the 10.

So overcall an opening 1NT with 2♠ with a hand such as

♠ A Q J 7 5 3
♥ 9 4
♦ A 5 3
♣ 9 2

When you overcall in a suit you will normally be single suited – that is to say you will not have a second biddable suit.

Most regular partnerships play conventional overcalls however. These are used, normally, to show hands with two (or more) playable suits. The first of these is the **Unusual 2 No Trump bid** (this is played over an opening 1 of a major suit as well). If the bidding has been 1NT on your left, and 2NT comes from your partner, the 2NT bid cannot possibly be genuine. If partner had the points to make 2NT (20+) he would have doubled the 1NT bid – so his 2NT bid must be conventional. Typically, it shows a hand with at least 5 cards in each minor suit, with the intention of wresting the contract away from the opponents, often paving the way for a sacrifice bid in one of the minors. The bid of 2NT asks you to bid your best minor suit.

An example of a 2NT overcall would be

♠ 5
♥ 9 2
♦ K J 10 5 3
♣ A Q 5 3 2

Here you would expect to make 8 or 9 tricks if partner has a 3 or 4 card minor suit, and your bid of 2NT robs the opponents of the chance to find a probable major suit fit. Weaken the hand say by changing the ♣A to the ♣J, and the hand is still worthy of a 2NT overcall – you are planning to sacrifice in a minor suit if necessary.

Finally, there are conventional meanings to minor suit over calls to the 1NT opener. Of course, if you play such conventions you pay the price of losing the natural meaning of 2♣ and/or 2♦. One of the simplest of the conventions is the Astro convention.

The Astro Convention.

Overcalls of both 2♣ and 2♦ to 1NT now take on different meanings. Both show hands with 9-15 points, and have at least 9 cards in two suits – i.e. at least 5-4.

Astro 2♣ shows at least 9 cards between Hearts and a minor suit.

Astro 2♦ shows at least 9 cards between Spades and another suit which could be Hearts.

There is a strong likelihood that bidder has 5 cards in the major suit implied by his bid. Of course an overcall of 2♣ denies holding 4 Spades.

Typical examples of suitable hands are:

| | | |
|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| ♠ 9 5 | ♠ A Q 5 3 2 | ♠ A 10 5 3 2 |
| ♥ A Q 5 3 2 | ♥ 9 5 | ♥ A Q 5 3 |
| ♦ A 9 8 7 | ♦ J 9 8 7 | ♦ 6 |
| ♣ 8 5 2 | ♣ K 5 2 | ♣ K J 3 |
| Astro 2♣ | Astro 2♦ | Astro 2♦ |

The responses to Astro overcalls are mainly natural.

A bid of 2 of the promised major (2♥ in the first example, 2♠ in the other 2), is a sign off, knowing that a reasonable fit has been found.

A bid of 3 of the promised major, is encouraging, but not forcing.

A bid of the suit immediately above the Astro suit (i.e bid 2♦ in the first and 2♥ in the other cases) warns of a dislike (singleton/void) for the Astro bidder's major and a tolerance for the bid suit, but a weak hand.

The only truly conventional, and forcing, response to Astro is 2NT – a request for the Astro bidder to bid his second suit (3♦ in the first 2 cases and 3♥ in the last), and typically shows a hand with shape in the other suits (often 4441 with a singleton in Astro bidder's major). Often a strong hand since we have forced the Astro bidder to the three level.