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This Week in Bridge

(319) Responding to 1NT in Competition

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Level: 2

Robert S. Todd

robert@advinbridge.com

General

When responding to partner's 1NT opening bid, we have plenty of tools and agreements that we use to communicate with partner. But when the opponents interfere in our bidding, it takes away some of our bidding space. The higher the opponents bid, the less space we have available to communicate with partner. We need to work to modify those agreements and decide when we keep the same or a similar set of tools (conventions) and when we need to significantly change our methods to deal with this lack of bidding space. Let's take a look at dealing with the interference from the opponents.

Low-Level Interference

When the opponents make a bid that does not take away much of our bidding space, we do not need to substantially change our bidding system. With most of our bidding space remaining, we can still use Stayman and transfers (our "normal" methods) to communicate with partner.

The Opponents Double 1NT – Systems On

A double of our 1NT opening bid does not take away any of our bidding space (in fact, we have all the bids we used to have, plus a new call in redouble, XX). In this case we keep our "systems on". The way that we use this redouble will vary based on the meaning of the opponent's double.

- If the opponent's double is a conventional bid (like a DONT bid showing a 1-suited hand), then we use a redouble to show values, "card-showing" (about 8+ points), and suggest that the opponents have made a mistake in coming into our auction. Any subsequent double by Opener or Responder is now penalty oriented.
- If the opponent's double is penalty oriented (showing about a 1NT opening bid as well), then it does not make sense for us to have a "card-showing" double. Instead we use a redouble in this case as a "run-out". The redouble asks Opener to bid 2♣ so that Responder can place the contract in either 2♣ or 2♦.



Example 1

♠ 83

♥ 983

♦ 943

♣ JT432

1NT X XX* P

2♣ P P P

Here we do not want partner to have to play 1NTX, so we use a redouble to ask partner to bid 2♣, and we leave the contract there.

The Opponents Overcall 2♣ – Systems On

If the opponents interfere with a 2♣ bid, again we have almost all of our bidding space available to compete in the bidding. Thus, we leave our transfer system intact. The only bid that we lost was the ability to bid 2♣ as Stayman. We can now bid Stayman by doubling (the bid we gained from their overcall).

Interference of 2♦, 2♥, or 2♠ – Systems Off (Simple-sohl or Lebensohl)

When the opponents interfere at the 2-level (other than 2♣), they take away our bidding space, and we should give up Stayman and transfers and develop a new set of agreements that will allow us to effectively compete in the bidding.

The advantage of transfer bids is that they allow us to show multiple hand strengths starting with the same bid. When we transfer, we could have a minimum hand interested only in a partscore, an invitational hand, a game forcing hand, or even a hand interested in investigating slam. Consider these hands:

- ♠ xx ♥ QJxxx ♦ xxx ♣ xxx
- ♠ Ax ♥ QJxxx ♦ Jxx ♣ xxx
- ♠ Ax ♥ QJxxx ♦ Jxx ♣ Axx

With all three hands, we start with the same bid (2♦* as a transfer to ♥). With our second bid, we communicate to partner which of these hands we hold (with a pass, 2NT, or 3NT, respectively in these cases).

When the opponents interfere in the bidding, we need a new approach that still allows us to show our long suit in a variety of different ways – giving us options for how to show our variety of strengths. Our structure for doing so is called Simple-sohl (or Lebensohl, a more complicated version of this same concept).



Showing Different Strength Hands

When the opponents interfere in the bidding, we generally have three hand types that we want to describe to partner:

1. Competitive Hands – usually 6-8 pts with a long suit,
2. Invitational Hands,
3. Game Forcing Hands.

In an effort to find a new bidding approach that will allow us to describe all of these hand types over interference, we begin by adopting a few general principles:

- 2-level bids are natural, 5+card suit, and competitive (non-forcing) – #1 above.
- 3-level bids are natural, 5+card suit, and game forcing (jumps or non-jumps) – #3 above.
- Cuebid is Game Forcing and “Stayman-like” (often looking for 4-4 Major suit fit).

These agreements take care of many of the hands we might hold, but there are still some hands that we need to figure out how to handle:

- Invitational, balanced hands – *See the double below.*
- Competitive hands with a suit we cannot bid at the 2-level (our suit is lower-ranking than what the opponents bid).
- Invitational hands with a 5-card Major that we can show at the 2-level.

Using Double

The first thing that we recognize when we start to consider our options in competition is that we have a new call available to us – double. We use double at the 2-level as “card-showing.” That means we have a relatively balanced hand with invitational (or sometimes better) values and we have no other good bid available to us. When the opponents overcall at the 3-level (making a jump overcall), we use a double as a “negative double”, being our way to search for a Major suit fit while keeping the auction below 3NT.

Note: Double is our fallback plan. It shows a hand that “wants to take action” but doesn’t know what other action to take. This meaning for double will be a running theme and is the modern approach to the meaning of double.

Using 2NT: *Simple-sohl* Relay

Having agreed to this meaning of double (8+ pts and relatively balanced), then we no longer need a natural and invitational 2NT bid. This frees up a bid of 2NT to be used as a conventional bid (called *Lebensohl*). One way we will use 2NT is as a way to distinguish between forcing and non-forcing bids at the 3-level.



Here is how Simple-sohl works:

We define 2NT* to be a *relay* to 3♣*. That means that when Responder bids 2NT (in competition), the 1NT Opener must bid 3♣. This 2NT bid is completely artificial (has no meaning at this point) and it just says to partner “I’m going to bid something at the 3-level, please bid 3♣, then I’ll tell you what is going on.” This gives us two ways to make all our bids at the 3-level - we can bid them directly (game forcing), or we can go through the 2NT relay first (competitive).

Here we see how to use this 2NT relay to distinguish between a competitive hand and a game forcing hand.

Example 2

♠ AQ

♥ 983

♦ AQ873

♣ 982

1NT 2♥ 3♦ 5+card ♦ suit and GF values (10+ HCP)

Here we bid our long suit at the 3-level, natural and game forcing.

Example 3

♠ AQ

♥ 983

♦ QT873

♣ 982

1NT 2♥ 2NT* Pass

3♣* Pass 3♦ 5+c ♦ suit and competitive values (6-8 HCP)

Here we bid 2NT, letting partner know we want to compete in the bidding, and then bid 3♦ to play.

This 2NT “relay” may all seem a bit strange, but with a little practice it will seem much more natural. Just remember “Use 2NT to compete in the bidding and double with the invitational balanced hand” (the hand with which you used to bid 2NT).

Conclusion

When the opponents enter our auction after partner opens the bidding 1NT we need to have good agreements. If they take away little of our bidding space, we maintain our Stayman and Transfer structure. If they make a call that uses up more of our bidding space, then we change our approach. The important part of this competitive bidding change is to have ways to force the bidding and ways to simply compete. If you adopt a basic approach of Simple-sohl you have a decent tool. If you upgrade to a slightly more sophisticated structure, Lebensohl, then you have the ability to show values with and without a stopper. The opponents seem to be interfering more and more after your partner opens 1NT and that makes these agreements even more important.