



# Adventures in Bridge

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## *This Week in Bridge*

### **(326) Notrump Overcalls**

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Levels: 1, 3, 4

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#### **General**

When the opponents open the bidding with 1♣, 1♦, 1♥, or 1♠, simple overcalls of 1NT are generally natural. These overcalls vary slightly from NT opening bids because at least one of the opponents has already shown a specific suit. That means that in order to make a notrump overcall, in addition to having a balanced hand with the proper number of points, we also should have a stopper in the opponent's suit. Let's take a look at a variety of different notrump overcalls auctions and see exactly what each of these bids show.

#### **Direct Seat 1NT Overcall**

*Level 1*

When right-hand opponent (RHO) opens the bidding with 1♣, 1♦, 1♥, or 1♠, an immediate overcall of 1NT shows a hand that is approximately a 1NT opening bid with a stopper in the opponent's suit. Specifically, a 1NT overcall shows a balanced hand, stopper in their suit, and 15 to 18 points. The reason that a 1NT overcall shows a bit more than a 1NT opening bid is that one of the opponents has already announced they have an opening hand, more than we would normally expect when we have a 1NT opening bid. Partner is now less likely to have a good hand, so we need to be a bit more careful when overcalling 1NT, especially when vulnerable. We may end up playing in this contract with very few points from partner.

The requirement of a stopper in RHO's suit is to prevent the opponents from running their long suit. When RHO opens the bidding with 1♥ or 1♠, we know they have a 5+card suit to maybe run against us. This makes having a stopper in their suit an imperative. When the opponents open 1♦, they usually have a 4+card suit and we can occasionally get away with having a "shaky stopper" in their suit. When they open the bidding with 1♣ then they have not promised a long suit that they may run against us. Sometimes our best bid in these situations will be to overcall 1NT with a partial stopper.



*Example 1*

1♣     \_\_\_?  
♠ KQ8  
♥ Q92  
♦ AKQ2  
♣ J93

After a 1♣ opening bid by RHO, the best description of this balanced hand with 17 HCP is a simple overall of 1NT. Though ♣J93 is not a ♣ stopper, partner could have as little as ♣Qx or 3-4 small to help us not lose too many ♣ tricks.

A few other things to note about bidding NT after our RHO has opened the bidding. We do not worry about having stoppers in all the suits when we overcall 1NT. When it comes to promising stoppers, our focus is just on the opponent's suit. When we have balanced hands that are not in the proper range for overcalling 1NT then we need to know what to do. With a balanced hand with only 12-14 points that has length and strength in the opponent's suit, we simply pass because we are not strong enough to overcall 1NT. With 19+ points and a similar shape, we do not jump to 2NT (as that would be Unusual.) Instead, we "double and bid NT" to show a hand too strong to overcall 1NT.

### **Balancing Seat 1NT Overcall**

*Level 1, 4*

A 1NT overcall in the balancing seat is similar to other actions in the balancing seat, in that we add about 3 points to our hand and bid as if we were in the direct seat. Thus, a 1NT overcall in the balanced seat shows about 12-15 points (15-18 points after we add 3), a balanced hand, and a stopper in the opponent's suit. Some players push this down even more, to make the balancing seat 1NT overcall 11-14 (or 11-15 points). This balancing 1NT is a valuable tool, because otherwise we could have a serious bidding problem with some hands.

*Example 2*

1♥     P     P     \_\_\_?  
♠ A7  
♥ KJT7  
♦ 9853  
♣ AJ4

Here we simply overcall 1NT to show a balanced hand, 13 HCP, and a ♥ stopper.

A more sophisticated (and better) approach is to vary our balancing seat 1NT overcalls ranges a bit based on whether the opponents have opened a Major or minor. A common expert treatment is to play that a balancing 1NT overcall over a 1♥ or 1♠ opening (where they are known to hold a 5+card suit) shows 12-15 points, while an overcall over a 1♣ or 1♦ opening only shows 11-14 points. This allows us



more flexibility to stretch over minor suit openings and show a slightly stronger hand over Major suit openings.

In the passout seat, with a stronger balanced hand, we add 3 points and bid similarly as we would in the direct seat. With 15 to 18 actual points we double and bid NT, bidding as if our hand were 3 points stronger (18 to 21 points). A jump to 2NT in the balancing seat is not used as the “Unusual NT”, since a weak hand would pass the hand out if given the chance. Instead, a jump to 2NT in the balancing seat is used to show an even stronger balanced hand, 19 to 21 actual points.

### 1NT Overcall in the Sandwich Seat

#### *Level 1*

1NT overcalls in the sandwich seat, when LHO has opened the bidding, partner has passed, and RHO has responded are also natural. These bids generally show a good 15 to 18 points (sometimes even a bad 19 points) and usually show stoppers in both of the opponents’ suits.

With the modern style being to open the bidding lighter and Responder so rarely passing, even when they have very little, it is important to be able to show a strong hand in the sandwich seat. That is why the modern style is to use this sandwich 1NT bid as natural.

### 1NT Overcalls and Sandwich 1NT by a Passed Hand

#### *Level 3*

When we are a passed hand, it does not make sense for an overcall of 1NT to be natural, because we cannot have enough values for this to be the case. Instead these bids are used as “2-Suited Bids”. A direct seat 1NT overcall by a passed hand is a “baby unusual NT,” meaning that it shows the lowest unbid suits, but usually 4/4 or 5/4 in the suits, not shapely enough to jump to 2NT.

#### *Example 3*

P      P      P      1♠

\_\_\_?

♠ 865

♥ 73

♦ KQ83

♣ KQ93

Here we overcall 1NT, showing both minors, and less shape than a jump to 2NT. This allows partner to compete in the bidding with a decent hand and/or fit for one of our minor suits.



A passed hand overcall of 1NT in the sandwich seat also shows a 2-suiter. This shows the other two suits, and fewer values than a takeout double. Usually we will have 9 cards in the two unbid suits.

*Example 4*

P      1♣      P      1♠

\_\_\_?

♠ 93

♥ KQ87

♦ QJ854

♣ 64

Here we can make an overcall of 1NT, as a Sandwich 1NT by a passed hand. This shows a light takeout, usually with about 9-card in the unbid suits. With 8 HCP and 4c♥ and 5c♦, we have the perfect hand.

**Conclusion**

Overcalling NT after the opponents have opened the bidding is generally a natural bid. We usually treat these NT bids in a similar fashion to when the opponents have not bid. The times that these NT bids are quite different is when we are a passed hand. In these cases, NT bids tend to be more takeout or for the lowest two unbid suits. Add all these simple NT overcalls to your agreements with partner. This will allow both of you to get back into the bidding when the opponents open and you have a good balanced hand.