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This Week in Bridge

(81) When to Open 1NT Off-Shape

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Level: 2

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General

Opening 1NT is our favorite bid in all of bridge. Partner has excellent tools (Stayman and Transfers) and has a good picture of our general hand (hand type and bucket). We will usually get to the right (best) final contract. But we do not want to “stretch” to open 1NT too often or with just any hand. If we do open 1NT too often, partner will no longer know (trust) what to expect from us and 1NT will lose its effectiveness. Having said that, there will be times when we will need to open 1NT “off-shape.” The primary reason that we will make such “off-shape” bids is to avoid a difficult rebid problem or other bidding issues that might arise. We will examine these “problem opening hands” and discuss which problems are best solved by opening 1NT.

Semi-Balanced Hands

Many semi-balanced hands will be treated as balanced and opened with notrump to avoid rebid problems. Let’s consider these specific hands.

2-4-5/2

A semi-balanced hand with a 4-card ♥ suit is the most frequent off-shape 1NT opening. With 15-17 points and this shape we will have no rebid if the auction goes 1m - 1♠, because 2♥ would be a reverse. The solution to this problem is to open 1NT on most of these hands. It is only on hands with all their points in their long suits (i.e., two small doubletons) that we treat these hands as two-suited instead of balanced. (Two-suited hands can open 1-minor and rebid 2-minor with only 15 points. With 16-17 HCP, these two suited hands can open 1-minor and reverse into 2♥.) With such good suits, there will be upgrades for length points and no positional values – thus, no reason to want to bid Notrump.

2-2-4/5

With the same hand as above but with both minors (instead of a 4-card Major,) we have a small advantage. With this shape we have two options. We can open 1♦ and rebid 2♣ OR we can open 1NT. When we have both minors we want to focus on Notrump – we get to good places when we open 1NT. So if we have either Major stopped, we will generally open 1NT. It is only when we have two small doubletons in both Majors that we will open 1-minor. This will usually be an opening of 1♦ with a rebid of 2♣ (even with 2-2-4-5 shape.)



Note: With 17 HCP and all our points in the minors we can reverse if we are exactly 2-2-4-5 (open 1♣ and rebid 2♦.)

4-5-2-2

When we have both Majors, we are less excited about opening 1NT because showing partner both Major suits will be a better description of our hand. As with our other semi-balanced minor suit hands, we will open our suits when all of our points are concentrated our long suits:

- 4-5-2-2 with 16-17 HCP, we open 1♥ and reverse into 2♠ after the likely 1NT response.
- 4-5-2-2 with 15 HCP, we open 1♠ and rebid 2♣ after the likely 1NT response. (“Lie in a minor.”)

With points in our minors (in our short suits) we have a more difficult bidding problem. These hands are certainly not good enough to reverse, but now a 1NT opening becomes somewhat more appealing.

- Generally, with these hands we will still try to show our two-suited type hand by “lying in a minor” when we have a minimum hand: 1♥ - 1NT* - 2♣.
- With better hands (maximum) and good positional minor suit holdings (i.e., Qx or Kx), we will want to be the declarer. These hands are best described by opening 1NT.

4-2-5/2

Our final 5422 semi-balanced hand has a 5-card minor and a 4-card ♠ suit. This is the 4-5 hand we are mostly likely to be able to describe naturally – without having to reverse. If we open 1-minor, partner will frequently bid 1♥ (or 1♦ over a 1♣ opening) and then we will be able to rebid 1♠ without reversing. This 1♠ bid is natural and shows a two-suited hand (in the extended Walsh style of modern bidding) with up to 17 points.

Thus, with this shape we feel less pressure to open 1NT and only do so when driven by positional values – holdings that we want to protect in our doubletons (i.e., Qx or Kx.)

Short in ♠ (1-4-4-4 or 1-4-3/5) – “Almost Semi-Balanced Hands”

Further difficult hands in bridge are the ones that are short in ♠. These hands pose the most difficult rebid problems and thus require the most forethought. Though opening 1NT with a singleton is generally dangerous because partner may transfer to that suit, when our singleton is a King or Ace (or even a Queen) we can consider opening 1NT if nothing else looks good.

- With a small singleton ♠ and 16+ to 17 HCP, our points are all concentrated in our suits and our hand is generally good enough to reverse.
- With a small singleton ♠ and 15 to 16- HCP, then we either show this as a 1-suited hand or a two suited hand in the minors. If we have a good 5-card suit, we can open that suit and rebid it. If we have a weak 5-card minor, then we open 1♦ and rebid 2♣ - showing the hand as both minors. We can do this with a 1-4-4-4 hand or even with a 1-4-3/5 hand.



Example

7

AK85

AQ4

K9753

Yes, with this hand we open 1♦ and rebid 2♣. This is not a good bid – we are not happy about having to distort our hand in this way, but it is the best we can do in case partner responds 1♠.

- If our singleton is an honor, then this gives us fewer HCP in our long suits and thus makes our hand not good enough to reverse. In this case, our only options are 1NT or bidding both minors. Though it may seem wrong, experience has shown that opening 1NT on these sorts of hands is winning bridge.

6322

With semi-balanced hands that have a 6-card minor, we have the option of opening 1-minor and rebidding our minor or opening Notrump. It will be important on these sorts of hands to re-evaluate, upgrade for length, and take into account positional values.

- With 14 HCP, a good 6-card minor, and a positional value in one of the Majors it is best to treat the hand as a balanced hand. Opening 1NT is an excellent description of our hand.

Example

Q5

K4

AKQ872

954

14 HCP plus two or three length points makes for a hand that evaluates to a 1NT opener.

- Another time we may want to vary our suit vs. Notrump thinking is based on what partner bids.

Example

A5

K8

AKJT63

J94

We have 16 HCP and 2+ length points. We open 1♦ and if partner responds 1♥ (our Kx) then we are in no rush to bid Notrump and become the declarer in 3NT, so we are happy to show our 15-17 points with a 6-card ♦ suit by rebidding 3♦. But, if partner responds 1♠ to our 1♦ opening bid then we have a positional value in ♥ (Kx) to protect and thus it is best to rebid 2NT, showing a balanced 18-19 total points, instead of showing our long ♦ suit.



Conclusion

Auctions that begin with 1NT lead to good bidding and relatively easy auctions (e.g., 1NT – 3NT, the best auction in all of bridge.) And when we are faced with a difficult bidding challenge (finding a rebid seems difficult) it is often best to make a small lie early in the auction by opening 1NT and thus save ourselves the hassle of dealing with all the complexities that can arise later in the auction if we start with a different opening bid. Keep an eye out for when this style of bidding can be useful. Do it sparingly, but do not forget that this practical solution of opening 1NT off-shape is available to you.