

Introduction to The Weak 1NT Opener – Part 3 of 3

This article is the third of three introducing the weak 1NT opening bid (12-14 HCP). In the first article, I discussed uncontested auctions when there was a weak 1NT opening bid. In the second article, I discussed how to bid if you play the weak 1NT opener and you hold a strong NT. In this article, I will discuss methods for bidding when the opponents interfere over a weak 1NT opening bid.

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Bidding When the Opponents Double

In this section, I will discuss a method I invented for competing when the opponents double the 1NT bid. The method applies whether the double is made directly (by responder's right hand opponent) or in balancing seat (by responder's left hand opponent after 2 passes)..

It is based on the DONT convention played by many pairs when competing over 1NT opening bids. I have therefore named this approach "DONT Runouts". It lets you to find the best place to play when the opponents have doubled your partner's weak 1NT opening bid.

The method is very flexible and allows for the following:

- If responder has a long suit (5 or more), you can play at the 2 level in that suit.
- If responder has 2 suits (as little as 4-4), you can play in your best fit at the 2 level.
- You can play in 1N doubled if responder has a sufficiently strong hand.

The system works as follows. Partner opens 1N and RHO doubles, or partner opens 1N, LHO doubles after 2 passes, and RHO passes. As responder you have the following choices:

- You pass if you want to play 1N doubled (typically a balanced hand with at least 8 HCP)
- With a single suited hand (5 card suit or longer), you redouble. Partner is forced to bid 2C, and you bid your suit (or pass if your suit is clubs). With spades, you have the option of bidding 2S directly, which jams the opponents.
- With two suits (and you may have as little as 4-4), you bid the lower ranking suit. Partner passes with 3 card support, and bids the next higher suit with a doubleton. Since partner cannot open 1N with 2 doubletons, you are guaranteed to play in a 4-3 fit at worst. For example, with diamonds and spades, you would bid 2 diamonds. If partner has a doubleton diamond, he bids 2H. You then correct to 2 spades.

Note that with 5-4 distribution I just redouble, considering that a single suited hand. A 5-2 fit often plays as well or sometimes better than a 4-4 fit. And if partner happens to have 2 card support for your 5-card suit and 3-card support for your 4-card suit, the 5-2 fit is definitely preferable to a 4-3 fit. So I only show a 2 suited hand with 4-4 or 5-5 hands.

I recommend you play this system even if RHO's double is not penalty (for example, showing a single suited hand). It is simpler and more consistent, and allows you to compete effectively.

Here are some examples (assume partner has opened 1N and RHO has doubled):

♠xx
♥xx
♦Kxxx
♣xxxxx

I recommend you redouble, showing a single suited hand. With a very weak hand, you are better off playing in the weak hand's long suit.

♠xx
♥xx
♦KQxx
♣xxxxx

I recommend 2C (showing clubs and another suit). Even though you have a 5 card club suit, it is weak and your diamonds are strong.

♠Kx
♥Jx
♦KQxx
♣xxxxx

You should consider passing with this hand, With 9 points, you are willing to play 1N doubled.

♠Axxx
♥Qxxx
♦xx
♣xxx

Bid 2H, showing hearts and spades. As mentioned above, you can be 4-4 and show 2 suits.

♠KQJxxx
♥Axx
♦xxx
♣x

Bid 4H (transfer) if you play Texas, or 4S if you don't. This is the same as what you would have done with no double. There is no point in letting the opponents find out if they can compete.

♠KQJxx
♥Axx
♦Qxx
♣xx

Bid 3S (natural and forcing). This gives partner a choice of games. At first blush, you may feel that not being able to transfer is a problem, However, the advantage of a transfer over a strong NT (hiding the strong hand) does not really apply over a weak NT, since both hands are the same strength.

Bidding When The Opponents Overcall

With the strong NT, I recommend when the opponents overcall that you play systems on and "stolen bid doubles". This means that all bids by responder retain the same meaning as if there had been no overcall, and a double means "the opponent made the bid I wanted to make (he 'stole' my bid)". This is a very simple and effective approach.

However, with the weak NT, it is more likely the points are evenly divided between the two sides, and you need more flexibility in competing for part scores. Therefore, I recommend you play the Lebensohl convention if you play weak 1N openers. It is somewhat more complicated than systems on, but it is a lot more flexible. In this article I will give a summary of Lebensohl. For more detailed information about Lebensohl I suggest you look at my online tutorial at:

www.hondobridge.com/hondoviewer/hondoviewer.php?sf=lebensohl

Before I get into the specifics, let me explain the general guidelines behind Lebensohl:

- Bids at the 2 level are natural and to play.
- Bids at the 3 level are natural and forcing to game.
- A bid of 2N is completely artificial and forces opener to bid 3C. It is used for several purposes. The most common is to play a partial at the 3 level when the opponent has bid a suit higher than the suit in which responder wants to compete. Another less common usage is to indicate responder has a stopper in the suit bid by the opponents. If responder forces to game after bidding 2N (as described below), he is showing a stopper. If responder forces to game without bidding 2N, he is denying a stopper. Lebensohl adherents call this "Slow Action Shows Stopper" (SASS).

In the next few paragraphs, I will describe how responder handles various hand types.

Responder wishes to play a partial in a 5+ card suit

If the suit is higher than the suit bid by the opponents (for example, responder has spades and hearts were overcalled), responder can simply bid that suit at the 2 level. As indicated above, 2 level bids by responder are natural and to play.

If the suit is lower than the suit bid by the opponents (for example, responder has diamonds and hearts were overcalled), responder bids 2N, a completely artificial bid. Opener must bid 3C. Responder can pass if he wishes to compete in clubs. Otherwise, responder can bid his suit (diamonds in the example) and opener is required to pass. Note that this treatment only applies if responder's suit is lower than the overcalled suit. In the above example, if responder bid 3S over opener's forced 3C bid, that has a whole different meaning, as explained below (if responder wanted to play in a spade partial, he would simply bid 2S).

Responder has a 5 card suit and game forcing values

Responder simply bids the suit at the 3 level. For example, assume hearts were overcalled. Responder can bid 3C, 3D, and 3S, all of which are natural and show game forcing values.

Normally it is undefined as to whether or not responder has a stopper in the overcalled suit. However, I recommend you play the following. Assume my suit is higher than the overcalled suit (for example I have spades and hearts were overcalled). In that case, if I bid 3S directly I am saying I have game forcing values but I do not have a heart stopper. If I bid 2N first, and then 3S I am saying I have a game forcing hand with a heart stopper.

Responder has a 4 card major and game forcing values

A cue bid by responder is Stayman, indicating at least one 4 card major and game forcing values (the cue bid is at the 3 level). However, there are 2 different Stayman sequences. A direct cue bid indicates that responder does not have a stopper in the overcalled suit. A bid of 2N followed by a cue bid indicates that responder does have a stopper (SASS).

Note that if the overcalled suit is clubs, the 2 different Stayman sequence approach does not work. That is because opener bids 3C over 2N, so obviously responder is no longer able to cue bid 3C. So with clubs overcalled, 3C is still Stayman, but whether or not responder has a stopper is undefined.

There is a treatment you can play to address this problem. As will be explained below, double is normally either penalty or competitive. However, over 2C you can choose to play double as Stayman. If you play that, then 3C is also Stayman and shows game forcing values but no club stopper. Double does not promise a club stopper. With no 4-card major, partner should bid 2D without a club stopper and 2N with a club stopper.

Responder Wishes to Raise to 3N

The only issue to consider is whether or not responder has a stopper in the overcalled suit. With a stopper, responder bids 2N, and bids 3N over opener's forced 3C bid (SASS). With no stopper, responder jumps directly to 3N; if opener does not have a stopper, he bids his lowest 4 or 5 card suit.

Responder has a 5 card suit and invitational values Responder must make a unilateral decision. He can either bid 3 of the suit and force to game, or bid 2N to play a 3 level partial.

Responder has no 5 card suit but would like to compete for a partial

In traditional Lebensohl, double is for penalties. However, I recommend that you play a double by responder as “competitive”, showing a balanced hand willing to compete (approximately 8-10 HCP). In general, opener should bid his lowest 4+ card suit in response to the double. On occasion, opener may pass with good defense and length (usually 4+) in the overcalled suit.

Some may argue that this approach gives up the ability for responder to punish the opponents for a bad overcall. However, in my experience, responder holds a balanced competitive hand much more frequently than a penalty double, so this approach works out better in the long run.

There are a couple of variations you can play. One is what I discussed above, where a double of 2C is Stayman (and a direct 3C cue bid is Stayman with no stopper but game forcing values). Another is what I call the “2 way double” which I find very effective in match points. If we are not vulnerable the double is competitive. If we are vulnerable the double is penalty. Using this approach I often get the opponents for -200 (down 1 doubled vulnerable) which is usually a top board in match points.

Here are some examples (assume partner opens 1NT and RHO overcalls 2H):

♠KQJxx
♥xxx
♦Qxx
♣xA

Bid 3S showing 5 spades and game forcing values with no heart stopper.

♠KQJxx
♥Axx
♦Qxx
♣xx

Bid 2N. Over partner's forced 3C response bid 3S to show that you have spades, game forcing values, and a heart stopper.

♠KQJxx
♥xxx
♦xxx
♣xx

Bid 2S, to play. Partner must pass.

♠xx
♥xxx
♦Qxx
♣KQJxx

Bid 2N, and pass partner's forced 3C response.

♠xx
♥xxx
♦KQJxx
♣Qxx

Bid 2N. Over partner's forced 3C, bid 3D, indicating that you wish to play in 3D. Partner must pass.

♠Ax
♥xx

♦KQJxx
♣Axx

Bid 3D, showing game forcing values. You are neither promising nor denying a heart stopper. If partner has a heart stopper he can bid 3NT. If he does not have a heart stopper, he bids 3H. With this hand, you would bid 4D over 3H, denying a stopper. If you had a heart stopper, you would bid 3N over 3H.

♠KQJxx
♥Axx
♦xxx
♣xx

You have to make a decision as to whether or not to force to game. Playing match points I would just bid 2S to play. Playing IMPs I would treat this as a game forcing hand and bid 2N followed by 3S to show a game forcing hand with spades and a heart stopper.

♠KQJx
♥xx
♦Qxxx
♣Axx

Bid 3H. This is Stayman, showing game going values, 4 spades, and no heart stopper.

♠KQJx
♥Axx
♦Qxxx
♣xx

Bid 2N. Over partner's forced 3C bid, bid 3H. This is Stayman, showing game going values, 4 spades, and a heart stopper.

♠Axx
♥xx
♦Qxx
♣KQJxx

Bid 3N. This is a natural NT raise, but denies a heart stopper.

♠xx
♥Axx
♦Qxx
♣KQJxx

Bid 2N. Over partner's forced 3C, but 3N. This is a natural NT raise, and shows a heart stopper.

Competing Over the Weak NT

In this section, I will briefly discuss some guidelines for competing when the opponents open a weak 1N.

It is certainly possible to play one of the standard conventions, either DONT or Cappelletti. Cappelletti has the advantage of allowing you to make a penalty double. DONT has the advantage of allowing you to more effectively compete at the 2 level; some of the Cappelletti bids (2H, 2S, and 2C when your suit is clubs) force you to the 3 level. Of the two, I have a strong preference for DONT, as it allows you to easily describe more hand types. Giving up the penalty double is not costly as you rarely will get to defend 1N doubled. I am not a big fan of Cappelletti and feel strongly that it is not a very effective way to compete over 1NT

openers (either weak or strong).

But my feeling is that the best approach is to play simple natural overcalls. I overcall with the same values for a 2-level overcall as I would had the opponents opened 1 of a suit. I use a double to show an equivalent balanced hand. It is neither strictly takeout nor penalty. Partner can pass with 8 or more points, particularly with a balanced hand, but does need to worry about whether we would do better bidding game or setting them doubled. With an unbalanced or weak hand, partner should bid their suit. With a strong hand, when partner feels we should be in game rather than penalizing the opponents, he jumps to the 3-level.

As a slight modification to the above, you can play "transfer overcalls". These are similar to natural overcalls except your overcalls are a transfer. For example, if you bid 2D over 1NT, you are saying you have hearts. Partner can either simply accept the transfer (by bidding 2H) or make whatever bid he would have made over a 2H overcall (such as raising to 3H or 4H or bidding a new suit as a forcing bid). I like this approach slightly better than simple overcalls because it gives you a little more flexibility. With a stronger hand, you can make another bid when partner accepts the transfer, including either showing a 2nd suit or raising partner to the 3-level to show a game invitational hand.