

Constructive Auctions After a 1NT Opening Bid

This is the second tutorial of a 5 lesson series on the Fundamentals of Constructive Bidding. Constructive bidding is defined as auctions with no interference by the opponents.

The purpose of these lessons is for students to learn the concepts behind constructive bidding. I have found that, although many students understand the (often complicated) rules about bidding, they do not understand the reasoning behind these rules. By learning the fundamentals rather than just the rules, a student will be able to more intuitively and comfortably bid, without being confused by the many (sometimes conflicting) rules that may or may not apply. Note that these lessons will not teach any particular system. It will simply teach the fundamentals upon which most bidding systems are built. A student should therefore be able to more comfortably play any of the popular systems.

The series consists of 5 lessons;

- Introduction to Constructive Bidding
- No Trump Auctions (this lesson)
- Major Suit Auctions Part 1
- Major Suit Auctions Part 2
- Minor Suit Auctions

Constructive auctions after a 1NT opener are very straightforward. These auctions very much illustrate the "responder is captain" principle which we discussed in our last lesson.

As opener, you should open 1NT if at all possible. This includes opening 1NT without stoppers in some suits, and with a 5 card major. 1NT is a very descriptive bid -- it shows 15-17 high card points and only 3 possible hand shapes (4-4-3-2, 5-3-3-2, and 4-3-3-3).

Responder Hand Categories

In all of these lessons, I will assume the reader uses basic hand evaluation techniques. That is, he or she uses the standard 4-3-2-1 method for counting HCP and makes small adjustments for either shortness or length. I now teach, and prefer, the more accurate Bergen methodology, but, because it is not familiar to everyone, I will not use it in these lessons.

As responder, hands fall into one of 3 categories -- minimum, medium, or maximum. The point ranges are slightly different than the ranges we discussed last lesson:

- Minimum - no more than 7 points; game is not possible
- Medium - 8-9 points; game is possible if opener has a maximum NT (defined below)
- Maximum - 10 or more points; you must bid game

When responder has a medium hand, opener is invited to bid game with a maximum NT. A hand is considered a maximum NT if it meets any of the following criteria:

- Any hand with 17 HCP
- Any hand with 16 HCP and a fit with responder's major suit
- Any hand with 16 HCP and a 5 card suit
- Any hand with 16 HCP, not 4-3-3-3 distribution, and at least 2 10s or 9s.

Now that you understand how to determine whether or not to bid game, the rest of the lesson will focus on how to determine whether the best strain is NT, hearts, or spades.

Determining If You Should Explore for a Major Suit Fit

As responder, it is simple to determine if you should explore for a major suit contract. If you do not hold at least 4 cards in either major, you should not bother to look for a major suit fit. On the few occasions when opener has a 5 card major, you may miss a 5-3 fit, but most of the time NT will play just as well anyway.

If you do not have 4 or more cards in either major suit, your choices as responder are simple.

- With a minimum hand, pass.
- With a medium hand, bid 2NT. Partner should bid 3NT with a maximum NT (described above).
- With a maximum hand, bid 3NT.

If, as responder, you have 4 or more cards in a major suit, you should use either the Stayman or Jacoby transfer conventions as described in the next sections.

The Stayman Convention

The Stayman Convention is used to find a 4-4 major suit fit in NT auctions.

You should only use Stayman if you have a medium or maximum hand. Do not bid Stayman if you have a minimum hand. (The *Garbage Stayman Convention* is described in the Advanced Topics at the end of this tutorial. If you decide to play garbage Stayman, then you can bid Stayman when you are 4-4 in the majors with a minimum response.)

You should bid Stayman if you have a medium or maximum response and your hand meets any of the following criteria:

- You have one 4 card major
- You have two 4 card majors
- You have one 4 card major and one 5 card major

The Stayman convention is initiated when the responder bids 2♣. This is a completely artificial bid that says nothing about clubs. It is merely asking the NT opener if he has a 4 (or 5) card major.

Opener makes one of the following responses:

- 2♦ - opener has no 4 card major
- 2♥ - opener has 4 (or occasionally 5) hearts (and possibly 4 spades)
- 2♠ - opener has 4 (or occasionally 5) spades but not 4 hearts

With a medium hand, responder should invite game as follows:

1. If opener has bid one of your 4 card majors, raise to 3 (e.g., 1NT-2♣-2♥-3♥), inviting opener to bid 4 with 16 or 17 points.
2. If opener does not bid one of your 4 card majors, bid 2NT. This is also an invitational sequence. Opener has the following options:
 - a) Usually opener will pass with a minimum NT opener and bid 3NT with a maximum opener (as defined above).
 - b) If the auction proceeds 1NT-2♣-2♥-2NT, responder must have 4 spades. Initiating Stayman guarantees at least one 4 card major, and since responder did not raise hearts, responder must have 4 spades. Therefore if opener has 4 spades as well as 4 hearts, opener then has the following options:
 - ✓ Opener should correct to 3♠ with 15 points. Opener does not have enough to accept responder's game invitation.
 - ✓ Opener should accept responder's game invitation with 16 or 17 points and bid 4♠.

3. If opener bids 2♦ and responder has a 5 card major, responder should bid it (e.g., 1NT-2♣-2♦-2♥). Opener then has the following options:
 - a) With 15 points, opener does not have enough to accept responder's invitation and should pass. If opener has 3 card support to an honor, he can raise to 3, giving responder one last chance to bid a thin game.
 - b) With 16 points and 2 card support, opener will often pass. However, if opener has a 16 point maximum NT bid (as described above), he can bid 3NT.
 - c) With 17 points and 2 card support, opener should accept responder's invitation and bid 3NT.
 - d) With 17 points and 3 card support, opener should bid game in the major.

With a maximum hand, responder should force to game as follows:

1. If opener has bid one of your 4 card majors, raise to 4 (e.g. 1NT-2♣-2♥-4♥).
2. If opener does not bid one of your 4 card major, bid 3NT. Normally opener will pass. However, if the auction proceeds 1NT-2♣-2♥-3NT, responder must have 4 spades, using the same reasoning as above. Therefore, when opener has 4 spades as well as 4 hearts, he should correct 3N to 4♠.
3. If opener bids 2♦ and responder has a 5 card major, responder should bid 3 of that suit (e.g. 1NT-2♣-2♦-3♥). Opener should bid 3NT with 2 card support, and 4 of the major with 3 card support.

The Jacoby Transfer Convention

Jacoby Transfers were devised to allow the 1NT opener to play the hand. This is often advantageous, because it is more likely that the defense will give away a trick on opening lead if the strong hand (the 1NT opener) plays the last card at trick 1. In fact, when the strong hand is concealed, you may take more than one additional trick, just because the defense has to guess more.

As responder, you should use Jacoby transfers under the following circumstances:

- If you have a six card or longer major (even with 4 cards in the other major), even if you have a minimum hand.
- If you have a 5 card major and a minimum hand (even if you also have a 4 card major).
- If you have a medium or maximum hand, a five card major and not precisely 4 cards in the other major (as described above, you should use Stayman with a non-minimum and 5-4 in the majors). Note with 5-5 in the majors, you should use Jacoby.

The transfers work as follows:

- With 5 hearts, responder bids 2♦ (artificial); opener is required to bid 2♥ (you have "transferred" the heart contract to opener).
- With 5 spades, responder bids 2♥ (artificial); opener is required to bid 2♠ (you have "transferred" the spade contract to opener).

Here is a general set of guidelines for responder:

- With a minimum hand, pass.
- With a medium hand, invite game (2NT with a 5 card suit, 3 of major with a 6 card suit).
- With a maximum hand, bid game (3NT with a 5 card suit, 4 of major with a 6 card suit).

For opener, if responder has bid over the transfer:

- With a minimum, pass with 2 card support, correct to transfer suit with 3 card support, bid game with 4 card support.
- With a maximum, make sure you bid game (either 3NT with 2 card support or 4 of the major with 3+ card support).

I have more details in the *Advanced Topics* section at the end of the tutorial, but it is imperative you understand the principles above before tackling the Advanced Topics.

Quiz

As responder, your partner has opened 1NT. For each of the following hands:

- a) Determine the hand type (minimum, medium, maximum)
- b) Determine your next bid, and what you will do over opener's possible responses.

1. ♠ Kxxx
♥ Kxxx
♦ Jxx
♣ xx

Answers:

- a) Minimum
- b) Pass

2. ♠ Kxxx
♥ Kxxxx
♦ xx
♣ xx

Answers:

- a) Minimum
- b) Bid 2♦ (transfer), pass the 2♥ response

3. ♠ Kxxx
♥ Kxxx
♦ Qxx
♣ xx

Answers:

- a) Medium
- b) Bid 2♣ (Stayman)
Over 2♦, bid 2NT; partner should bid 3NT with a maximum
Over 2♥/2♠, bid 3♥/3♠; partner should raise to game with a maximum

4. ♠ Qxx
♥ Kxxxx
♦ Kxx
♣ xx

Answers:

- a) Medium
- b) Bid 2♦ (transfer); over partner's 2♥ bid 2NT
With 2 hearts and a minimum, partner should pass
With 2 hearts and a maximum, partner should bid 3NT
With 3+ hearts and a minimum, partner should bid 3♥ (you should consider bidding 4♥)
With 3+ hearts and a maximum, partner should bid 4♥

5. ♠ KQxx
♥ Kxxxx
♦ xx
♣ xx

Answers:

- a) Medium
b) Bid 2♣ (Stayman)
Over 2♦, bid 2♥ (showing a medium hand with 5 hearts and 4 spades)
Over 2♥, bid 3♥ (or 4♥ if you feel lucky)
Over 2♠, bid 3♠

6. ♠ Kxx
♥ Kxx
♦ Qxxxx
♣ xx

Answers:

- a) Medium
b) Bid 2NT; partner should bid 3 with a maximum

7. ♠ Qxxxx
♥ Qxxxx
♦ xx
♣ x

- a) Minimum
b) Bid 2♦ (transfer) or 2♥ (transfer), your choice; pass partner's response

8. ♠ Kxxx
♥ Qxx
♦ KQxxx
♣ x

Answers:

- a) Maximum
b) Bid 2♣ (Stayman)
Over 2♦, bid 3NT
Over 2♥, bid 3NT (if partner has 4 hearts and 4 spades, he should bid 4♠)
Over 2♠, bid 4♠

9. ♠ x
♥ Qxx
♦ KQxxx
♣ Kxxx

Answers:

- a) Maximum
b) Bid 3NT

10. ♠ x
♥ KQxxx
♦ Qxx
♣ Kxxx

Answers:

- a) Maximum
- b) Bid 2♦ (transfer)
Over 2♥, bid 3NT; partner should bid 4♥ with 3+ hearts

11. ♠ Kxxxx
♥ KQxxx
♦ xx
♣ x

Answers:

- a) Consider this a maximum, since partner must have a fit for one of your majors
- b) Bid 2♥ (transfer)
Over 2♠ response, bid 4♥ (showing 5 hearts and 5 spades)
Partner should pass 4♥ with better hearts, bid 4♠ with better spades

Advanced Topics

For the interested reader, I developed a set of more advanced topics:

- More Details on Jacoby Transfers
- Garbage Stayman
- 4 Suit Jacoby Transfers
- Weak NT Opening Bids

These are optional. You may find them confusing. If so, just skip over them. They are not essential to your understanding of bidding over 1NT openers.

More Details On Jacoby Transfers

This section contains more details about Jacoby Transfers. It simply gives examples of how to apply the principles I already described. I will repeat those principles here as a convenience to the reader.

Here is a general set of guidelines for responder:

- With a minimum hand, pass.
- With a medium hand, invite game (2NT with a 5 card suit, 3 of major with a 6 card suit).
- With a maximum hand, bid game (3NT with a 5 card suit, 4 of major with a 6 card suit).

For opener, if responder has bid over the transfer:

- With a minimum, pass with 2 card support, correct to transfer suit with 3 card support, bid game with 4 card support.
- With a maximum, make sure you bid game (either 3NT with 2 card support or 4 of the major with 3+ card support).

I suggest you do not try to memorize every sequence. If you just use common sense (which is encapsulated in the principles above), you can figure out what to do.

Once the opener has accepted the transfer, responder has the following options:

With a minimum hand, responder should pass. If responder has a weak hand, it is almost always better to play in responder's long suit (even with a 5-2 fit).

With a medium hand, responder should do the following:

1. With a 5 card suit, bid 2NT. Opener then has the following options:
 - a) With 2 card support, opener should pass with a minimum NT and bid 3NT with a maximum NT (as described above).
 - b) With 3 card support, opener should bid 3 of the major with 15 points, and 4 of the major with 16 or 17 points.
 - c) With 4 card support, opener should bid 4 of the major (even with 15 points).
2. With a six card suit, bid 3 of the suit. Opener then has the following options:
 - a) With 2 card support, opener should pass with a minimum NT and bid 3NT with a maximum NT (as described above).
 - b) With 3 or 4 card support, opener should bid 4 of the suit.

With a maximum hand, responder should do the following:

1. With a 5 card suit, bid 3NT. With 3 card support, opener should bid 4 of the suit.
2. With a 6 card suit, bid 4 of the suit.

With 5-5 or better in the majors, responder should bid 2♥ (transfer to 2♠). After the forced 2♠ response:

1. Responder should pass with a minimum.
2. Responder should bid 3♥ with a medium hand. This is an invitational sequence. Opener then has the following options:
 - a) With 15 points, opener should pass with 3 hearts, bid 3♠ with 3 spades. Opener should bid 4 with 4 card support.
 - b) With 16-17 points, opener should bid 4 in whichever suit he has better support.
3. Responder should bid 4♥ with a maximum; opener should correct to 4♠ with better spades than hearts.

Let me also discuss "Texas Transfers", which is a popular but unnecessary convention. The idea behind Texas Transfers is that, if responder has a six card suit and a maximum hand, he knows that he wants to play game in his six card suit. So, playing Texas Transfers, responder can bid 4♦ as a transfer to 4♥ and 4♥ as a transfer to 4♠. If you care to play them, there is nothing wrong with doing that, assuming your partner does not forget the convention. However, unless you differentiate between the sequence 1N-2♦-2♥-4♥ and 1N-4♦-4♥ (and the same thing for spade transfers), there is no added value to playing Texas, as both auctions accomplish exactly the same thing.

4 Suit Jacoby

It turns out that Jacoby Transfers have enabled experts to develop many sophisticated auction treatments. For example, the auctions 1NT-4♠, 1NT-2♥-2♠-4♠, and 1NT-3♠-4♠ accomplish pretty much the same thing. However, for some experts, the first auction is a closeout (actually, experts use "Texas" transfers, 1NT-4♥-4♠), the second auction is a mild slam try, and the third auction is a slam force.

One variant of Jacoby that I use is 4 suit Jacoby. A 2♠ bid by responder is a transfer to clubs, and a 2NT bid is a transfer to diamonds (to make a 2NT invitational bid, we bid Stayman followed by 2NT (e.g., 1NT-2♣-2♠-2NT does not necessarily promise hearts).

Since there are two bids between the transfer bid and the transfer suit, opener now has 2 choices. With good support (3 to an honor), opener "accepts" the transfer by not bidding the suit (1NT-2♠-2N or 1NT-2NT-3♣). With less than good support, opener "rejects" the transfer by bidding the transfer suit (1NT-2♠-3♣ or 1NT-2NT-3♦). This is somewhat counter-intuitive, as one would think the more natural way would be for opener to bid the suit to "accept" the transfer. However, the reason for doing it this way is that it is more likely that opener will end up as declarer.

This convention can be used for 2 purposes:

1. To allow responder to bid 3NT with a 6-8 point hand and a six card minor suit, if opener accepts the transfer. Otherwise, the contract will be 3 of the minor.
2. To play in 3 of a minor with 5 or fewer points and a six card minor.

I do not recommend 4-suit transfers for less experienced players. First of all, it is easy to forget that 1N-2N is a diamond transfer. And secondly, it is easy to forget that now Stayman does not guarantee a 4-card major.

An alternative minor suit transfer method that some people use is 2♠ is a transfer to either clubs or diamonds. Over 2♠, opener is forced to bid 3♣. Responder then passes or corrects to 3♦. I am neutral about playing this treatment. It rarely comes up, so I see no real advantage in playing it.

Garbage Stayman

In general, it is usually easier to play in a suit than NT. This is particularly true when responder has a weak hand. Garbage Stayman was invented to allow the contract to be played in a suit at the 2 level when responder has a very weak hand (usually 4 or fewer points).

There are 2 variations:

- Classic Garbage Stayman
- Major Suit Garbage Stayman

Classic Garbage Stayman works as follows. Responder has a weak hand with at least at least 4 diamonds and at least 3 cards in each major. Over 1N, responder bids 2♣. No matter what opener bids, responder passes. Therefore, the final contract will be either 2♦, 2♥, or 2♠.

Major Suit Garbage Stayman works as follows. Responder has a weak hand with at least 4-4 in the majors. Over 1N, responder bids 2♣. If opener bids 2♥ or 2♠, responder has an easy pass, and is playing in a 4-4 fit. If opener bids 2♦, then responder bids 2♥. This tells opener that responder wants to play in either 2♥ or 2♠. Opener passes with better hearts, and corrects to 2♠ with better spades. The final contract is often a 7 card major suit fit (since the NT opener cannot have a doubleton in both hearts and spades), but this is usually better than playing 1N with a weak dummy.

You can play both Classic and Major Suit Garbage Stayman simultaneously.

Weak NT

I like NT openings so much that I play 12-14 point 1NT openers, which means that I open many more hands 1NT than most people. I'm not sure why this treatment has not caught on more (most bridge players feel the strong NT has been ordained from on high!) because I think it has many advantages.

Before I get into the advantages, let me explain how I show a strong NT. After opening a minor suit, I simply bid NT as my next bid (e.g. 1♦-1♠-1NT).

The major advantage is that weak NTs lead to a more natural bidding style. For strong NT bidders, opening one of a minor can describe many different hand types, from a long suit to a minimum hand with NT distribution. With a weak NT, when I open 1 of a minor, I usually have a 5 card suit (with a 4 card suit I would open 1NT). Also, the weak NT has pre-emptive value; responder knows a lot about opener's hand and where we should play the contract, but the opponents are somewhat in the dark, having to bid at the 2 level in order to get into the auction.

Clearly the point values for responder's hands change accordingly:

- Minimum - no more than 9 points; game is not possible
- Medium - 10-11 points; game is possible if opener has a maximum NT
- Maximum - 12 or more points; you must bid game

Other than that, the auctions are pretty much identical to strong NT auctions.

I am not suggesting you play weak no trumps (in fact, quite the contrary, because it will be difficult for you to find any partners who play it), but hopefully it will help you appreciate how nice it is when partner opens 1NT.