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This note reviews the basics of the 1NT opener. While you may know all this, it forms the basis for our NT structure, and there are some less obvious aspects that bear review.

In Std American and 2/1, 1NT is opened with 15-17 HCP and a relatively balanced hand. As far as the ACBL is concerned, the only rules are that if the hand contains a singleton, it must be the A, K, or Q, and a hand with a singleton may not also contain a doubleton (no 6-4-2-1 shapes). However, just because it is legal to open with 1NT doesn't necessarily make it the best choice.

1NT and 2NT are unique as opening bids in that they almost precisely describe the strength of your hand (within a three-point range). This allows partner to immediately assess the likely combined assets of the hands – the only question may be a fit for a suit contract. Most pairs have a variety of tools (transfers, Stayman, etc) to explore possible contracts after a 1NT opener. NT auctions are “well-defined” in this sense, and as long as the opponents behave themselves you usually get to the right contract.

A 1NT opening bid is also slightly preemptive – to interfere in the auction the opponents will have to bid at the two level. For example, after a 1 club opener, with S-AQxxx H-xxx D-Kxx C-xx a 1 spade overcall is easy, but after a 1NT opener, two spades would be very risky.

On the old Goren days we were taught that to open 1NT you had to have 16-18 and a stopper in each suit, and opening 1NT with a doubleton was considered dubious. Experience has shown that this was far too restrictive. Modern practice is to open almost any relatively balanced hand with 15-17 with 1NT, even if the hand has a worthless doubleton. We've all had the fun of opening 1NT with something like S-AQx H-Kxxx D-AKJx C-xx, hearing partner raise to 3NT, and having the opponents roll the first 5 or six tricks because partner also had a small doubleton in clubs. But these occasional annoyances are more than made up for by the many good results that come from opening this hand 1NT, instead of 1D.

It's obvious to open 4-3-3-3 and 4-4-3-2 hands 1NT, but what about less ideal distributions? Each of the following situations are something to discuss with partner, and there are no absolutely right or wrong answers.

1. Hands with a 5-card major.

Many experts will open a 15-17 hand with a broken 5 card major suit with 1NT, believing that the preciseness of the 1NT outweighs the risks of missing a 5-3 major fit. Many such experts also use a convention (puppet Stayman) that allows the pair to discover such a 5-3 fit. It's no fun to play in three NT, only to discover when the dummy comes down that you missed your 5-3 major fit and a ruff would have provided an extra trick or two.

I suggest that unless you are playing Puppet Stayman (which is not simple) that you avoid opening 1NT with a 5-card major. I think it is always harder to show shape than points. Even with a nice 17 count, you'll find I think that if partner passes your 1S bid you won't have missed much. If partner responds you can catch up on your extra strength later.

2. Hands with 5-4-2-2 shape

Hands with 5-4-2-2 shape where the five-card suit is a minor present a real problem, because there is often no acceptable rebid. For example, with:

S-AQ H-Kxxx D-AKxxx C-xx

You have a nice sixteen count, but if you open 1D and partner responds 1S (likely) or even 1NT, what is your rebid? You really should have a sixth diamond to rebid 2D (and you are too strong for this) while 2H is awful – it overstates both your count and your heart suit quality. You might escape with your life if partner has four hearts (hence 5 spades) and a decent hand, but sadly most of the time partner will not have that specific shape.

Most experts will open this hand 1NT to show values, and most importantly to solve the rebid problem. Whatever partner does will probably be OK, and you will stay out of trouble.

However, with:

S-AQxx H-xx D-Kx C-AQxxx

you will not have a rebid problem if you open 1C. (If partner responds 1D or 1H, you have a natural 1S rebid; after 1NT by partner you can raise to 2NT or 3NT depending on your agreements about 1C – 1NT auctions.) In this case a 1C opening bid is probably better.

3. Hands with a strong 6 card minor

It is currently fashionable with a certain set of players to open 1NT with something like:

S-AQ H-Kxx D-AKJxxx C-xx

on the theory that if partner has a little something 3NT may well make (and sometimes it does). I am not a fan of this approach – to me it looks like masterminding as partner cannot make a meaningful contribution to deciding the contract, because you have misled partner as to your general shape. To me this type of hand is better handled by a 1D opener, followed by a 3D rebid if partner responds. This leaves partner well placed to bid 3NT when that is right (i.e., a bit of a diamond fit and some outside strength), and to pass and play 3D with a misfit (like a singleton diamond).