



By: Don Rogers

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:

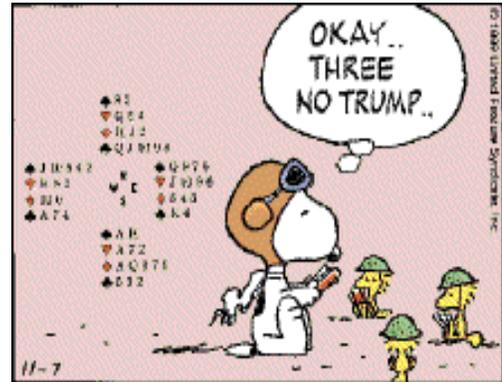
S-AQ H-Kxx D-AKJxxx C-xx

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).

Responding to NT Opening Bids

An opening 1NT (or 2NT) bid is very tightly defined, so the responder knows more about the combined partnership assets than does opener. Whenever one player has limited his hand in this way, it is a fundamental bidding principle that the other partner is now the “captain”, because they know more about the combined partnership assets and distribution than does the NT opener. As the captain, it is your responsibility as responder to set the level and strain of the final contract. In some cases, you can ask opener a question and allow them to make the final decision, but it is up to you to ask the question. Remember 26 pts should produce game (maybe less if you have strong distribution)!

There are five general types of hands you as responder can hold after partner opens 1 NT. (This same approach applies after partner opens 2NT, but the point ranges will change because 2NT promises 20 – 21, so 5-6 points in your hand will probably produce game vs a 2NT opener.) Each of these links discusses how to respond with that type of hand. The last link, for those of you who like flow charts, summarizes all of these. Remember that in all these cases (except the first) exceptional distribution may increase the value of your hand if opener has a fit.





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I. Weak Hand (0-7 pts)

With a hand this weak there is no real chance of game. As captain your responsibility is to do your best to avoid a minus score (1NT may not succeed). It may seem counter-intuitive, but **the weaker your hand the greater the necessity for you to take action**. A normal 1NT opener vs a Yarborough may take only 3 tricks. If your side is vulnerable and the opponents double, down 4 is worth more to them than any game. If you have a really bad hand, think of bidding as damage control.

Almost all duplicate pairs use transfers when partner opens and they have 5 card or longer major suit. This is always correct, regardless of the strength of the hand, because the major may play better, scores almost as well as NT, and you can play at the two level in the major when that is right. Some pairs also have methods to transfer to a minor suit when partner opens 1NT. Transfers to a minor suit should not be made except in rare situations!

The reason for this is that when you transfer to a minor suit, you will be playing at the three level. Therefore, you need a six card (or longer) suit to transfer into a minor. Also, in general we prefer to play in NT rather than the minor suit because NT scores so much better. You should only transfer to a minor suit with a really terrible hand and a long minor, or a hand so strong that a slam in the minor suit might be possible! Hands with intermediate values (~6 to 14 points) and long minor suits should be played in a NT contract.

A few examples will help to explain these ideas. In each case assume partner has opened a standard 1NT, and RHO has passed.

1. A-xx H-xxxxx D-xxx C-xxx

This is about as bad as it can get. At 1NT you can expect this hand to take exactly 0 tricks. At 2H, you can expect at worst to make a couple of small hearts good by ruffing. Therefore, you can expect a contract of 2H to play at least 2 tricks better than 1NT, and if partner has a good heart holding (it could happen) you might even make 2H. However, the main point here is to reduce your minus score by playing in hearts. Transfer partner to hearts and pass.

2. S-xx H-xx D-Qxxxxx C-xxx

The same logic applies here. With six diamonds, 3D is likely to be a much better contract than 1NT. Occasionally opener will have a magic hand that allows 1NT to roll, but about 97% of the time 3D is better. Use whatever tools you have to get there.

3. S-xx H-Kxx D-Qxxx C-xxxx

With this sort of a balanced weak hand with some values, a pass is probably best. Your side has somewhere between 20 and 22 pts, and declarer will likely be able to reach your hand at least once. 1NT may not make, but it is unlikely to be down more than 1.

4. S-xxx H-xxxx D-xxxx C-xx

OK, so this is the worst hand you can have – no points and not even a five-card suit. Time for desperate measures. Bid 2C (Stayman) and pass whatever opener bids. The logic is that if partner does not have a four-card major, they have at least three, and probably four, diamonds. Anything is likely to be better than 1NT.

5. S-xxx H-Kxxx D-xxxx C-xx

This one is almost as bad, because you are right on the edge of passing and hoping partner can gut out 1NT. Either pass or 2C per example 4 could be right, and it might be a 50-50 deal. I would probably pass, but the “garbage” Stayman approach could work too.

6. S-xx H-Kxx D-Qxxxxx C-xx

It might seem right to bid 2S to transfer to the minor, but you should not. If partner has a partial fit for diamonds, they can probably make 1 or 2 NT. If they don't have a partial fit for diamonds, 3D is probably down at least one trick.

7. S-xx H-xxx D-Qxxxxx C-xx

This is the type of hand that is correct for a minor suit transfer. 3D may not make, but 1NT is likely a disaster.



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II. Invitational Hands (8 to a bad 10)

With a hand in this range there may be a game if partner is on the top of their NT range (a very good 16 or 17). As captain your responsibility is to invite partner to game, and to abide by their decision.

The first question is do you have a five or four card major. If not, you simply raise to 2NT and let partner decide. There are more options if you do have a 5 card or longer major. (Note that with a long minor suit and 8-10 pts, you should prefer to play in NT as that scores better than a minor.)

With one or more 4 card majors, you start by bidding 2C (Stayman). Remember that usually the hand will play one trick better in a 4-4 major fit than in NT. If partner bids 2D (no four-card major), then you bid 2NT. Partner can bid 3NT or pass. If partner bids 2 of the major that you do not have, again you can bid 2NT, and partner will know what you have – an invitational hand with 4 cards in the other major.

If partner bids the major you do have, then you should confirm the suit by bidding 3 of the major. This is invitational – opener can pass with a minimum NT opener, or carry on to 4 of the major with a little extra.

With a 5-card major suit and an invitational hand, you start with a transfer bid in the usual way. (At this point the 1NT opener does not know the strength of your hand, only that you have 5 of the suit. Opener absolutely needs to follow “instructions” and accept the transfer!) After opener bids 2 of your major, with the invitational hand you bid 2NT. Now partner knows you have an invitational hand and 5 cards in your major, and can choose between pass (playing 2NT), 3 of your major (which you should pass!), 3NT or 4 of the major. Opener's decision will depend on how well they fit your suit, and the strength of their hand.

Remember, when you show an invitational hand, opener makes the final decision about the final contract. If opener bids 3 of the major, do not succumb to temptation to bid 4! Opener knows what they have in their hand better than you do.



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III. Game Hands (Good 10 - 14)

This is generally straightforward, and does not tend to cause many problems. As responder, remember that you are the captain. With this type of hand, it is your responsibility to ensure that game is reached.

With a major suit that is five cards or longer, start with a transfer, and bid a game after partner accepts the transfer. With a 5 card major suit, rebid 3NT and allow partner to choose between 3NT and 4 of the major. With a six-card major, bid 4 of the major. Partner should have at a minimum two small trump, and four of the major is likely to play one trick better.

With at least one four card major, bid 2C (Stayman). If partner bids the major that you have, bid 4. If partner bids 2D (no 4 card major) or the major you do not have, rebid 3NT.

With no 4-card or longer major, just raise to 3NT. This auction gives the opponents almost no information to help them with their lead. Don't mess around when you know what the right contract is!

Do not make the mistake with hands in this point range of transferring to a minor suit! Unless your hand is so distributional that a slam in the minor is possible, you will get a poor score for playing in a minor suit when NT can be made.

So with:

S-xx H-Qxx D-KQxxxx C-Ax

Bid 3NT. Those six diamonds will be worth tricks in NT, and you have entries to get their if partners diamonds are not great. Declarer will likely be able to set up the diamond suit for 5 or 6 tricks.



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IV. When Slam is Possible (15+)

Occasionally (not often), you are going to pick up a really good hand and hear partner open 1NT. As always in this type of auction, the responder is the captain and must be in charge of getting to slam when that is right. Opener's job is to answer questions.

If partner opens 2NT and you have 12+ (or compensating distribution) the same considerations apply and there may be a slam.

The key to remember is that with two balanced hands, 33+ combined points probably belongs in a small slam, and 37+ in a grand slam. (The logic is that with 33+ points, opponents cannot possess two aces, and with 37+, the opponents cannot have an ace.) Does this mean that 33+ will always make 6NT? No - there can always be an unfortunate lie of the card that will cause it to be defeated. However, remember that you have to play the percentages, and more times than not there will be a way to make a small slam with 33+. If you are making every slam you bid, then you are probably not bidding enough slams!

A. Balanced Hands

1. S-AQx H- Axx D- Qx C-KJ10xx

If partner has a nice 17 count, slam is likely. If partner has a doggy 15, slam is probably doomed. Bid 4NT (quantitative). THIS IS NEVER BLACKWOOD. It simply asks partner to bid 6NT if on a maximum, and to pass with less.

2. S-AQxx H- Axx D-Qx C-KJ10x

Almost the same hand as 1., But now you have a four card major. As usual, if partner has four spades a spade contract will probably produce an extra trick. Bid 2C (Stayman) to find out. If partner bids 2D, bid 4NT (once again quantitative*), to invite 6NT. It's more complicated if partner bids 2H, because:

- Partner could also have four spades
- A bid of 4NT by you is Blackwood, because partner has named a real suit.

I am not sure this is a standard treatment, but I think a rebid of 5NT by you in this case should get the message across that you have four spades, not four hearts, and an invitational hand. Opener can pass 5NT with a minimum, bid either 6S (with a max and four spades), or 6NT (with a max and less than four spades.) Do discuss with partner prior to first use!

3. S-AQx H-Axx D-Qx C-KQJ10x

With a prime 18 and a fine 5 card suit, just raise to 6NT. No reason to ask partner. You know, so you go.

4. S-AQx H- Axx D-Qx C-AKQJ10

With a fine 22 count, just bid 7NT and take the average.

B. Unbalanced Hands.

With unbalanced hands you have to exercise more judgement, because long suits and a fit with partner can mean much less in the way of points are required for slam. There are lots of ways to use 3 level responses to 1NT to show various distributions, strong hands, etc. If you have these in your toolbox, great, but if not, the standard meaning of bidding a suit at the three level after partner opens 1NT is that you have a good hand and a good six card suit, and some interest in slam.

1. S-xx H-xx D-Kx C-AKQxxxx

This hand “only” has 12 points, but look at the playing strength! Partner is sure to have at least two clubs (partner cannot have a singleton A, K, or Q, as you are looking at them), so this hand will produce at least seven tricks 90% of the time. What you really need to know is not how many points partner has, but how many aces. This is the time to use Gerber (a direct bid of 4C over 1NT, asking for aces). Unless partner has only one ace, bid 6NT.

2. S-xx H-Kxx D-Kx C-AKJxxx

Here you have one fewer club, not a solid suit, but an extra King. The club suit here could produce only two tricks if partner has no fit, but six if partner has a club fit. Bid 3C (forcing). If partner just bids 3NT, pass is probably best. If partner raises to 4C, check for aces with 4NT and go if there are not two aces missing.

3. S-Ax H- Kxx D-Kx C-AKJxxx

You know you want to be in slam, but which slam? Bid 3C. If partner bids 3NT, you can force the issue by bidding 4C. Partner must not pass this. Your 3C bid was forcing to game – why would you now take partner out of 3NT, unless you were still interested in slam? The 4C bid puts the focus on partner's club holding, and asks partner to further describe their hand. (It is a general principle that going past 3NT in a minor shows slam interest.)



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V. You have a Six (or longer) card suit

A. Six+ Card Minor Suit

Because it requires a 5 bid in a minor suit to make game, and only three in NT, it rarely makes sense to head towards the minor suit game in this case. (The exception is when the opponents are bidding a suit, and neither of you have a stopper in their suit.)

Therefore, even with a long minor suit, you only want to play in the minor if you are very weak (and 1NT probably won't make), or you have a strong hand with great shape. In this case a small or even grand slam in the minor is possible if opener has the "right" cards. There have been examples of these types of hands earlier in the series.

B. Six+ Card Major Suit

The situation is different here because game in a major only requires one more trick than in NT, and making one more trick in the major will result in a better score than playing in NT. Also, with weak hands, transfers allow us to play in two of a major, while playing in minor will require playing at the three level. With a six card or longer major suit, you should insist on playing in your suit, even if partner has only two small.

To best describe these types of hands there is a transfer bid, called a "Texas Transfer", that is very helpful that I would suggest you discuss with partner. A Texas Transfer is just like a Jacoby transfer, except that you do it at the four level. So:

1NT - 4D asks partner to bid 4 hearts.

1NT - 4H asks partner to bid 4 spades.

Because you are forcing partner to bid at the four level, this gives you a way to distinguish between a bad hand with five trump, where you are just trying to avoid a bad score, and a game going hand with six or more trump where you can make game even against two small in partner's hand. To make a Texas Transfer you need at least six trump, and 8 – 12 useful high card points. (You want to be careful about counting too much for distribution; if you are counting heavily on a side-suit void for most of your hand, and partner shows up with AKQ of that suit, it will not turn out well.)

With this in mind, the structure for responding to a 1NT opener with six or more of a

major is:

1. With 0-7 HCP, transfer at the two level and pass partner's response.
2. With 8-12 useful HCP, bid 4D or 4H (Texas Transfer) and pass partner's response.
3. With 13-14 HCP, transfer at the two level, and then raise to 4. This sequence shows mild slam interest, but partner is allowed to pass 4 of the major with poor trumps or a minimum hand.
4. With 15+ HCP, transfer at the two level and push for slam. Either bid a new suit (Forcing!) or 4NT, which should be Blackwood as a suit has been set by the transfer.

Examples:

1. S-Axxxxx H- xx D-x C-J10xx

Bid 2H and pass the 2S response. Be happy you have an extra trump, but 2 is the limit for this hand.

2. S-AQxxxx H-xx D-x C-KJ10x

Bid 4H (Texas) and pass opener's 4S bid. Plenty for game (and occasionally you'll make six when opener has a super double fit), but slam is unlikely.

3. S-AQxxxx H-Ax D-x C-KJ10x

You are interested in slam if partner has good spade support, but not if partner has two or three small spades. Show mild slam interest by bidding two hearts (transfer) and raising partner to 4S. Partner should know you have six spades, this range of hand, and can proceed further with a good spade fit.

4. S-AKQxxx H-Ax D- x C-KJ10x

With this hand you will be disappointed if you don't reach slam, and 7 is certainly possible. (All partner needs is Jx of spades, A of diamonds, and five clubs to the AQ. Not too much to ask!) Remember that the slower you go, the more strength you are showing. Start by transferring with 2H, and then bid 3C over opener's 2S. This is an absolutely forcing bid, and asks partner to evaluate his hand in light of the fact that you have at least a game forcing hand with slam interest, and at least nine black cards. (remember that if you had just a game going hand with five spades, your second bid would be 3NT to allow partner to pick between 3NT and 4S.)

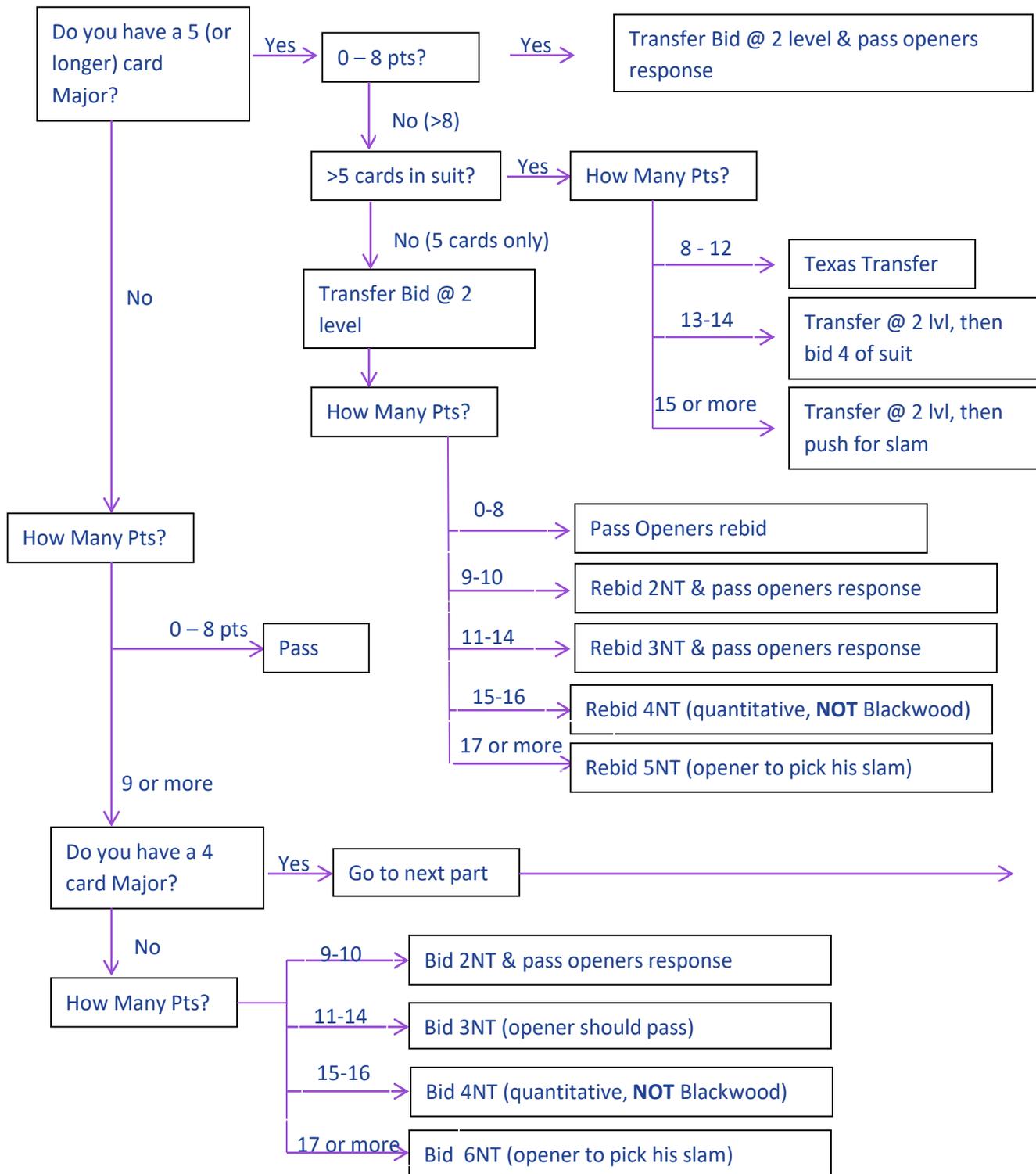
5. S-AKQJxx H-Ax D-xx C-KJ10

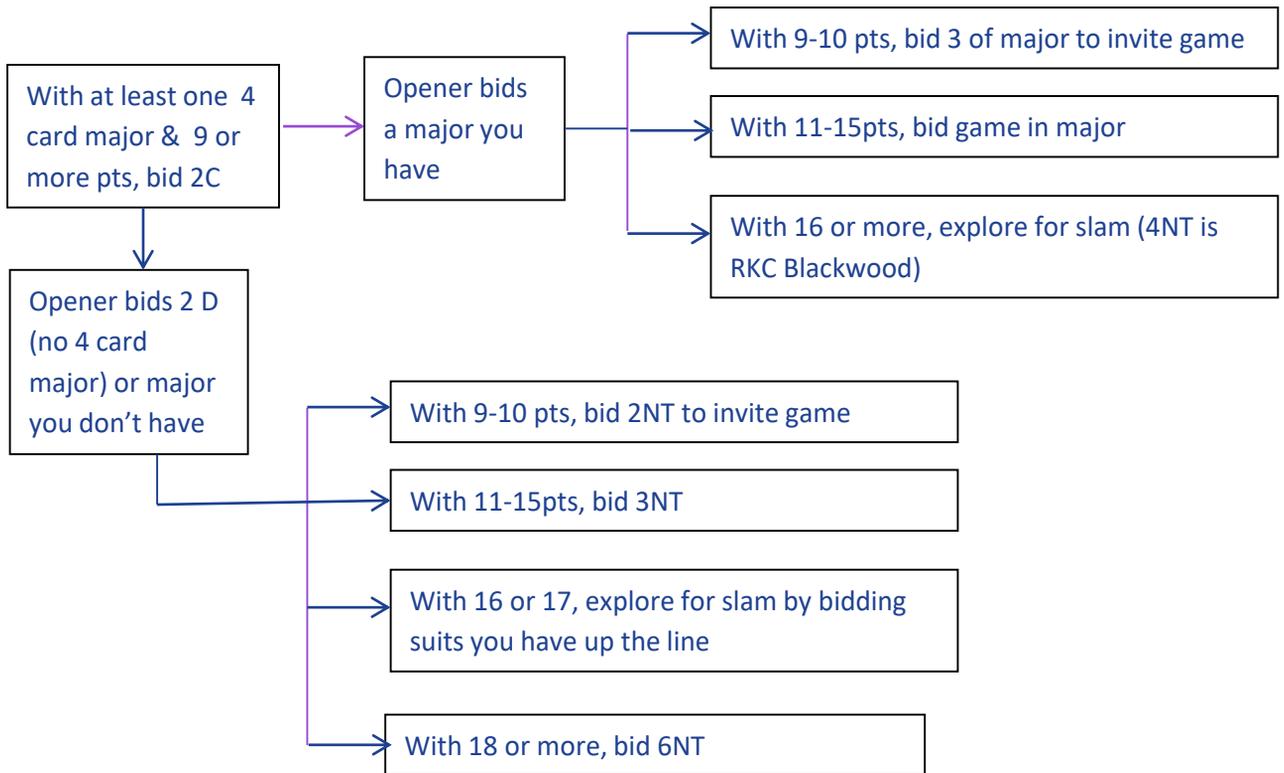
This time you pretty much just need to know if partner has two aces or not. After using 4H as a transfer to spades (setting the suit) 4NT is Blackwood. The main question here is which is the best contract - 6S, 6NT, or 7S. (Remember that your spade suit represents 6 tricks at NT too, and NT scores better!)

Responding to Partners Opening NT Bid

An opening 1NT (or 2NT) bid is very tightly defined, so you as the responder know more about the combined partnership assets than does opener. Your primary responsibility as responder is to set the level and strain of the final contract. In some cases you can ask opener a question and allow them to make the final decision, but it is up to you to ask the question. Remember 26 pts should produce game!

The following is a decision tree for responding to 1NT opening bids.





Responding to Partners Opening 2 NT Bid

The structure of your bids is the same, but now opener has 20 – 21, so the point requirements for your bids are reduced. If you have 6 or more, you want to be in game, and you invite with 5 points. You should still show 5 card or longer major suits with a transfer, and use Stayman if you have a 4 card major.

When partner Opens 2C and then rebids NT

2C followed by 2N shows a balanced 22 or 23. So now you want to be in game with 4 points, and invite with 3. Use transfers to show a 5 card or longer major, and bid 3C (Stayman with 4 or more points and a 4 card major). Note that on this sequence your 3C bid is always Stayman, since with a bad hand you just pass 2NT.