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This Week in Bridge

(223) Modern 1NT Opening Bids

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Level: 1

Robert S. Todd

robert@advinbridge.com

General

In the modern style of opening bidding, the best opening bid in all of bridge is 1NT. We should strive to make this opening bid as often as possible. There are a large number of reasons that 1NT is such a powerful and effective opening bid, but one of the most important is that starting with a 1NT opening is the only way to have *the best auction in all of bridge: 1NT - 3NT!* The modern style is to open 1NT on all balanced hands that have 15-17 total points. We do not worry about having small flaws like a 5-card Major suit or a suit that is unstopped (like a small doubleton). *Stoppers are for 3NT, not 1NT!*

A Balanced Hand with 15-17 Points

A balanced hand is one that has at most one doubleton. That means that balanced hands have 3 possible shapes - 4333, 4432, 5332 (suits in any order). With 15-17 total points and any of these shapes, we keep things simple and open the bidding 1NT.

Do Stoppers Matter?

The short answer is NO! We just open 1NT with all balanced hands with 15-17 points. We have no problem opening 1NT with all 4333 hands that have 15-17 HCP, even without a stopper in one of the suits. The first issue we encounter that may give us pause is a hand with 4432 distribution, 15-17 HCP, and a small doubleton in some suit. It may seem scary to open the bidding with 1NT with only two small cards in a suit, but we must do it anyway. If we do not, we will not be able to describe our hand to partner later in the auction.

Example 1

- ♠ 76
- ♥ KQT5
- ♦ K43
- ♣ AKJ6

If we open 1♣ on this hand, instead of 1NT, then we will have no way to show our shape and strength to partner later in the bidding. Just open the bidding 1NT!

Opening 1NT with a 5-card Suit

With a 5-card suit, we open 1NT with 5332 distribution and 15-17 total points. This is true if the 5-card suit is a minor suit or a Major suit. With a 5-card minor suit it feels more natural to open 1NT, because we expect to be headed to a NT contract anyway. Since we are all programmed to look for Major suit fits, we sometimes fight against opening 1NT with a 5-card Major suit, but it is best to just open 1NT with hands that have a 5-card Major suit and 15-17 points. Part of the reason that we choose to do so is to avoid the rebid problem that comes after opening 1♥ or 1♠ with a balanced hand and 15-17 total points.

Example 2

♠ A4
♥ KQT93
♦ AT5
♣ Q53

If we open the bidding with 1♥ and partner responds 1♠ (or event 1NT), we do not have a good rebid. 1NT would show 12-14 points, 2NT would show 18-19 points, and a new suit would show 4+cards and 12-17 points. It is best to just open 1NT and avoid this problem.

Open 1NT with 15-17 Total Points, Not Just High Card Points

When we have a balanced hand that contains a 5-card suit then we may have additional value in our hand, beyond HCP, in the nature of length points. If our 5-card suit is a poor suit, then we do not need to add value to our hand for length points. In that case we would simply use our HCP to evaluate our hand. But if we have a decent 5-card suit (either a minor or a Major), we need to add a length point to our HCP to determine our total points. Thus, with a decent 5-card suit and 14 HCP, we open 1NT.

Example 3

♠ AQJT3
♥ K83
♦ A3
♣ T83

Open 1NT with this hand. A balanced hand with 14 HCP and 1 length point – giving 15 total points.

Example 4

- ♠ A4
- ♥ KQT93
- ♦ AT5
- ♣ AT3

With a decent 5-card suit and 17 HCP, we should not open 1NT. With this hand, we have 18 total points, too much to open 1NT. Instead we open 1♥ and plan to rebid 2NT, showing 18-19 total points.

Semi-Balanced Hands with a Rebid Problem

With some semi-balanced hands that have 15-17 total points we may choose to open the bidding with 1NT. These types of hands “look balanced” and/or have a rebid problem. Let’s look at some examples.

Example 5

- ♠ T4
- ♥ KQT3
- ♦ K5
- ♣ AQJT3

This semi-balanced hand has 16 HCP and 17 total points. With a hand not strong enough to reverse, if the auction begins 1♣ - 1♠, it is best to open the bidding 1NT and describe this hand as a balanced 15-17 points. A small lie, but the one least likely to cost.

Example 6

- ♠ Q43
- ♥ A5
- ♦ T7
- ♣ AKJT53

This semi-balanced hand has 14 HCP, 16 total points. With a long strong minor and honors in both Major suits, we are likely headed towards a NT game. It is best to simply open 1NT, describing this as a balanced hand with 15-17 total points.

With these hands, we should not open 1NT:

Example 7

- ♠ A4
- ♥ AKJT53
- ♦ QT3
- ♣ 32

Again, we have a semi-balanced hand with 15-17 total points. But with a 6-card Major, we will never find our best game, which is likely 4♥, if we open 1NT. Instead, we open 1♥ and plan to rebid ♥ later.

Example 8

♠ T4
♥ KQT93
♦ K5
♣ AQJ3

With this 5/4 semi-balanced hand we have no rebid problem. Instead of opening 1NT, we open 1♥ and plan to rebid 2♣ - showing 12 to 17 total points.

Example 9

♠ T4
♥ AKT9
♦ 85
♣ AKJT3

With all of our points located in our two suits, it is better to treat this hand as a 2-suited hand, even stretching to reverse, than to treat it as a balanced hand and open 1NT. We open 1♣ with this hand.

Other *Not Balanced* Hands With Which We May Open 1NT

There are other hands that are not “good” 1NT opening bids but we may choose to open 1NT with them because it solves other problems, like rebid problems.

Example 10

♠ K4
♥ K3
♦ AK945
♣ QT93

With this hand, we could open 1♦ and rebid 2♣, showing 12-17 points and both minor suits. But with honors in both Major suits, it is better to open 1NT and describe this hand as balanced with 15-17 total points.

Example 11

♠ K
♥ KQ93
♦ QJ95
♣ AJT93

This is a classic problem hand and one that has no good solution of how to bid, but a singleton ♠K often functions like a doubleton. So instead of opening 1♣ and after a 1♠ response by partner being stuck with no good rebid, we may choose to open a flawed but practical 1NT.

Conclusion

Opening 1NT is a bit of an art form, but something that you should want to do and strive to do. There are many advantages to opening 1NT: better responding systems, better auctions, more difficulty for the defense, protecting your honors, etc. Think about the reasons to open 1NT and strive to do so. That is the modern style of 1NT opening bids -- *just open 1NT as often as possible!*