

The No Trump Opening Bid, Revisited

We all know about opening the bidding 1 No Trump, don't we? We have 15 to 17 points and balanced distribution, so we bid 1 No Trump. Nothing to it. Or is there more to it? Why don't we take a closer look.

1. Strength: 15 to 17 points

- a) There have been plenty of variations on this range:
 - 16 to 18, earlier Standard American
 - 12 to 14, Acol, the British standard
 - 12 to 14, Kaplan-Sheinwold (K-S) system of old
 - 14 to 16, Meckstroth-Rodwell today
 - 10 to 12, some systems
- b) Notice that all these are three point ranges. This narrow range allows for the most precision in reaching partnership decisions about game or slam.
- c) Aces are undervalued in the 4-3-2-1 point count scheme. They're actually worth 4 _ points or more. If you hold:

Hand A: ♠ A 10 9 6
♥ A J 7
♦ A 5 4 3
♣ A 4

a bid of 1 No Trump would be an underbid. You should plan on opening 1 Diamond and rebidding 2 No Trump.

- d) Don't overlook those tens and nines. If you hold two tens, consider adding one point to your hand, especially if the tens are in the same suits as higher honors. Example:

| | | | |
|---------|------------|---------|-----------|
| Hand B: | ♠ A 10 6 5 | Hand C: | ♠ A 8 6 5 |
| | ♥ A 7 | | ♥ A 7 |
| | ♦ Q 10 9 7 | | ♦ Q 7 5 2 |
| | ♣ K J 10 | | ♣ K J 4 |

You ought to think about opening 1 No Trump with the Hand B, even though it's "only" a 14-point hand. Those tens make the hand a lot stronger. Even the nine of diamonds is "working." Hand B is way better than Hand C, which you just open with a bid of 1 Diamond.

2. Balanced Distribution

- a) As a rule, this means:
 - No void
 - No singleton
 - At most one doubleton
- b) There are three possible balanced distributions:
 - 4-3-3-3
 - 4-4-3-2
 - 5-3-3-2

We all agree to open 1 No Trump with hands with these shapes.

- c) Semi-balanced distributions. Is it ever right to open No Trump with:
 - 5-4-2-2 or
 - 6-3-2-2 shape?

d) Examples:

| | |
|---------------|-----------------|
| Hand D: ♠ K 2 | Hand E: ♠ Q 9 7 |
| ♥ A Q | ♥ K J |
| ♦ A 10 7 5 | ♦ A Q 7 5 3 2 |
| ♣ K 10 9 4 2 | ♣ K 7 |

With both these hands, a 1 No Trump opening describes them better than any other action.

3. Stoppers

- a) In the olden days, you were supposed to have all four suits well stopped before opening 1 No Trump. That was then, this is now.
- b) With one suit unstopped and the rest of the hand suitable, the modern style is to open 1 No Trump.

Hand F: ♠ K Q 8 6
♥ 8 3
♦ A Q 4 3
♣ A J 7

Go ahead and open 1 No Trump with this hand.

- c) With two suits unstopped, forget it. Open 1 of a suit instead.

4. Open No Trump when you can.

- a) “If your hand contains the correct number of points to open 1 NT, do it—except when it is clearly right to do something else.” (Mike Lawrence, Judgment at Bridge)
- b) “If you can find some justification, no matter how slight, to open 1 NT – do it! The reason is *ease of bidding*.” (Dan Romm, Things Your Bridge Teacher Won’t Tell You)
- c) “Whenever you have a balanced hand and the appropriate point count, open 1 NT. There are absolutely no exceptions. Do not be distracted by a five-card major.” (Marty Bergen, Points Schmoints)

5. Reasons for Opening in No Trump:

- a) The bid paints a very thorough picture of your hand.
- b) It gets your whole story across in a single bid.
- c) Partner knows within 2 points the strength of your hand.
- d) It steals the one-level from the opponents.
- e) It makes it much more difficult for the opponents to compete.
- f) It solves all sorts of rebidding problems.

6. Ease of bidding:

Hand G: ♠ 8 7 3
 ♥ K J 8 6 5
 ♦ A Q 10
 ♣ A Q

If you want to open 1 Heart with this hand, please tell me what your rebid will be after partner responds 1 Spade:

- Pass? No, partner's new suit bid is forcing.
- 1 NT? No, this shows a balanced minimum, but you have 16.
- 2 Diamonds? No, this promises at least a 4-card suit.
- 2 Spades? No, this shows a minimum hand with good spade support. Your three small spades do not qualify.
- 2 NT? No, this shows 18 or 19 points.

But with Hand H: ♠ A 3
 ♥ K 9 8 7 4
 ♦ K 4
 ♣ K Q 5 2

By all means open 1 Heart; you'll have no rebid problem if partner responds 1 Spade or 1 No Trump. Notice, too, that the hand has two doubletons, another reason for avoiding a 1 No Trump opening.

7. Open 1 NT even with a 5-card Major Suit? Yes, for the following reasons:

- a) You solve the rebid problem. (See Hand G above.)
- b) You'll never convey your 15-17 strength if you start with 1 of a suit.
- c) Opening 1 No Trump can keep the bidding lower. This is especially true if you play the 1 NT response as forcing (2-over-1 System).
- d) Should you still open 1 NT even if the major suit is strong? Yes, unless you have a worthless doubleton in the hand.
- e) Does it matter if the major is spades rather than hearts? No, open 1 NT.

8. Can you count points for length?

- a) There is only one distribution, 5-3-3-2, where the one point for a long suit is an issue.
- b) At the lower end of the 15-17 range, how would you open this 14-point hand?

Hand I: ♠ K 6 3
 ♥ A 10 5
 ♦ A Q J 10 4
 ♣ 8 3

Technically this is a 14 High Card Point hand. But the 5-card diamond suit is an excellent source of tricks. Open 1 No Trump.

- c) At the upper end of the 15-17 range, how would you handle this hand?

Hand J: ♠ A 10
 ♥ Q 9 5
 ♦ K J 9
 ♣ A Q J 7 2

Yes, this hand contains 17 HCP. But the fifth card in clubs is surely worth an extra trick. So this hand is too strong to open 1 No Trump. Start with 1 Club and rebid 2 No Trump.

9. A quiz. Try opening the bidding with these hands;

Hand K: ♠ 7 5
 ♥ K J 10 4
 ♦ A K Q 10
 ♣ A 10 7

Hand L: ♠ A Q
 ♥ K 6 3
 ♦ A Q
 ♣ 9 7 6 5 4 3

Hand M: ♠ A 10 9 6 5
 ♥ K Q 7
 ♦ Q 7
 ♣ A J 4

Hand N: ♠ Q 10 2
 ♥ A 8
 ♦ A K Q 10 7 5
 ♣ A 10

Hand K is too good to open 1 NT. Those three tens are way better than a bunch of deuces. Open 1 D and rebid 2 NT.

Hand L should be opened 1 NT. For sure. Forget those two doubletons.

Hand M is another 1 NT opening. It is true that partner will not know you have a 5-card spade suit. So be it. Wouldn't you much prefer to be declarer and have the opening lead come into your hand rather than through it?

With Hand N, open 2 NT. You have only 19 High Card Points, but the powerful diamond suit more than compensates. And those three tens add extra value.

10. How about other strength ranges? Here's a summary:

| | |
|--------------|------------------------------------|
| 12 – 14 HCP | Open 1 of a suit, rebid 1 NT |
| 15 -- 17 HCP | Open 1 NT |
| 18 – 19 HCP | Open 1 of a suit, rebid 2 NT |
| 20 – 21 HCP | Open 2 NT |
| 22 – 23 HCP | Open 2 Clubs, rebid 2 NT |
| 24 – 25 HCP | Open 2 Clubs, rebid 3 NT |
| 26 – 27 HCP | Open 3 NT |
| 28 + HCP | Call me, I want to be your partner |

11. Opening 2 No Trump:

- Ideally, all four suits should be stopped to open 2 No Trump.
- If one suit is not perfectly stopped, it may still be best to open 2 NT.
- Your unstopped suit should be no worse than Q-x or x-x-x (3 small).

Hand O: ♠ Q 10
♥ A K 8 4
♦ A K Q 5
♣ Q J 10

Go ahead and open 2 No Trump, despite the slight flaw in spades.

12. Fine points after partner bids 1 No Trump:

- With 4-3-3-3 pattern and a 4-card major, don't bother with Stayman. What are you planning on ruffing?
- With an undistinguished 8 points, Pass. Game is unlikely, so just take your plus score. Ex.: ♠ Q 7 ♥ 8 6 4 2 ♦ Q 8 5 3 ♣ K J 7. Pass.
- With combined 25 – 29 points, prefer to play in your major suit fit. With 30 – 31 points, 3 NT is preferable. All suits are doubly stopped and you'll probably make the same number of tricks in NT as in your suit.
- With 5-4 or 4-5 pattern in the major suits, start with Stayman rather than a transfer. This keeps both major suits in play.
- Don't forget to add points for long suits. Examples:
 - ♠ 7 4 2 ♥ 8 7 4 2 ♦ A J 10 ♣ K 5 3 Pass.
 - ♠ 7 4 ♥ 8 4 2 ♦ A J 10 7 6 ♣ K 5 3 Bid 2 NT.
 - ♠ 7 4 ♥ 8 4 ♦ A J 10 7 6 3 ♣ K 5 3 Bid 3 NT.