

Defending against 1NT

by Frances Hinden

Terry Hewett asked for authoritative advice on this topic, so we asked Frances to provide it

IN the April 2014 magazine, Andrew Robson emphasised how important it is to bid over 1NT at pairs, particularly at love all (neither side vulnerable). This article isn't specifically about pairs tactics but considers the differences when defending against a strong rather than a weak 1NT opening.



There is no 'standard expert' defence to a 1NT opening. A look at the system cards of the world's top pairs will find a variety of conventions. Fashions change: a few years ago almost no-one played the double of a strong no-trump for penalties, but people started to open 1NT on hands such as:

♠ 5 3 ♥ K 7 ♦ A K J 8 6 3 ♣ Q 9 2

(or even ♠ 5 3 ♥ 8 7 ♦ A K J 8 6 3 ♣ 10 9 2!) particularly in third seat non-vulnerable. Now you will find an even split between those who play the double as 'strong' and others who still give it an artificial meaning. The only thing all popular defences have in common is that 2♣ isn't natural. With that in mind, I only recommend that you:

- Play the same basic defence whatever the strength of the no-trump opening (this avoids accidents);
- Play double as 'penalties' (a strong hand);
- Have some way to show both majors.

There are some adjustments to make against a strong 1NT, i.e. one with a minimum of 14 HCP.

Overcalling

Against a weak no-trump, you need to balance the desire to compete with the fact that you might be making 3NT or 4♥/4♠ on power. Against a strong no-trump, bidding is more about disturbing the opponents' auction or finding a good sacrifice. If you do have a game on, it will be based more on distribution than high-card strength.

Take these two hands:

Hand 1	Hand 2
♠ A J 10 8 6 2	♠ Q 9 3
♥ 6	♥ K Q J 10 2
♦ K 10 5 4	♦ J 2
♣ 7 4	♣ A 9 5

Hand 1 is a clear 2♠ overcall at any vulnerability against any strength of 1NT opening. It may make game or produce a cheap save opposite a spade fit and it forces the opponents to start investigating their best contract at the three level.

Hand 2 is a 2♥ bid when love all at match-points, but at any other time it is a pass. It has more high cards, but it is less likely to be making game or to be better in 2♥ than defending 1NT (it is more tempting to bid in fourth seat as partner won't lead a heart against 1NT). This hand is also more likely to concede a penalty: at match-points that is less important but at IMPs it's a poor idea to risk -50 for the chance of -50 instead of -90.

Against a weak no-trump, an overcall of 3♥ or 3♠ invites partner to raise to four, but against a strong no-trump it is more useful to play it as preemptive. I would bid 3♥ over a weak no-trump on Hand 3:

Hand 3	Hand 4
♠ 8 6	♠ K 10 9 8 6 5 4
♥ A K J 10 4 3 2	♥ 6
♦ K 7 5	♦ K 3 2
♣ 4	♣ 9 6

However, I would bid 3♠ over a strong no-trump (unless I was vulnerable against not) on something

more like Hand 4. Maybe the full deal is:

Love All. Dealer South.

♠ J							
♥ K 10 8 5 3							
♦ A Q 9 6							
♣ Q 7 5							
♠ K 10 9 8 6 5 4	♠ Q 7 2						
♥ 6	♥ J 9 4 2						
♦ K 3 2	♦ 4						
♣ 9 6	♣ K 10 8 4 2						
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N		E					
W	S						
♠ A 3							
♥ A Q 7							
♦ J 10 8 7 5							
♣ A J 3							

Given a free run, North-South have a good chance of getting to their best spot (at teams) of 6♦. After the auction starts 1NT – 3♣ – Double (take-out) – 4♣, best of luck to them!

While we are on the topic of three-level overcalls, most people use 2♣/2♦ conventionally, leaving 3♣ and 3♦ the only way to bid a minor directly. The same considerations apply: against a weak no-trump, you are aiming at a possible 3NT game and it's helpful to keep these bids as constructive, while against a strong 1NT opening a pre-emptive hand is more common.

I play a special gadget here: we use a direct 2NT overcall to show a solid 3♣ or 3♦ bid; we find this is more common than the traditional 'game forcing two-suiter' or weak with both minors.

Doubles

I suggested that double is played as a strong hand against either a strong or weak 1NT opening, but there are still some differences.

Against a weak no-trump, double shows a good 15+ balanced, or any strong hand with a good lead. The assumption after a double is that the hand belongs to the doubling side – many pairs play pass as forcing if the opening side run to two of a suit (or perhaps only to 2♣ or 2♦). The partner of the doubler is expected to pass 1NT doubled unless he

has a weak hand with a long suit, or a strong distributional hand. The advantage of the forcing pass is that it helps sort out the 'play or defend' decision:

E/W Game. Dealer South.

♠ 5 4 2							
♥ 8 7 6							
♦ Q J 10 7 2							
♣ 3 2							
♠ K Q 8 7	♠ J 9						
♥ K 10 5 2	♥ A J 9 3						
♦ K 3	♦ 6 5						
♣ A Q 5	♣ J 10 9 7 4						
<table style="margin: auto; border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> <tr><td style="padding: 2px;">N</td><td></td><td style="padding: 2px;">E</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px;">W</td><td style="padding: 2px;">S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		E	W	S	
N		E					
W	S						
♠ A 10 6 3							
♥ Q 4							
♦ A 9 8 4							
♣ K 8 6							

West	North	East	South
			1NT ¹
Dble	2♦	Pass ²	Pass
2♥ ³	Pass	3♥	Pass
4♥	All Pass		

¹ 12-14

² Forcing, can't double for penalties

³ West can't double for penalties, so bids his lowest suit

East is stuck over 2♦ if pass isn't forcing: he knows that East-West have the majority of the high cards but doesn't have a good suit to bid and is happy to defend if West has good diamonds.

Some pairs play take-out doubles after doubling 1NT for penalties; I think this is a superior method but it is important to agree it with your partner first. However, while it solves East's problem on the hand above, East is stuck when he has a penalty double if pass isn't forcing.

Against a strong no-trump, the position is different. The double doesn't promise a stronger hand than opener's and the plan is not only to take a penalty (although that's a possibility), but to compete for the part-score. Double is still a decent 15+ HCP, but now fourth hand is expected to take it out with nothing, even with a balanced nothing – we play 2♣ as 'scramble', asking the doubler to bid his lowest decent suit. This treatment allows you to take a penalty if the 1NT opening was light, but more importantly lets you compete on hands such as this:

**Send your questions to
elena@ebu.co.uk and the editor will
find the expert who can answer them!**

Game All. Dealer South.

♠ 8 6
♥ 5 4
♦ Q 10 8 5 2
♣ Q 10 3 2

♠ K 10 3 ♠ Q J 9 7 5
♥ A Q 9 2 ♥ 8 7 6
♦ A 7 4 ♦ 3
♣ K J 7 ♣ 8 6 5 4

♠ A 4 2
♥ K J 10 3
♦ K J 9 6
♣ A 9

A strong 1NT opening from South would usually end the auction, and is likely to make at least seven tricks (West has a horrible lead problem). After the auction starts 1NT – Double, however, North can bid 2♦ but East tries 2♠ which is likely to be the last making contract for either side.

This double is obviously a risky action, but (particularly at pairs) passing out 1NT with equal strength is a losing tactic in the long run. On a related note, a look at the convention cards for the recent European Championships shows a number of top pairs playing double of a weak no-trump as ‘13+ HCP for take-out’, which is the same concept.

After doubling a strong 1NT, there is less merit in playing a forcing pass as it’s less likely that your side has the majority of the high-card points. However, it is now definitely right to play later doubles as take-out if a pass isn’t forcing. It is far more likely that you want to compete for the part-score than to take a two-level penalty. Here’s an example of how this can gain:

N/S Game. Dealer South.

♠ J 7 4
♥ Q 10 9 7 3
♦ 9 5
♣ 9 8 4

♠ A 6 ♠ 10 9 5 2
♥ 8 6 4 ♥ J 5
♦ K Q 6 4 ♦ J 8 7 2
♣ A Q 10 7 ♣ K J 6

♠ K Q 8 3
♥ A K 2
♦ A 10 3
♣ 5 3 2

West	North	East	South
			1NT ¹
Dble	2♥	Dble ²	Pass
2NT ³	Pass	3♦	Pass/3♥
All Pass			

- ¹ 15-17
- ² Take-out
- ³ Not four spades, no desire to defend, both minors (often called ‘scramble’)

South might compete to 3♥, but that has five losers while 3♦ was making.

Playing take-out doubles doesn’t always prevent you from penalising, as here:

N/S Game. Dealer South.

♠ J 7 4
♥ Q 8 5 3 2
♦ 9 5
♣ 9 8 4

♠ A Q 6 2 ♠ 10 9 5
♥ 6 4 ♥ K J 9 7
♦ K J 6 ♦ 8 7 2
♣ A Q 10 7 ♣ J 6 5

♠ K 8 3
♥ A 10
♦ A Q 10 4 3
♣ K 3 2

West	North	East	South
			1NT ¹
Dble	2♥	Pass ²	Pass
Dble ³	Pass	Pass ⁴	Pass


- ¹ 15-17
- ² Nothing to say as double would be take-out
- ³ Take-out
- ⁴ Delighted

Fourth-seat Doubles

The last major difference between a strong and weak no-trump comes in fourth seat after responder bids 2♣ (Stayman) or 2♦/2♥ (transfer). It’s a well-known tactic to bid 2♣ on nothing opposite a weak no-trump, in the hope that opponents can’t organise a penalty double. To counter that, it’s a good idea to play a fourth seat double not as lead-directing, but simply as

showing a strong hand.

N/S Game. Dealer South.

♠ 8 7 6		♠ J 5 4	
♥ K 7 6 2		♥ A Q J 5	
♦ 5 3		♦ K Q J 7	
♣ 9 7 4 2		♣ K 10	
♠ A Q 2		♠ J 5 4	
♥ 9 8 3		♥ A Q J 5	
♦ 10 9 6 4		♦ K Q J 7	
♣ Q 6 3		♣ K 10	
		♠ K 10 9 3	
		♥ 10 4	
		♦ A 8 2	
		♣ A J 8 5	

West	North	East	South
Pass	2♣ ¹	Dble ²	2♠
Dble ³	All Pass		1NT

¹ I know I'm in trouble, maybe this will confuse the opponents

² A hand that would have doubled the 1NT opening

³ Penalties

This is going for at least 800.


If East-West play a double of 2♣ as lead-directing, they are less likely to take a penalty, as a delayed double of 2♠ is for take-out and West does not know how strong East is.

Note that if East-West were vulnerable and North-South non-vulnerable, West might view instead to bid 3NT at match-points, expecting at least +600 to be available against a possible +500 only from 2♠ doubled. At IMPs, a penalty of 500 or 800 is a safer plus than trying to make 3NT. Even if there isn't a penalty available, this double lets West compete on a weak distributional hand knowing that partner has strength.

Against a strong no-trump, however, it's important to play double of the artificial response as lead-directing as it's more likely that the opening side are about to bid a game. This doesn't give up on bidding game, but again it's going to be based on distribution not high cards.

For example:

N/S Game. Dealer South.

♠ K J 10 8 3 2		♠ A 7 6	
♥ 5 3		♥ K Q 8 7 6	
♦ 9 3		♦ Q 5 4 2	
♣ J 7 4		♣ 9	
♠ 4		♠ A 7 6	
♥ J 10 9 2		♥ K Q 8 7 6	
♦ K J 10 6		♦ Q 5 4 2	
♣ A 8 3 2		♣ 9	
		♠ Q 9 5	
		♥ A 4	
		♦ A 8 7	
		♣ K Q 10 6 5	

West	North	East	South
Pass	2♥ ²	Dble	1NT ¹
3♦ ³	Pass	4♥	2♠
			All Pass

¹ 12-14

² Transfer

³ Hearts and diamonds ('fit bid')

It takes a diamond lead to hold 4♥ to ten tricks, while North-South have only eight tricks in spades.

SUMMARY

Play the same defence against any range of 1NT opening, but **against a strong no-trump**:

- Bid a suit with distribution, not on high cards;
- Double on a strong balanced hand but pull partner's double to a long suit freely;
- Consider playing take-out doubles after doubling the 1NT opening;
- Double an artificial response to suggest a lead.

While **against a weak no-trump**:

- Bidding is more constructive (other than love all at pairs);
- Consider playing a forcing pass after a penalty double;
- Double Stayman or a red-suit transfer response to show a strong hand. □

