



Michelle Brunner

A 1NT opening can include a five-card major

Two World Champions debate a hot bridge topic. Tell us whose argument has won you over by e-mailing the Editor at elena@ebu.co.uk

WHEN I was a little girl . . . seriously, though, haven't all bridge players grown up with the notion that an opening 1NT bid describes a balanced hand? I and the *Bridge Encyclopedia* (I'm pleased to quote), reckon that includes not just 4-3-3-3 and 4-4-3-2 hands but 5-3-3-2 shapes as well. I can't believe that anyone would entertain the idea of opening 1♣ or 1♦ when their balanced hand includes a five-card minor, since the pre-emptive 1NT opening bid is so carefully designed to simultaneously describe your exact shape and strength. So, why the debate? Because, for some reason, there is a school of thought which strongly disagrees with the premise of making this natural, normal, reliable, sensible, descriptive, logical and patently obvious call just because their balanced hand contains a five-card major. OK, I'm prepared to admit that, occasionally, you will achieve a more favourable result in pursuit of opening the bidding with your five-card major while I am festering in 1NT but, having the courage of my convictions, I have few scars to illustrate those rare incidents.

The 1NT opening bid – in particular the weak variety (that has to be the subject of another debate!) – is the most powerful bid in the system and if you don't use it, you lose it! To convince you, let me start by asking you to consider your rebid. Open 1♥ or 1♠ with a ropey five-carder and (unless your opponents unwittingly come to your aid) you will be forced to rebid your ropey five-card suit. That will, more often than not, lead to a ropey result when your combined fit in that suit is negligible and partner doesn't realise the need to rescue you as he expects you to hold either a six-card suit or a hand that is certainly not balanced. Next, I want you to imagine that

you end up defending and you have to suffer the consequences when partner misguidedly leads your moth-eaten suit (the subject of possibly another debate).

If those two issues alone do not constitute perpetrating a criminal offence, consider, too, the shame in losing the pre-emptive quality of the 1NT opening bid. There is a subtle, yet substantial, difference between the ease of competing over a suit opening bid (even when it is a major) as opposed to the often more dangerous nature of taking action over 1NT. Whilst most bridge players recognise such vagaries as being inherent to the world of bridge, they do little to lessen the pain and, instead, worry unnecessarily about the prospect of losing the possible major-suit fit! Allow me to allay your fears in that department too.

'Owning an eight-card fit does not necessarily mean that you should play in it'

Owning an eight-card fit does not necessarily mean that you should play in it. I could give you plenty of everyday example hands where concealing your 5-3 or 5-4 major-suit fit will propel your partnership into the only contract capable of generating a plus score for your side as, for example, when you have only to make seven, eight or nine tricks in no-trumps as opposed to the equivalent eight, nine or ten required for the major-suit strain. If you have concerns that by not opening your major-suit, your partner might fish out the wrong opening lead should you end up defending . . . well, who's to say your suit will provide the best start to the defence anyway!

That said, the ensuing auction might steer partner towards leading your undisclosed five-carder anyway. I expect my fellow

debator will also raise the issue of the potential benefit of locating a possible major-suit fit early in the auction in order to pre-empt the bidding effectively in anticipation of highly-competitive action. Indeed, whilst opening 1NT may conceal such a fit temporarily, it does not exclude the possibility of the opener re-entering the auction at a later date if he so wishes. An auction such as 1NT – (Pass) – Pass – (2♥) – 2♠, or 1NT – (2♠) – Pass – (Pass) – Double for take-out, is not uncommon.

Let's not forget, too, that all transfer systems (especially with the sophistication of transfer breaks) enable you to discover a nine or ten-card fit and if partner insists on launching to game on the strength of that information, your balanced assets will not come as a shock. By opening 1NT you will not only warn partner that your hand is limited and balanced, you will also present him with the opportunity to pre-empt the auction – now with a degree of safety – in either his own suit or, indeed, by raising directly to 3NT.

Last, but not least, if the prospect of missing your eight-card fit still haunts you, you could always incorporate the five-card Stayman convention into your repertoire, although I hesitate to recommend it as I do not play it!

The advantages of opening 1NT with a five-card major are clear, each strengthening my case incontrovertibly. To conclude, it's evident that I am passionate about opening 1NT with a five-card major but, hey, I don't think that it is necessarily right to open *every* hand thus. Holding, say, ♠AKQJ3 ♥76 ♦Q54 ♣432, even a firm believer like me can envisage the possibility of getting a better score by opening 1♠ but, notwithstanding, that's not guaranteed is it? □

A 1NT opening should not include a five-card major



THE DEBATE

Heather Dhondy

Or vote by post (Editor, English Bridge, 23 Erleigh Road, Reading RG1 5LR).
Comments for publication (not more than 200 words, please) are welcome.

BIDDING systems are developed around trying to find the correct game contract, and rightly so. In a study I have made, about 55% of all contracts are played in game (slams 7%, part-scores 38%), and in teams matches around 55% of all swings are generated from game contracts (slams 10%, part scores 35%). Therefore the main focus of our attention should be in reaching the best game.

It is long established wisdom that if an eight-card major-suit fit can be found, this is likely to result in the optimum contract. Not always, but more often than not. Even playing pairs, where one might be tempted to bid 3NT for the extra 10 points, it more often than not results in one fewer trick, whenever the major suit game allows for ruffing a suit good, or taking a ruff in the short trump hand etc. – not to mention the times where there is a weak suit that the opponents can exploit in no-trumps. The same cannot be said for minor-suit fits. Now, needing eleven tricks, the optimum contract is more likely to be 3NT. Hence opening 1NT with a five-card minor is recommended by all.

‘It is the game contracts that we want to get right’

To play a system whereby opener will bid 1NT on all 5-3-3-2 distributions, will mean that on occasions the 5-3 major suit fit will be lost. To mitigate this problem, some choose to use five-card Stayman in response. However, this does not solve all problems, and creates quite a few others as well. Whether playing five-card Stayman or not, in part-score hands, responder, holding the three-card fit, will simply pass 1NT, or perhaps remove to his or her own five-card suit, and you may end up playing

in a 5-2 fit with a 5-3 alternative available. In game hands, responder will raise 1NT to 3NT if you are not playing five-card Stayman, and the 5-3 fit will be lost. Playing five-card Stayman will help with that aspect; however, let’s consider what additional problems it causes:

- You will no longer be able to bid Stayman on weak three-suiters with short clubs, or with 4-5 (either way round) in the majors, since 2♣ must always now show at least an invitational hand.
- If the opponents come in over ordinary (promissory) Stayman, as the 1NT opener you can be sure that partner holds a four-card major. This may help you to compete with confidence holding both majors (or you can at least take a calculated risk holding one). Playing five-card Stayman, this no longer applies.
- Perhaps the biggest downside of all is that responder is almost obliged to use 2♣ whenever he holds an invitational or better hand, and has at least one three-card major. This means that on many occasions extra information has been needlessly revealed to the defence, which can only work to their advantage.

Moving on from finding the 5-3 fit, there are other advantages to opening your five-card major. Say the auction becomes competitive: are you not better placed having shown your major suit? Of course

you are. If partner has a fit, he can bid straight to the level of the fit, and pressurise the opponents’ auction. If the opponents pre-empt against you, your fit may well be hard to reach if you open 1NT, whereas opening your suit removes all the problem.

On the occasions where you end up defending, partner will have a blind lead if you open 1NT, where opening your suit may well help him. Having said that, your opening bid does not guarantee a good suit in the same way that an overcall would, so partner is not obliged to lead your suit, and can exercise judgement. However, it might provide a useful guide if an opening lead is not indicated by the responder’s hand.

Playing Acol, rebidding a major at the two level promises no more than five cards in the suit

Playing Acol with a weak no-trump, an opening bid of 1♥ or 1♠ shows no more than four of the suit, and a rebid of the same suit promises no more than five of the suit. Therefore, there is nothing wrong with opening and rebidding your suit holding only five. On occasion you will end up in a 5-1 fit at the two level, where you would prefer to be playing 1NT.

This is perhaps the strongest argument for opening 1NT with a five-card major, but remember: it is the *game contracts* that we want to get right. You can’t always reach the best part-score, whatever your methods, but you can maximise your chance of ending up in the optimum game – though not by opening 1NT with a five-card major. □

IN THE NEXT ISSUE, STEVE EGINTON AND RICHARD FLEET DEBATE WHETHER THE NATIONAL TEAM SHOULD HAVE A PRIVATE SPONSOR