

Bidding weak hands when partner opens 1NT

Over the summer, since the finish of classes, my students have been meeting each week for a duplicate game. We usually manage about 14 boards and their skills are definitely improving. One aspect of bidding that everybody seems to get wrong is the weakness takeout over 1NT.

When partner opens 1NT, it is not necessarily the best contract for our side. If you have a really horrible flat hand with very few points, you just have to pass. But if you have a long suit it is usually a much better place to play.

Whilst watching, I saw the following hands. I have withheld the names to protect the guilty.

♠ J 10 8 7 3	Partner opens 1NT. No of course you don't want to bid on this rubbish. Of course you pass, wouldn't anybody? No! Everybody wouldn't pass. Everybody should bid 2♠. 2♠ says 'Please pass partner. I am in charge and I have decided 2♠ will be a better contract than 1NT'.
♥ 4	
♦ J 10 5 2	This was opener's hand. A not very exciting 13 points. The defence against 1NT led a heart. Opener won and played the ♦K. The defence took three spades, four hearts, one diamond and a club. Three down when 2♠ goes just one off. As the opponents can make a heart contract, losing 100 is no disaster but 300 was a bottom.
♣ 9 7 5	
♠ 9 4 2	
♥ A 9 6	
♦ K Q 6	
♣ A 6 4 2	

♠ K Q J 10 3	A few boards later a hand something like this came up. Again opener bid 1NT and this time responder bid 2♠. The 1NT bidder remembered that 2♠ was a weakness takeout and passed. Of course game had been missed and that was another bottom.
♥ 4	
♦ Q 10 5 2	
♣ K J 5	

At the end of the duplicate we had a little chat about weakness takeouts and when to make them. The opening 1NT is a LIMIT bid. It describes the hand quite precisely; limiting the point count to 12, 13 or 14 points and the distribution is balanced, so there won't be any singletons and not more than one doubleton. Responder knows quite a lot about opener's hand but opener knows nothing about responder's hand. That puts responder firmly in charge. If responder bids 2♦, 2♥ or 2♠ then that says 'Partner you must pass, no arguments'.

So what should my nameless student have done on that second hand? The answer is to bid 3♠. This is a forcing bid that asks a question 'Do you have three or more spades? If yes bid 4♠, if no bid 3NT'.

Everybody nodded wisely, had it gone in, I wondered?

♠ J 4 3	Well next week we had this hand and opener bid 1NT. Wanting to do a weakness takeout into clubs, a 2♣ bid was found by responder. Opener bid 2♥ because, of course, 2♣ is Stayman and the 1NT bidder was showing a 4-card major.
♥ 7 4	
♦ 3 2	Responder bid 3♣ but opener had forgotten the system and went on to 3NT.
♣ A K J 6 5 4	

♠ Q 6 5	However this story had a happy ending. Opener held the hand shown. A spade was led and the queen won the trick. Declarer managed to cash six club tricks without the suit getting blocked, by leading ♣A, ♣K and then a small club towards the ten and one back to the jack. The defence could only cash three spades when they got in with the ♦A and that was nine tricks and a top.
♥ A J 10 5	
♦ K Q	
♣ 10 7 3 2	

If you want to make a weak takeout to clubs, you must bid 2♣ then 3♣, since in simple Standard English a bid of 2♣ does not promise a 4-card major (what is called non-promissory Stayman). However with a good suit like ♣ A K J 6 5 4 it is not necessary to remove 1NT to clubs, since the clubs are likely to make six tricks in no trumps too and that will give a much better score.

Those of you who play full Standard English with transfers will know a different way of bidding these hands.

With Hand 1 you bid 2♥ and pass partner's 2♠ bid.

With Hand 2 you bid 2♥ and then 3♦ over 2♠.

With Hand 3 if you decide to takeout to clubs, bid 2NT. This forces 3♣ from partner, which you pass.

When playing our transfer system, a 2♣ response to 1NT promises at least one 4-card major.