

September saw the return of last year's beginners, now proudly second year learners, and a new crop of would-be players taking their place. Strangely, as I write, both groups are about at the same place in the bidding. Whereas for the returners it is a quick revision before going on to the 2NT opening, for the newcomers it is their first lesson in bidding following on from the MiniBridge introduction. The topic is the opening 1NT and the subsequent auction.

There really is only one bid to learn, the rest is just common sense. Here are some examples to illustrate that point. One no trump shows 12, 13 or 14 points, a balanced hand with no 5-card major. By balanced, I mean a hand with no void, no singleton and at most one doubleton. Whilst most of my readers will be aware of the rules, it is surprising how often students want to open 1♦ with a hand like:

♠ A Q
♥ J 8 6
♦ A 10 9 6 4
♣ K 7 6

What is wrong with 1♦ they ask, I will rebid 2♦ whatever partner bids. True, but what is wrong with 1NT? It fits the rules for a one no trump opener and, more importantly, limits a weak opening hand at the first opportunity. The question inevitably comes back – “Well if that is a 1NT opener why isn't this?”

♠ A Q
♥ A 10 9 6 4
♦ J 8 6
♣ K 7 6

The answer is if we open 1NT, we have no way of showing a 5-card major and may miss a major suit game. Equally we have no way of showing a 5-card minor but we don't want to, as most game going hands with minors are played in no trumps. Let's look at how that statement affects the subsequent bidding.

♠ K J 10 9 7 4
♥ 7 5
♦ K Q 5
♣ A 2

With 13 points, you hear partner open 1NT. The combined total for our side must be at least 25, maybe as much as 27. For 1NT partner must have at least two spades, so the right bid is a simple jump to 4♠ – no need to mess about.

♠ K Q 5
♥ 7 5 4
♦ K J 10 9 7
♣ A 2

Again, you hear 1NT from partner. Again the combined total must be at least 25 points, enough to bid game. We really do not want to play in five of a minor where we have to make eleven tricks. Much better to try for no trumps where only nine tricks are needed, so we just bid 3NT – no need to mention the diamonds, partner will see them when dummy goes down. Make the ♥4 the ♦4, so we have a 6-card diamond suit, we still bid 3NT.

♠ 5 4 3
♥ 7
♦ J 10 9 7 3 2
♣ 4 3 2

What a horrible hand, certainly no game will make. Just imagine poor partner struggling in 1NT. Even with 14 points it will be an impossible task. Your hand might take a few tricks with diamonds as trumps, so bid 2♦. This is a weakness take-out and partner MUST pass however good or bad their hand. You may not make 2♦ but you will take more tricks than partner would in 1NT.

These first hands are very clear-cut. Bid the contract you want to be in, don't give information away. It can only help the defence. Sometimes, however, you will need to consult partner about the final contract. Remember that once 1NT has been opened it is responder who is in charge of the auction. Opener can reply to questions asked but is not permitted to take the initiative. Opener is limited, only responder knows if this is a game hand or a part score.

♠ K J 10 9 7
♥ 7 5 4
♦ K Q 5
♣ A 2

With 13 points we still want to be in game but now maybe 4♠ will be a better contract than 3NT. We aren't sure what to do, so we ask partner a question by bidding 3♠. It is a FORCING bid that says ‘With three or more cards in spades please raise spades, otherwise bid 3NT. Whatever you do, don't pass!’

♠ J 10 2
♥ Q 7 5
♦ K J 5 4 3
♣ A 2

Only 11 points now, maybe we have the magic 25 or better, maybe we don't. Again we have to consult partner. This time it is a different question, which we ask by bidding 2NT – ‘Are you a maximum or a minimum, partner?’ Now partner can pass with only 12 points, bid 3NT with 14 and decide what to do with 13 depending on whether the mood is optimistic or pessimistic.