

Suit contracts after a 1NT opening

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Nothing is more annoying than have an opponent cashing winners in a long suit to beat our 3NT contract. If only we were playing with a trump suit we could ruff their winners. Which is why, if we have at least eight cards in a major, we often choose to play in game in that major. But how can we find an 8-card major fit after our side starts the bidding with a 1NT opening? It's easy if responder has a long suit: -

♠ K Q 9 8 6 4
♥ 3
♦ A J 6
♣ K 8 2

When 1NT is opened, responder knows that the 1NT hand has at least two spades, so with six or more spades responder can just bid 4♠. The message from the 4♠ bid is clear. Opener must pass.

♠ K Q 8 6 4
♥ J 3
♦ A J 6
♣ K 8 2

It's a bit harder with only five spades. This hand has the values for game but cannot tell whether 4♠ or 3NT would be best. The answer is to bid 3♠, which asks partner to raise to 4♠ holding three or more spades, but to bid 3NT otherwise.

With values for game and a 6-card major, bid game directly over 1NT.

With values for game and a 5-card major, ask partner to choose the best game by bidding your major at the three level.

But look at this deal: -

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

Whether East or West open 1NT, the other hand would raise to 3NT. Whilst 4♠ will make ten tricks nearly all the time, 3NT will go down on a heart lead, losing at least four hearts and the spade ace. Can we find an 8-card spade fit when the spades are divided 4-4?

The answer is yes, but only if we use a conventional bid. A convention is a bid, which has been given an artificial meaning to help solve a particular problem. The convention we need is called Stayman. Stayman uses a 2♣ response to 1NT to ask a question 'Partner do you have a 4-card major?' The responses to the 2♣ bid are: -

2♦ I do not have four cards in either major.

2♥ I have four hearts and maybe four spades.

2♠ I have four spades but not four hearts.

Using Stayman the bidding on the hand above would go:

West East

1NT 2♣

2♠ 4♠

When West can respond 2♠ to the 2♣ enquiry, East has enough to raise to 4♠. If West had replied 2♦ or 2♥ to Stayman, East would just bid 3NT. Of course before bidding 2♣, responder must check they can cope with any response opener might make.

Let's look at Stayman, as practised by my class.

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

Elsa Barbara

1NT 2♣
2♥ 3NT

Barbara tried 2♣ to see if Elsa had four spades, but when the response was 2♥ she had the values to bid 3NT.

Without the ♦3 instead of ♦J, Barbara would have only 12 points and would rebid 2NT, but Elsa would know 2NT is a game try and she has enough to bid 3NT.

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

West East

1NT 2♣

2♦ ? I won't publish the name of the East player who tried 2♣ and then realised she didn't know what to do when West bid 2♦. She bid 2NT, West went 3NT and that went two down.

East must pass if she cannot cope with any response the 1NT bidder might make.

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

Russell Sylvia

1NT 2♣
2♥ 2NT
3♠ pass

When Russell bid 2♥, Sylvia correctly bid 2NT and Russell was about to bid 3NT when he started to think. Why had Sylvia bid Stayman and then 2NT? The answer must be that Sylvia has four spades. So instead of 3NT he bid 3♠. Now Sylvia thought that she had shown her points and her spades, so she passed 3♠. Before I could even ask a question, Russell said 'Of course I must bid 4♠, I know she has 11-12 points and I am a maximum for 1NT.'

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

Janet called me over when John opened the West hand with 1NT. She knew if she bid 2♣ it would be Stayman and she wanted to make a weakness takeout into clubs. I explained that the one time 2♣ did not have a 4-card major was when the hand rebid 3♣, so the bidding went:

John Janet

1NT 2♣

2♥ 3♣

pass

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

To make the point more interesting I changed Janet's hand. . Now when Janet bid 2♣ over 1NT, John bid 2♥ and Janet could pass 2♥ to play in their 4-4 heart fit. If John had responded either 2♦ or 2♠ she would have bid 3♣.

Over 1NT opening, a 2♣ response asks about majors.

2♦ shows neither hearts nor spades. 2♥ shows four hearts. 2♠ shows four spades and denies four hearts.

To bid 2♣ and then 3♣ is a weak takeout into clubs.

Only respond 2♣ to 1NT if you can cope with any response partner might make.