

English Bridge October 2001

Each year sees hundreds of new students join our classes. Some people have hardly seen a pack of cards before and for the teacher, these are the easiest to teach – they believe what they are told and don't argue. But some students, particularly those, who join the course later on, can be a problem. Often they learnt to play many years ago – perhaps at school or with their parents. It may seem unlikely but the game has changed over the years, as new ideas are adapted.

I had trouble explaining this to Mark, who had learned to play when he was working abroad some 25 years ago. Every time he wanted to make a different bid from the one I recommended!

Bidding is a code. The words One No Trump do not have a meaning until you and your partner have agreed what that meaning should be and the context in which that meaning should apply. Of course you don't have to work this out for yourself, by playing Standard English you are taught the code and how to interpret it. A few examples might make this point a lot clearer.

♠ K Q J 10
♥ 10 4
♦ K J 6 5
♣ K 6 2

This hand is a 1NT opening bid. It is balanced. With 13 points it is right in the middle of the 12-14 range for a 1NT opening bid. But Mark didn't like that. He wanted to open 1♦, that's what he had always bid and he didn't see why he should change.

Now Mark is not wrong, at least he is only wrong because we are playing Standard English. There are many countries of the world where 1♦ would be the correct opening bid. If you ever play in France or the United States, for instance, 1♦, would be most people's choice since a 1NT opening shows a different point range. But not in England where it is normal to play that 1NT

♠ K Q 10 6
♥ K 4
♦ K J 6 5
♣ K 6 2

shows 12-14 points. There is a good reason for what we do. If a hand is a minimum balanced opener, 1NT gets the hand across in one bid. Somewhat disgruntled Mark agreed to try these methods and then the next hand came along. It looked very nearly the same as the last one, just three points stronger.

Well he said, at least I can open 1♦ this time. But Janet corrected him 'No Mark, you are right that it is too strong for 1NT, but we play you should open 1♠. If partner cannot support spades, you probably don't have an 8-card major suit fit. You will make your rebid in no trumps to show your stronger point count' I was very pleased to hear how well Janet remembered the lesson from last year.

♠ A J 3 2
♥ J 6 2
♦ A Q 4 3
♣ Q 3

Janet was caught out with this hand though, when Mark opened 1♠. Janet was second to speak and overcalled 1NT. Mark knew what was wrong with that bid and was happy to remind her that a 1NT overcall showed 16-18 points. The 1NT overcall needs to be stronger as with an opening bid on your right, there are not many points left for partner. The correct action on this hand is to pass, even though you would happily have opened 1NT.

♠ 5 4
♥ Q 9 8
♦ 10 9 8
♣ A 9 8 7 5

Having persuaded Janet to pass over 1♠, Phil in third seat had to respond to his partner's 1♠ opening. He felt like passing on these miserable six points, as he was not strong enough to respond 2♣. But since Mark could hold as many as 19 points for his 1♠ opening, the partnership could have as much as a combined 25 points and game could be on. So Phil correctly responded 1NT, showing 6-9 points. Marion passed in fourth seat, she only had five points and Mark, who actually had 15 points, cheerfully bid 3NT, saying 'If partner has 12-14 points we should be in game!' Everybody was happy to help correct this mistake!

Oh dear, when I set these hands up for a revision session I had not realised the problems I would cause. So let's be clear, 1NT only has a meaning in a given context. Here is my summary

A 1NT **opening** bid shows a balanced 12-14 points

A 1NT **overcall** shows 16-18 points with a stopper in the opening suit

A 1NT **response** to partner's opening is a dustbin bid. It shows 6-9 points, a hand not good enough to make a response at the two level. It may not be a balanced hand.

A 1NT **rebid** by opener shows 15-16 points and a fairly balanced hand.