

Responding to and defending against 1NT

We receive much correspondence regarding the legality of bidding sequences such as:

1.

<u>N</u>	<u>S</u>	
1NT	2♦ (a)	
2♥	3♦	
Pass		

 (a) 2♦ is ostensibly a transfer but it transpires that South has weakness take-out in ♦s.

2.

<u>N</u>	<u>S</u>	
1NT	2♣ (b)	
any	3♣	
Pass		

 (b) 2♣ is ostensibly Stayman but it transpires that South has weakness take-out in ♣s.

3.

<u>N</u>	<u>E</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>W</u>	
1NT	2♦ (c)	Pass	2♠	
Pass	3♦	Pass	Pass	
Pass				(c) 2♦ is ostensibly Astro (or a similar conventional defence) but it transpires that East has a ♦ one-suiter.

4.

<u>N</u>	<u>E</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>W</u>	
1NT	2♥ (d)	Pass	2♠	
Pass	3♥	Pass	Pass	
Pass				(d) 2♥ is ostensibly Pinpoint Astro (or a similar conventional defence) but it transpires that East has a ♥ one-suiter

(The distinction between cases 3 and 4 will be made clear later).

Unfortunately “is it legal?” is a simple question to which the answer is far from simple. It may be clearer why this is so if you consider that a number of different things may possibly have happened when a player’s bid in one of these sequences is explained as meaning one thing, and his hand turns out to be something quite different. Taking case 3 as an example there are four possible scenarios:-

A. The explanation is a correct statement of the partnership agreement, but the bidder has forgotten the system. In other words, the actual partnership agreement is that 2♦ is Astro, showing ♠s and another. E, however, has forgotten and bids 2♦ thinking that it is natural. Here there is no infraction in the first instance – it is not an infraction to forget the system, although there may be unauthorised information consequences.

B. The explanation is incorrect. This time it is W who has had an aberration – perhaps he plays Astro with other partners – E’s bid of 2♦ showing ♦s is in accordance with the actual agreement. Here there is an infraction – giving misinformation about the agreed methods.

C. E/W have an agreement that the bid is two-way – initially it is treated as conventional, but if the suit concerned is repeated, it cancels the previous message and becomes natural. The initial message of 2♦ seems to be “I have ♠s and another”, but the message of 3♦ is “cancel the previous message – I have ♦s”. In reality this is more than somewhat misleading – the full message of 2♦ is “I either have ♠s and another or just ♦s – please await clarification”. Here there is an infraction – giving incomplete or misleading information about the agreed methods, and in addition those methods may or may not be permitted.

D. E/W do not have an agreement that the bid is two-way. E knows perfectly well that 2♦ is supposed to show ♠s and another, but he has been dealt ♦s, and does not know how to show ♦s. He hopes that W will get the right message if he bids 2♦ then 3♦. This is effectively a psyche, and there may be an infraction if the psyche is fielded.

Depending on which scenario applies, one or more of a number of different legal problems may arise with these sequences. I will deal with them in turn.

Is the sequence legal? – Problem 1: Permitted methods

The obvious question is “are these sequences permitted by the *Orange Book*?” (the publication which contains details of permitted systems and conventions in England). It is important to note that what the *Orange Book* has to say about permitted bidding methods applies to partnership agreements. There can be no question of a finding that E/W are playing an illegal method unless they have an agreement to play it. They may have discussed it and specifically agreed to play it (i.e. scenario C applies). Alternatively, even if it has not been specifically agreed, if E makes the bid hoping that W will read it as he intends it (i.e. scenario D applies), and W does read it correctly, it is open to the Tournament Director to rule that there is an implicit agreement.

There cannot be an illegal agreement in cases 1 and 2. The reason is that when it comes to responding to 1NT, **all** methods are permitted at Levels 2, 3 and 4.

By contrast, the rules regarding defending against 1NT (cases 3 and 4) are rather different, and to complicate matters they changed on 1st April 2005. The essential distinction is between situations in which all methods of defending are permitted, and situations in which conventional defences require an “anchor suit”. An anchor suit is a known suit in which the overcaller will always have length. For example, in traditional Astro, where 2♣ shows ♥s and a minor, ♥s is an anchor suit, because the overcaller always promises ♥s, but ♣s and ♦s are not anchor suits because the overcaller may or may not have them – he may have ♥s and ♣s, or he may have ♥s and ♦s.

Before 1st April 2005 the position was as follows:-

Level 2	Requires an anchor suit
Level 3	Requires an anchor suit (except in the pass-out seat)
Level 4	Any defence permitted

Since 1st April 2005 the position is now:-

Level 2	Requires an anchor suit
Level 3	Any defence permitted
Level 4	Any defence permitted

So, if the pair have the agreement to play a two-way method in case 3, it is now permitted unless they are playing at Level 2.

What about case 4? Under Pinpoint Astro, a 2♥ overcall shows ♥s and ♠s, so under the two-way method the options are “♥s and ♠s” or “just ♥s”. But notice – both options always contain ♥s, so there is an anchor suit after all. In reality the agreement is “it shows ♥s – it may be single-suited, but if there is a second suit it will be ♠s”. This agreement is actually permitted at Level 2.

To summarise the position about permitted methods for overcalls, the two-way method (either the two-suiter or a single-suiter) is o.k. if you are playing at Level 3 or above, and it is also o.k. at Level 2, provided that when you have a two-suiter, one of the suits is always the same as the suit you have if you have a single-suiter.

Have the opponents been given correct and complete information? – Problem 2: Misinformation

“Special partnership agreements must be fully and freely available to opponents.” So says Law 75. Consider a hand – you have opening values and a decent 5- or 6-card ♥ suit, but it is LHO to speak first. He opens 1NT, partner passes and RHO bids 2♦, which LHO alerts. You ask about 2♦ and are told “transfer”. Gosh – RHO has hearts, unexpected but perfectly possible. Perhaps the opponents will get to play in 2♥, where your trumps will be a considerable nuisance. So you pass and await developments. LHO duly bids 2♥, partner passes again and RHO bids 3♦. Whatever this means you have nothing to say at this point, although it looks as though RHO has a decent hand with ♥s and ♦s (which leaves partner with precious few points and no more than a singleton ♥). The opponents seem to be about to play in 3NT or a ♦ contract, where the bad ♥ break may still prove to be an embarrassment to them, and they still might (just) end up in ♥s. So you pass again and the next thing you know is that you are on lead to 3♦, and of course it transpires that LHO has a weak hand with long ♦s, partner has a few scattered values, and you could have made anything between 2♥ and 5♥ your way. If you had known that RHO could have had just ♦s and not ♥s at all, you would have overcalled 2♥. If the opponents had an agreement that 2♦ was a two-way bid, they should have told you about the possibility when you asked about 2♦. If you had had the full information, you would have concluded on the evidence of your hand that it was unlikely that RHO held ♥s, and you would have got your ♥s into the game and achieved a much better result.

In particular it is misleading to describe the 2♦ bid as merely being a “transfer”. The use of the word “transfer” implies that the bidder always holds the next suit up, here ♥s, and gives no clue to the possibility that he might hold ♦s and not ♥s at all. If a pair has agreed to play the two-way method in case 1, then the correct explanation is along the following lines “It asks me to bid 2♥ – if he follows with 3♦ he has a weak take-out into ♦s and the sequence says nothing about ♥s; if he does anything else next, he has a normal transfer to ♥s.” A prominent reference to the two possibilities for 2♦ should also be included on the convention card. (A bid which asks partner to do something specific without guaranteeing any particular holding in the bidder’s hand is technically known as a “puppet”, but what is important is not so much the terminology used as the completeness and accuracy of the underlying information).

Have the players been influenced by their own side’s alerts or explanations? – Problem 3: Unauthorised information

Alerts and explanations are for the opponents’ benefit – not for that of the alerting side. A player who makes a bid which he thinks is natural is not permitted to base his subsequent bidding on the fact that partner has alerted, whichever partner has made the mistake. If the agreement is that the bid is natural, the bidder is not allowed to know that partner has misinterpreted it; if the agreement is that the bid is conventional, the bidder is not permitted to allow the alert to wake him up to the fact that he has himself forgotten the system.

If S in case 1 believed that 2♦ was natural, then he has a huge ethical problem when he hears his partner alert it and bid 2♥! The ethical situation is that the 2♦ bidder must assume that his partner has made a natural 2♥ response to a 2♦ weakness take-out, and he must bid accordingly. That suggests that opener has good ♥s and no liking for ♦s, so if responder has good tolerance for ♥s along with his ♦ suit, he has a responsibility to pass (or raise) 2♥, rather than simply rebidding 3♦ and hoping partner gets the message. Similar considerations apply in case 3 if E overcalls 2♦, thinking it is natural, and W alerts and responds 2♠. In fact there is much more scope for W having a natural 2♠ response in this situation – after all he could have 6+ ♠s and a void ♦. E is

not allowed to bid on the basis that W is only supporting a ♠ suit W thinks E has shown. Instead, he must assume that W has a ♠ suit of his own. A 3♦ rebid would only be acceptable if E has long ♦s and very short ♠s.

It is quite possible for problem 2 and problem 3 to occur at the same time.

Has the partner taken inappropriate action opposite the bid? – Problem 4: Fielding

If a player departs from his agreed methods, it may be accidental (scenario A, known as a misbid) or deliberate (scenario D, a psyche). In either case his partner is expected to continue bidding in accordance with the actual agreement, unless and until the psyche or misbid is “exposed”. In other words, players must assume that their partners are bidding in accordance with the partnership agreement unless and until the only plausible explanation of the auction is that partner has departed from the agreed system.

Consider case 3, from W's perspective. E has shown ♠s and another, and W has decided to sign off in 2♠. E now bids 3♦. Why should this not be a game try with extra values, showing that ♦s are the second suit? If W has a maximum for his 2♠ bid, or the knowledge that E has ♠s and ♦s means that the hands fit well, then he should consider bidding 4♠. If he has better ♠s than ♦s, even with a poor hand, he should return to 3♠. It would be abnormal to pass 3♦ opposite the presumed meaning of the 3♦ rebid, unless W had, say, only 3 (or fewer) ♠s and better ♦s. If W takes abnormal action, and it turns out that E has departed from the system and has ♦s alone instead of ♠s and ♦s, then he has fielded the psyche or misbid.

Summary

Case 1 (2♦ “transfer” followed by 3♦)

Whilst this is a legal method, in our experience it tends to arise not by agreement but because either responder has forgotten that the pair are playing transfers or opener has forgotten that they are not playing transfers. Alternatively, responder may be inventing system at the table because he does not know what to do with a weak hand with ♦s.

In the original form of transfers, this sequence shows 5 ♥s and 4 ♦s and is forcing for at least one round. If you wish to play transfers, we believe that it is much better to stick to this meaning for the sequence. There are a number of other sequences available for signing off in ♦s: for example, responses of 2♣, 2♠, 2NT, 3♣ and 3♦ can all be put to good use in one way or another (there are many different methods available on the market).

You should also note that if you do play the sequence as showing a weak takeout into ♦s, the 3♦ rebid is alertable as well as the initial 2♦ response, because it is non-forcing, whereas the normal meaning for the sequence is forcing.

Case 2 (2♣ Stayman followed by 3♣)

This is relatively harmless, for three reasons. First, the original form of the Stayman convention caters for the possibility that 2♣ followed by 3♣ is a weakness take-out. Secondly, the opponents are probably aware (or, at least, they should be aware) of the possibility and can ask if they need to know (there are many different schemes of continuations after Stayman, and opponents should not assume that any one, rather than any other, is in use). Finally, it is not really credible to imagine that a player has forgotten whether or not he is playing Stayman, so the unauthorised information problems are unlikely to arise.

It would be refreshing to see convention cards made out, or explanations given, such as “2♣ Stayman – could be the first move as a weakness take-out into ♣s.” However, it isn't absolutely essential to do so, because opponents are unlikely to be misled.

Case 3 (2♦ Astro followed by 3♦)

This is similar to case 1, but worse, for two reasons. First, because if you are playing at Level 2 it is not a permitted method. Second, because the unauthorised information problems tend to be

worse because there is a much wider range of hands that a responder to an overcall might have, in comparison with a 1NT opener.

Our advice is that if you play Astro (or similar), then with a one-suiter in ♦s you should agree to overcall 3♦ immediately (you're going to end up at the 3-level anyway, so why beat about the bush?).

Case 4 (2♥ Pinpoint Astro followed by 3♥)

This is similar to cases 1 and 3, but without the possible problems with permitted methods. Again, if you want to play a method whereby all two-level overcalls show two-suiters, you should agree to use some different call to show the one-suiters. A direct jump to the 3-level is the obvious choice, but at Levels 3 and 4 you can even use double to show an unspecified one-suiter – if (and of course it's a big "if") you are prepared to forego the use of a penalty double.

General advice

If you insist on using these two-way methods, then you should be careful to protect yourselves by:

- providing full details on your convention card;
- providing the opponents with a full explanation should they ask for one; and
- making sure that neither you nor your partner forget the system.

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(This is an expanded and updated version of an original by EBU Chief Tournament Director Max Bavin).