



# No-Trump Overcalls

It would be helpful for you to understand why you need more points to overcall 1NT than open 1NT. While opening 1NT carries some risk, it is not always easy for the opponents to realise that they have the majority of points, which is the best criterion for deciding to make a penalty double. One of the benefits of playing a weak no-trump is that sometimes opponents each have a balanced hand with 13 points but cannot enter the auction. 1NT goes lots off, but it doesn't come close to compensating for a missed game. However suppose South opens 1♥ and

West comes in with 1NT. If North has nine or more points it is clear that North/South have the majority of points, making a penalty double easy.

**It is much easier to make a penalty double of a 1NT overcall than a 1NT opening bid.**

Note that a double of a 1NT overcall is for penalties, just like the double of a 1NT opening bid. The EBU criteria for alerting doubles reflect good practice here. A double of a natural suit bid below 3NT is assumed to be for take-out unless alerted. A double of a no-trump bid is assumed to be for penalties unless alerted.

**A 1NT overcall shows a good 15-18 points. It also guarantees at least one stopper in their suit.**

You might open 1NT with a weak suit but once your opponents have bid a suit, effectively telling you (and themselves) what they are going to lead, you need a stopper in that suit.

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

With Hand A you should pass a 1♥ opening. This is a bad 15 points. I like Bernard's advice to deduct a point from 4-3-3-3 shape hands, because they have such limited trick taking potential. You don't need to worry about missing game because if the auction continues (1♥) Pass (Pass) ?

to your partner he is in the protective seat, and very different criteria apply to bidding in the protective position.

With Hand B, overcall 1♥ with 1NT. This is a far better 15 points: 4-4-3-2 shape, good intermediates and a double heart stopper. Yes you have a weakness in spades but there is a principle in competitive bidding that applies widely.

**When opponents have bid a suit, for bidding no-trumps you need to concentrate on the suit they have bid, not suits they haven't bid.**

Suppose you overcall 1NT with Hand B. Sometimes partner will have spade values. However even if spades are a genuine weakness, bear in mind that the opening leader will feel under some pressure to lead his partner's suit, hearts. Occasionally they will find the spade lead. The right reaction to that is not to worry how you could have bid better but to accept it as an occupational hazard and get on with the next hand.

Hand C	Hand D
♠ 8	♠ 9 8
♥ A Q 9 7	♥ K 2
♦ K Q 8 5	♦ 9 5 4
♣ A Q 10 9	♣ A K Q J 8 7

## Hand E

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

Suppose your right hand opponent has opened 1♥ and you hold Hand C. There is no perfect bid. Thirty years ago players tended to pass, hoping partner could protect. This was called a 'trap pass'. Nowadays I think most experts would regard a 1NT overcall as the least flawed option. Note that you do not have the option of making a take-out double of 1♥ and then converting 1♠ by partner to 2♣, showing the other two suits. You will see next month that Auction F shows a hand with long clubs, too strong to overcall 2♣.

Auction F			
West	North	East	South
1♥	Dbl	Pass	1♠
Pass	2♣		

If you wish you can agree with partner that this shows clubs and diamonds, but you need to be aware that if you make a take-out double partner will expect you to have at least three cards in each of the other three suits. How are you going to feel if you double with Hand C and the auction develops as in Auction G?

Auction G			
West	North	East	South
1♥	Dbl	3♥	4♠

With Hand D it is perfectly reasonable to overcall 1♥ with 2♣, but 1NT is a practical alternative that many experts would choose. You may not have the usually required number of points (15), but the solid club suit suggests that it may be possible to bid and make 3NT on fewer than usual points. I would bid 1NT, but I would run to 2♣ if doubled.

While it is undesirable to pass 1♥ with lots of points I think there really is no alternative with Hand E. You are overloaded in hearts and have no particular interest in suggesting anything else. Suppose the auction develops as in Auction H? What do you think 2♥ means?

Auction H			
West	North	East	South
1♥	Pass	1♠	Pass
1NT	2♥		

In my view to pass first time and bid hearts at the two level second time allows no other sensible interpretation except that you have really excellent hearts. However, there is real danger in this line of thinking unless you have lots of time and energy to discuss numerous sequences with your partner. Club players need general principles that guide them through numerous sequences. Here is one.

**If your opponents have bid a suit naturally, then if you bid that suit it is conventional.**

If you adopt this principle then you will never play in a suit once it has been bid by an opponent. Experts are not totally happy with that and point out that it makes it very difficult to overcome a psyche by an opponent. True, but a principle like this performs an invaluable role for club players: it avoids confusion. It is virtually impossible for experts to identify every possible sequence. It is totally impossible for club players who don't have unlimited time at their disposal. The moment you start making exceptions to a general

principle you open up the likelihood that a less clear-cut sequence will crop up and that you and your partner will come to different conclusions. Having said that, it is for you to decide how you want to approach this with your partner. And don't assume that for all their hard work experts never have misunderstandings. They do, and they are sometimes spectacular!

I will summarise my view on complexity, which is almost an obsession with me. How ambitious you are in conventions and interpretations should reflect how much time you are prepared to spend with your partner. Any exception you make to a general principle should be determined by how often it will occur. I frequently see club players invent undiscussed bids that they expect partner to work out, or agree specific sequences with partner that might crop up once every five years, by which time either or both of them will have forgotten. They invariably fall flat on their face. Having said this, I will no longer need to reinforce it. I will give you lots of principles and discuss occasional exceptions. Otherwise depart from the principle at your own risk.

## Opener's partner acts over a 1NT overcall

I now look at how opener's partner bids over a 1NT overcall, as in Auction M.

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

Hand L
♠ A Q 10 9 8 6
♥ 9
♦ 6 5
♣ 8 7 6 5

Auction M			
West	North	East	South
?		1♥	1NT

If West knows that his side has the balance of points he doubles. West doubles with Hand J. Note that if the final contract is 1NT doubled, West leads the ♥2, usual from three to an honour. The old practice of leading the highest card in partner's suit is flawed. It costs a trick in Layout N.

Layout N		
♥ 5 3		
♥ Q 7 2	<div style="display: inline-block; transform: rotate(45deg); transform-origin: center;"> <div style="display: inline-block; transform: rotate(-45deg);">N</div> <div style="display: inline-block; transform: rotate(-45deg);">W</div> <div style="display: inline-block; transform: rotate(45deg);">E</div> <div style="display: inline-block; transform: rotate(45deg);">S</div> </div>	♥ A 9 8 6 4
♥ K J 10		

West also doubles with Hand K. And I will commit another act of heresy here. The best lead is not automatically partner's suit. It is all too likely here that partner has mediocre hearts and that declarer's hearts are waiting to gobble them up. Lead the ♠Q. If you are lucky partner has the ♠K. If declarer has it he is pretty well forced to take it or lose it, and hopefully partner will subsequently return a spade, or if he has no spade to lead, switch to a diamond.

With Hand L West bids 2♠. With nine or more points West would have doubled, so 2♠ cannot be forcing. It shows a good suit in a limited hand. Opener certainly doesn't rebid hearts just because he dislikes spades. When one partner has a good suit in a weak hand it is usually right to have this suit as trumps, otherwise lack of entries renders the suit useless.

If opener's partner doubles does opener stand the double?

Hand P	Hand Q
♠ 9	♠ 9
♥ A Q 8 6 5	♥ A Q 10 8 6 5
♦ K 10 8	♦ K 7
♣ A 5 4 3	♣ 8 5 4 3

Hand R
♠ 9
♥ A Q J 8 7
♦ Q J 8 7 5
♣ 9 4

Auction S				
West	North	East	South	
Pass	Pass	1♥	1NT	
Dbl	Pass	?		

Hand P is a sound opening bid. It is almost always correct to pass if you have a sound opening bid, so on most hands you will leave in the double.

With Hand Q, East wasn't playing weak two bids and opened 1♥ in third position for lead directing purposes. With Hand Q East should rebid 2♥, a strong message for West to pass.

Equally with Hand R, East rebids 2♦. Again West will normally choose between 2♦ and 2♥ unless very strong.

**If opener removes responder's penalty double of a 1NT overcall, he has a weak, probably shapely hand.**

I will end this section by looking at how the auction might continue after a penalty double if the partner of the 1NT bidder removes the double.

Auction T				
West	North	East	South	
Pass	Pass	1♥	1NT	
Dbl	2♣	Dbl		

This is covered by another wide ranging principle:

**After one penalty double all subsequent doubles are for penalty.**

If North/South are in serious trouble then they should not be let off lightly.

## Bidding opposite a 1NT overcall

Your system opposite a 1NT overcall should be the same

as opposite a 1NT opening bid, so Stayman, Transfers etc.

Obviously partner will take account of the fact that the 1NT overcall is 3-4 points stronger than a 1NT opening bid.

If the 1NT overcall is doubled you need to know whether Stayman and transfers still apply.

## 2NT overcalls

This is the source of endless confusion among club players so let me try to explain the theory behind the unusual no-trump (UNT).

If you are too strong for a 1NT overcall, you double first and then bid no-trumps.

So you have no natural use for a direct jump to 2NT over 1♥. Bridge players love to find uses for redundant bids, hence the widespread use of 2NT to show the lowest two unbid suits.

How about if opponents open a weak 2♥? You have one fewer level to bid no-trumps, and you desperately need to be able to bid a natural 2NT, showing a good 16-19 points. You cannot afford to give up the natural use for 2NT.

Let me try to give you a principle here.

**A 2NT overcall is an unusual no-trump if, and only if, it is over a 1-level bid.**

When we look at protective bidding you will learn that a protective jump to 2NT is needed as a natural bid, but in the meantime the general principle should serve you well.

Opposite a natural 2NT overcall you should play the same system as opposite a 2NT opening bid. ■

# No-Trump Overcall Quiz

by Andrew Kambites

1. At love all what should South bid with these hands if East opens 1♦?

Hand A	Hand B	Hand C	Hand D	Hand E
♠ K J 6	♠ K J 6	♠ K J 6	♠ 5 3	♠ K 3
♥ K 6 4 3	♥ K 6 4 3	♥ K J 4 3	♥ 10 5 4	♥ K Q 7 6 4
♦ A J 9	♦ A J 9	♦ 9 7 6	♦ A 6	♦ 5
♣ 8 3 2	♣ A 7 3	♣ A K Q	♣ A K Q 6 5 4	♣ A K J 6 4

2. At game all what should East bid with these hands after the auction shown?

Hand A	Hand B	Hand C	West	North	East	South
♠ K 7 6	♠ K 7 6	♠ K Q 10 7 6 5	1♦	1NT	?	
♥ 5 3	♥ 5 3	♥ 9 6				
♦ Q 4 3 2	♦ Q 4 3 2	♦ J 10 7				
♣ J 8 7 6	♣ A J 8 7	♣ 7 5				

3. At game all what should West bid with these hands after the auction shown?

Hand A	Hand B	Hand C	West	North	East	South
♠ K 4 3	♠ 8	♠ 6 3	1♦	1NT	Dbl	Pass
♥ J 7	♥ J	♥ A 6	?			
♦ K Q 10 7 5 4	♦ K Q 10 7 5 4	♦ K J 10 9 7				
♣ Q 4	♣ K J 10 6 4	♣ A 8 4 2				

4. With North/South vulnerable, what should South bid with these hands after the auction shown?

Hand A	Hand B	Hand C	West	North	East	South
♠ Q 10 9 4 3	♠ 9 8 6 4	♠ Q 10 9 4 3	1♦	1NT	Dbl	?
♥ 8 6	♥ J 10 7 6	♥ A 7 5				
♦ 6 3 2	♦ K 7 6 2	♦ 6 3				
♣ J 10 9	♣ 2	♣ J 10 9				

5. With North/South vulnerable what should South bid with these hands after East opens a weak 2♥?

Hand A	Hand B	Hand C
♠ 7 4	♠ A 8	♠ A 8
♥ 9	♥ A Q 4	♥ A Q 4
♦ K Q 5 4 3	♦ K Q 6 5 2	♦ A K Q 5 3
♣ A K 6 5 4	♣ Q 6 5	♣ Q 6 5

# Answers to No-Trump Overcall Quiz

1. At love all what should South bid with these hands if East opens 1♦?

Hand A	Hand B	Hand C
♠ K J 6	♠ K J 6	♠ K J 6
♥ K 6 4 3	♥ K 6 4 3	♥ K J 4 3
♦ A J 9	♦ A J 9	♦ 9 7 6
♣ 8 3 2	♣ A 7 3	♣ A K Q

Hand D	Hand E
♠ 5 3	♠ K 3
♥ 10 5 4	♥ K Q 7 6 4
♦ A 6	♦ 5
♣ A K Q 6 5 4	♣ A K J 6 4

Hand A Pass.

Hand B 1NT. 15-18 points and at least one diamond stopper.

Hand C Double. No diamond stopper for 1NT but too strong to feel happy about passing.

Hand D 1NT. Solid clubs and a diamond stopper. The majors are unguarded but you only need to worry about the suit they have bid and are likely to lead. 2♣ wouldn't be wrong.

Hand E 2NT. The unusual 2NT, provided it falls within your agreed range for 2NT. Showing the lower two unbid suits.

2. At game all what should East bid with these hands after the auction shown?

West	North	East	South
1♦	1NT	?	

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

Hand A 2♦. Show support for partner.

Hand B Dbl. Your side has the majority of points.

Hand C 2♠. Not forcing. Shows a good six-card suit.

3. At game all what should West bid with these hands after the auction shown?

West	North	East	South
1♦	1NT	Dbl	Pass
?			

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

Hand A 2♦. A minimum opening with no sure entry to your diamonds.

Hand B 2♣. Minimum with no way to know if your suits will run.

Hand C Pass. A perfectly respectable opening bid. The two aces will help you set up the diamonds. Remember, leaving in the double is the normal action.

4. With North/South vulnerable, what should South bid with these hands after the auction shown?

West	North	East	South
1♦	1NT	Dbl	?

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

Hand A 2♠. Sign off. Without the double you would sign off in 2♠ with a transfer (if you play transfers). Play the same system opposite a 1NT overcall as you do opposite a 1NT opening bid.

Hand B Pass. Nothing you can say. 2♣ wouldn't be Stayman after the double.

Hand C Pass. You expect 1NT doubled to make.

5. With North/South vulnerable, what should South bid with these hands after East opens a weak 2♥?

Hand A	Hand B	Hand C
♠ 7 4	♠ A 8	♠ A 8
♥ 9	♥ A Q 4	♥ A Q 4
♦ K Q 5 4 3	♦ K Q 6 5 2	♦ A K Q 5 3
♣ A K 6 5 4	♣ Q 6 5	♣ Q 6 5

Hand A Pass. Or 3♦, hoping to bid clubs later. 2NT would not be the Unusual 2NT.

Hand B 2NT. 16-19 points and at least one heart stopper.

Hand C 3NT. Too strong for 2NT. Hope partner can provide a little help.