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## The 12 habits of highly effective bidders

### 5. They are not slaves to their systems. (continued)

Everyone's bidding system includes unwritten rules about the meanings of common calls. These include principles we learned as beginners, plus other guidelines that are so widely accepted they rarely require discussion.

Many of these guidelines center on what constitutes an acceptable notrump opening bid. Years ago, it was considered risky — even foolish — to open 1NT or 2NT with an unstopped suit or a five-card major. The more modern view is that a notrump opening offers so many advantages that it pays to loosen your definition of the hands that qualify.

These changes in the "conventional wisdom" about notrump openings have made it a topic that warrants partnership discussion. Here are some problem hands for 15–17 notrump openers and solutions you may want to adopt.

♠KQ5 ♥AJ742 ♦AQ6 ♣93

Open 1NT. Some experts advocate opening 1NT with virtually any 5–3–3–2 hand in your range. Others prefer the major unless the hand is otherwise "perfect" for notrump. It

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can be argued that this one isn't because of the unstopped club suit, but that's a minor flaw when you consider your rebid problems after opening 1♥.

This hand isn't strong enough to raise a 1NT response, and you have no way to describe it if partner responds 1♠. Over a forcing 1NT, you can rebid 2♦, but if partner takes a preference to 2♥, you have a poor suit for playing a 5–2 fit.

♠KQ6 ♥A8 ♦1085 ♣AKJ105

Bid 1♣, planning to rebid 2NT. This hand is so much better than a typical 1NT opener that it deserves an upgrade. The strong five-card suit and outside quick tricks will make this 17-point hand play like 18 or 19, so plan to bid it that way.

♠QJ8 ♥AQ2 ♦KQJ104 ♣A10

2NT. Sticklers for point-count would open 1♦ and rebid 2NT. For the same reasons as above, though, this is more powerful than most hands of 18–19 points, so call it 20 and bid accordingly.

♠AQ ♥K10 ♦A962 ♣QJ863

1NT. The alternative is opening 1♣ and rebidding 2♦ over partner's major-suit response. Your hand is dead minimum (some would say sub-minimum) for this action, but the main problem is that it steers partner away from notrump, which is your most likely game. When you reverse, partner sees a 5–4 pattern with values concentrated in your suits, usually with a singleton outside. That's not the message you want to send when your short suits are 2–2 and contain more than half your points.

♠AQ ♥A1082 ♦KJ1094 ♣K7

1♦. This is the appropriate strength and suit quality for a reverse, but it's still a notrump hand,

and it's more powerful than most 1NT openers. If partner responds 1♠, rebid 2NT to show your strength and balanced pattern in one bid. This still allows you to find a heart fit, and it avoids the vagaries of the 2♥ reverse, which can lead to a more difficult auction.

♠A106 ♥KQ ♦Q5 ♣KQ854

1NT. This is in the range for opening 1♣ and rebidding 3♣, but your suit is weaker than partner will expect. The jump rebid also suggests outside shortness, which makes it difficult for partner to bid notrump unless he has stoppers in all other suits.

Note that the doubleton queen is not necessarily a liability. If partner holds the ace or king, it may be important for your hand to declare, so you'll want to bid notrump before partner does.

♠A95 ♥A643 ♦KQ1054 ♣

1NT. "Never open 1NT with a singleton." We've all heard it a million times, but there are still some hands that scream for you to break that rule. This is one of them. The hand's overall strength and honor location are wrong for a reverse rebid, which means you'll have an impossible problem if you open 1♦ and partner responds 1♠ or 1NT.

If you're still worried about the singleton, consider that partner is unlikely to insist on a club contract and your king may serve as a stopper even if dummy has no club honors. All these advantages make 1NT such an attractive — even obvious — opening bid that you shouldn't even have to invoke the old "I had diamond in with my clubs" excuse afterwards.

*Next: More flexible approaches to notrump rebids.*



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When I was learning to play bridge, I was told that “just about everyone” follows these two rules for the opening bidder:

1. With 4-4 or longer in the minors, open 1♦ and rebid 2♣.
2. Never rebid 1NT with a singleton.

I found these rules a bit confusing, as they were sometimes in direct conflict with three other basic rules for opener:

3. Always open your longer minor.
4. Never rebid a five-card minor.
5. Rebid notrump when you have balanced distribution.

The only way to resolve these contradictions is to treat the rules as guidelines, not commands, and to be flexible in deciding which to follow on any given deal. That requires evaluating your hand, anticipating how the auction will go and planning your rebid.

#### Balanced 4-4 and 4-5 openers

It's easy to discount Rule 1 when you hold balanced hands such as:

♠KJ ♥J72 ♦Q972 ♣AQ106  
or

♠A8 ♥KQ ♦J843 ♣KJ1052

There's no point in opening 1♦ unless you plan to show a two-suiter, and that's not the message you want to send with either hand. Both are notrump-oriented, so Rules 3, 4 and 5 rate to be more successful. You can easily open 1♣ and rebid 1NT, with no qualms about “hiding” your diamond suit or long-ish clubs.

#### Unbalanced 4-5 openers

Planning the auction is more difficult with hands such as:

♠10 ♥QJ6 ♦AJ72 ♣KQ1054

Experienced players have long debated the best way to handle this pattern, and there's no consensus.

One camp follows Rules 1 & 2:

They open the “prepared” 1♦ and rebid 2♣ over the expected 1♠ response. With strong clubs and weak diamonds, they may choose to open and rebid clubs.

Other pairs prefer to follow Rules 3, 4 and 5. They open 1♣ and rebid an off-shape 1NT over 1♠.

Whether you open 1♣ or 1♦, your rebid will mislead partner about your distribution, so decide which rule to break. If you open 1♣, every rebid tells one lie. If partner responds 1♠, you're a club short for a 2♣ rebid and a spade short for a 1NT rebid. If he responds 1♥, you're technically one trump short for a 2♥ raise.

A 1♦ opener, however, leads to two lies. When you rebid 2♣, partner assumes you're 5-4, so this auction misleads him about a club and a diamond. With a minimum and equal length in your suits, partner will take a preference to 2♦ and you may end up in a 4-2 fit.

Those who follow Rules 3, 4 and

5 have fewer problems with this pattern. They open 1♣, and if partner responds 1♥, they evaluate this as a good dummy for a 4-3 fit, so they raise to 2♥. If partner responds 1♠, the values look right for a notrump contract.

#### 1-4-4-4 openers

Your considerations are slightly different with a 1-4-4-4 opener. The same problems arise if partner responds 1♠, but with only eight cards in the minors, you're reluctant to insist on a suit contract.

Your best approach will depend on where your honors are and how suitable your hand is for suit or notrump play. With a solid opener and honor concentration in the minors:

♠3 ♥K974 ♦KQ106 ♣AK9

open 1♦ and rebid 2♣ over a 1♠ response. You could have as many as 16-17 points for this rebid, so partner will stretch to keep the auction open and you'll have better chances of finding game.

With softer values and more high cards in the majors:

♠Q ♥AJ92 ♦J654 ♣KQ10

limit your hand (and slow partner down) by rebidding 1NT over 1♠. Opening 1♣ rather than 1♦ will keep all contracts in the picture and if it's the opponents who bid spades, it gets partner off to the right lead.

No strategy will be right for every hand, but it's a good idea to discuss your tendencies with partner. If you prefer 1♦-then-2♣ approach with 1-3-4-5 opener, partner should think twice about retreating to 2♦ with doubleton. If you lean more toward 1♣-then-1NT with this pattern, he'd better not insist on rebidding a five-card spade suit.