

Winsome & Loathsome

Tunes of the Trail

1NT with a five-card major: the final answer

Does she or doesn't she? That used to be a promotional mantra for a brand of hair coloring. But who cares? They must finally have concluded that nobody does.

The bridge world has its own do-you-or-don't-you inquiry. It is asked of me over and over again, at every lecture, seminar and panel discussion. I field the question in living rooms, kitchens and hospitality suites. Wherever bridge players gather, sooner or later, someone poses the question: "Do you or don't you — I mean, open 1NT with a five-card major?" Who cares?

Well, clearly somebody does, else the question wouldn't keep coming up. There is a lot of dogma surrounding this issue. But tell me how it would change responder's auction if he were totally unaware whether partner does or doesn't? How would changing whether you do or you don't change your general bridge style or improve your bridge game? There is an old German proverb that says that to change and to improve are two different things. Sounds right — at least they certainly can be.

Players I admire greatly come down on both sides of the five-card major issue. Some of them insist on opening 1NT with a five-card major, others would prefer to stick a hat pin in their ear. They seem to be equally successful, so we are conceivably talking about a non-issue here. I'm pretty good at non-issues and if you read on, I will settle this one and provide a definitive final answer for those who like to suspend judgment and rely on a formula.

Shaw said that reading made Don Quixote a gentleman ... but believing what he read made him mad. So, read on, and I'll tell you what to

do — *i.e.*, what I do — and probably make some of you mad.

I have weighed in on this subject on occasion and, having written about it, I decided to begin to observe my own pragmatic experience. The results seemed to confirm my instincts — they were unscientific but astounding. In two tournaments, Detroit and Orlando, I played nine relevant deals, and eight of them came down on the side of opening the major suit rather than 1NT. The ninth hand worked out better for the 1NT opening only because it was matchpoints.

The first example was extreme. Our opponents bid 4♠ and made five, vulnerable, while our teammates bid 1NT — and made it. Lose 11!

Would you choose to open 1NT holding

♠AK753 ♥A7 ♦A95 ♣J104?

If so, what is partner supposed to do with

♠J982 ♥832 ♦3 ♣KQ876?

Thus evolves the first do-you-or-don't-you principle:

1. You don't open 1NT holding a five-card major when 6–8 unremarkable high-card points in responder's hand could produce a likely game.

We should note, in passing, that aces are more suited to suit play, while "slow" cards (queens, jacks and 10s) are better suited to notrump. Take this ace-laden hand:

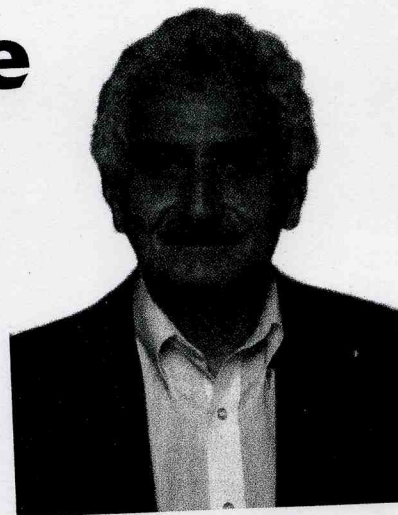
♠A7 ♥AKQ62 ♦986 ♣A83

Those who open it 1NT (I think it's too good) will play it there opposite

♠86 ♥1054 ♦AK754 ♣974

Those who opt for 1♥ will play an easy 4♥, making five on the ♠K lead.

The decision whether to open 1NT versus a five-card major should be based on which would best resolve potential rebid problems. Playing systems which include the



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forcing 1NT, one never has to open 1NT holding five spades. Over a 1NT response a rebid is never a problem. Opener must bid a new suit—it might be a three-card minor. The focus is on finding the best suit fit—even the 5–2 major suit fit, which Edgar Kaplan and others contended would, more often than not, play better than a notrump contract. I read somewhere that playing in a 5–3 fit is worth, on balance, a trick and a half more than playing a notrump contract. So, a second principle emerges:

2. As a general rule, don't open 1NT holding five spades. The exceptions are very rare. I would have to have a spade suit so bad (say five low ones) that I would be fooled into thinking I held only four cards in the suit. But that's not enough. I would prefer to hold three hearts, as well, so if partner should transfer to hearts, we would still be playing in a 5–3 fit. With a hand such as ♠97643 ♥AQ7 ♦AQ ♣KJ10, I might open 1NT.

So, having largely eliminated the problem when holding five spades, let's examine the rebid problems when holding five hearts. The auction that offers the most difficulty is a response of 1♠ over 1♥. To rebid 1NT is an underbid, while rebidding 2NT is an overbid. So I recommend that when holding five hearts you ▶



Partnership Bridge

By Pamela and Matthew Granovetter

www.bridgetoday.com

Pamela: “Forcing to game” means forcing to game, right? If you drop partner in the middle of the auction when he thinks you’re on a game force, it’s not going to be healthy for your partnership. I had the following disaster last night.

Dlr: North		♠ Q 6			
Vul: N-S		♥ A K J 9 3			
		♦ K 8 7			
		♣ J 3 2			
		♠ A K J 9 5 3	N	♠ 10 4	
		♥ Q 6	W	♥ 10 7 5 4 2	
		♦ J 10 6 5	E	♦ 3 2	
		♣ 4	S	♣ Q 10 9 8	
				♠ 8 7 2	
				♥ 8	
				♦ A Q 9 4	
				♣ A K 7 6 5	
West	North	East	South		
	1♥	Pass	2♣		
2♠	3♣	Pass	3♦		
Pass	3♥	Pass	4♣		
Pass	5♣	Dbl	All Pass		

The result was down two for minus 500 after the lead of the ♠K.

Pamela: We were playing the increasingly popular style: 2/1 forcing to game (without exceptions). I knew in my heart that I should pass partner’s 4♣ bid, but I was reluctant to break discipline.

Matthew: That was some double by East! This is what I’d call an unlucky deal for North-South. Nevertheless, you should have stopped in 4♣, even if it does go down one on the bad split. At the point your partner bid 4♣, it was obvious that the only playable spot was 3NT, but having found no spade stopper, your partner retreated to 4♣. It was now a good bet that there were two spade losers and probably one more in the wash.

Pamela: The wash was in the East hand. But suppose partner held a

slam-going hand, for example, ♠2 ♥65 ♦AQ94 ♣AKQ765.

If our agreement is that 2♣ is forcing to game, wouldn’t South be entitled to bid 4♣ over 3♥, hoping to hear a 4♦ cuebid? Then he could use Blackwood to get to slam. What kind of partnership will I have if partner bids 4♣, looking for slam, and I drop him there, because I think we may not make a game?

The Last Word (Matthew): Not a very good one. For this reason, some partnerships play that the “forcing to game” rule expires at four of a minor, if the partnership unsuccessfully tried for 3NT. Using this rule, a minor-suit bid and raised via 2/1 can be passed after fishing for 3NT; with the slam-try hand you gave as an example, you bid something else, such as 3♠. □

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choose the “best lie.” Ergo, the third principle:

3. With five hearts and 15 HCP, open 1♥, and over 1♠, rebid 1NT.

That is only a one-point lie, and would, therefore, seem to be the “best lie.”

4. With five hearts and 17 HCP, open 1♥ and over 1♠, rebid 2NT.

Once again, that is only a one-point discrepancy and would, therefore, seem to be the “best lie.” Indeed, if you assign a point for the heart length, it is no lie at all.

5. With five hearts and 16 HCP, it is okay to open 1NT because there is

no good lie.

However, should you prefer, without exception, to open all hands holding a five-card major suit one of a major, then with five hearts and 16 HCP you can open 1♥ provided you are willing to rebid a three-card minor over 1♠ (as well as 1NT), as the best available lie.

So there you have it. The final answer. The five principles of Do you or Don’t you? Succinctly, with a few minor exceptions, they tell you not to open 1NT holding a five-card major unless it consists of five hearts and specifically 16 HCP.

I hope some of our computer geeks in the bridge world will help me provide scientific confirmation of their validity. □

District 1 appointments

The Goodwill and Charity Committee appointments made by George Retek, who represents District 1 on the ACBL Board of Directors, were left off the lists published in the March issue (page 36). They are Ann Hartop, Ammon NB, and Louise Zicat, Gatineau QC, Goodwill; Karl Hicks, Dominion NS, and Peter Clark, Ottawa ON, Charity.