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Get in while you can

A light 1NT overcall when non-vulnerable allows you to take action with an otherwise unbidable hand.

With neither side vulnerable, you pick up:

♠AQ2 ♥K4 ♦KQ104 ♣8763.

Not a bad hand. You're all set to open 1♦ when your right-hand opponent opens 1♠. Uh oh. With only two hearts, a takeout double is out, and you can't overcall at the two level in a four-card suit.

A 1NT overcall promises at least 15 high-card points, so that's out. I suppose you have to pass.

I'll bet you hate passing with that hand. So do I. Here's my suggestion. It's based on a lot of very positive experience.

When your side is not vulnerable, define a 1NT overcall as 14-17 HCP.

Are there any risks? Of course, but no more than with any other overcall. You're still at the one level, and partner knows a lot more about your hand than if you pass.

What happens if partner has nothing? You may or may not survive, but I doubt that the outcome would be any different if you had the ♣J instead of the ♣8.

With a good hand, bidding now often resolves difficult guesses later

Better Bidding with Bergen

on. It's also true that excessive passing and/or worrying is no fun.

Get in while you can.

... continued

Your RHO opens 1♥. Neither side is vulnerable. Playing a 1NT overcall as 14-17 HCP, what's your bid with

♠A4 ♥KJ9 ♦Q7643 ♣A104?

Bid 1NT, not 2♦. To say that I prefer 1NT to 2♦ is the understatement of the year.

♠Q54 ♥QJ6 ♦QJ52 ♣KQJ?

This time when RHO opens 1♥, you should pass. I'm certainly not advocating a 1NT overcall on every balanced hand with 14 HCP and a heart stopper. This mess is really worth about 11 points.

♠Q98 ♥A2 ♦AQ75 ♣Q643?

Double. Having only three spades is not reason enough to avoid the normal takeout double.

♠K8 ♥AQ ♦AJ93 ♣97542?

Bid 1NT. The two doubletons should not prevent you from overcalling 1NT.

♠AK109 ♥A64 ♦63 ♣K753?

Bid 1♠. With such good spades and only one heart stopper, the four-card overcall is the best option.

By the way: If you decide to try the lighter 1NT overcall, simply write "14-17 nonvul, 15-18 vul" on your convention card under "DIRECT NT OVERCALLS." No Alert or special Announcement is needed.

Not very shapely

A pattern of 5-3-3-2 is not worth much if your five-card suit is trumps. Having no long or short outside suits is a liability in a suit contract.

West	East
♠KQJ85	♠A92
♥AK	♥J109
♦Q63	♦7542
♣A72	♣K63

West	East
1♠	2♠
4♠	Pass

West lost three diamonds and one club. With his 5-3-3-2 pattern, he should have rebid 3NT to give responder a choice. With his 4-3-3-3, East would have passed 3NT and nine tricks would have been easy. If East had a shapely hand, he'd have gone back to 4♠.

West	East
♠AJ	♠72
♥8754	♥AKQJ2
♦KJ4	♦Q76
♣KJ42	♣853

West	East
1♣	1♥
2♥	4♥

East had an "opening bid opposite an opening bid" and jumped to game once West raised hearts. In 4♥, East lost one spade, one diamond and two clubs — down one. With his balanced hand, East should have contented himself with 3♥. West had too many jacks and would have declined the invitation. □

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