

No Respect for One Notrump?

An expert panel shows you how to “get busy” against the opponents’ 1NT.

Competing against 1NT used to be considered a kamikaze mission, but in today’s hyper-competitive bidding environment, it’s all the rage. A group of expert players was recently asked about their favorite methods of combating 1NT openings, and their answers — first published as a series of interviews in the Daily Bulletins at the Spring 2007 NABC in St. Louis — are presented below.

Please note: While most of the methods below are allowed under the **General Convention Chart**, a few are permitted only for events where **Mid-Chart** methods have been approved (typically, for high-level contests). Players should ask the director-in-charge for details.

Eric Kokish

Kokish, of Toronto ON, is one of the best bidding theoreticians in the world. He has coached many high-level teams and is a regular contributor to the *Bridge Bulletin* and *Bridge World* magazines.

Kokish’s favorite approach after an enemy 1NT opening (15 to 17 HCP) is this:



Dbl = a five-card or longer minor and a four-card major
2♣ = both majors, typically 5-5
2♦ = either major
2♥ = five or more hearts and a five-card minor
2♠ = five or more spades and a five-card minor
2NT = both minors or a game-forcing two-suiter
Three-level bids = Preemptive (non-vulnerable) or constructive (vulnerable)

Mid-Chart

“The upside of this approach is that it gets most hand types described, and it gets the relative lengths of the two-suiters straight. The downside is that you can’t play a one-suited minor hand at the two level.”

Another drawback is something that pertains to many 1NT defenses, namely, the unavailability of a penalty double because double is assigned a conventional meaning.

“The loss of the penalty double is a problem across the board. It has prompted some people to start opening hands with 1NT that are either off shape or out of range since they know you can’t nail them.”

Kokish refers to this approach as “modified Woolsey,” but he has also heard it called “Multi-Landy” because the 2♦ and 2♣ calls in this system resemble those conventions. (Players are reminded not to use conventional names when explaining methods to the opponents.)

Against weak 1NT openings, Kokish changes his approach to incorporate a penalty double:

Dbl = penalty
2♣ = both majors, typically 5-5
2♦ = either major
2♥ = hearts and a minor (4-5, 5-4 or 5-5)
2♠ = spades and a minor (4-5, 5-4 or 5-5)

Mid-Chart

“You can’t give up the penalty double when the opponents are playing a weak notrump,” says Kokish. “But you lose the length inferences available in the strong notrump defense.”

A passed hand, however, can use the first method, according to Kokish.

Bobby Wolff

Bobby Wolff has been a longtime champion of simple, direct systems, and his hugely successful career is testimony to the fact that one doesn’t need conventional complexity in order to win.

“Against expert competition, simple is best. Even something like Landy (2♣ shows the majors, all else is natural) is fine. Unusual systems typically have only one benefit: surprise. Against less-experienced players, however, weird systems can work very well, but that doesn’t mean it’s good bridge,” Wolff said.

Overcalling 1NT is an inherently dangerous business, according to Wolff, not only because of the risk of being penalized, but because of the difficulty of having a constructive auction.

“The lengths of the overcaller’s suit(s) are unknown, so it’s easy for bad things to happen.”

Wolff and partner Dan Morse use this scheme against strong and weak 1NT openings:



- Dbl = penalty
- 2♣ = minors
- 2♦ = majors
- 2♥ = natural
- 2♠ = natural
- 2NT = major-minor two-suiter

Mid-Chart

“Barry Crane once analyzed his results from allowing the opponents to play 1NT and discovered that he was scoring something like 52% to 53%.” When his side balanced against 1NT, however (and some of the balancing actions were clearly not sound), he found that his percentage increased to 57% or 58%. Forcing his (typically) less-experienced opponents to use their judgment worked to his advantage, but again, using dangerous bidding approaches just to stir up action against weaker opponents isn’t good bridge. Certainly, that approach is a reality in matchpoint games for pairs that are trying to win, but it’s not sound.”

Wolff says that all partnerships should weigh the merits of their approach, especially regarding complexity and aggressiveness.

“Using complex systems, you’re trading solidity for pressure on the opponents.”

Wolff’s philosophy when competing against weak 1NT openings, however, is that it’s better to err on the side of aggression by competing.

“When you have a good 13 or 14 HCP, get in if possible. True, you could get doubled, but there are risks either way. Passing could be riskier than bidding. And to penalize you, they have to have the methods and right type of hand to do it.”

Michael Rosenberg

Rosenberg, of New Rochelle NY, is acknowledged as one of the best declarers on the planet. The many-time NABC champion has strong opinions when it comes to 1NT defenses.



“You have different goals depending on whether you’re playing matchpoints or IMPs. At matchpoints, your goal is to ‘get in there’ and disrupt their auction. At IMPs, your goal is to get to a game or get a good score from defeating the opponents.”

Rosenberg plays two different systems, therefore, to cater to these two situations. At matchpoints:

- Dbl = a four-card major and a longer minor
- 2♣ = both majors (2♦ by advancer asks which major is longer/better)
- 2♦ = one major
- 2♥ = five hearts and a five-card minor
- 2♠ = five spades and a five-card minor

Mid-Chart

Rosenberg refers to this as the “Washington system, after the expert players in the Washington DC area who use this scheme. (Note that this is essentially the same system described by Kokish, although he calls it something different. The bottom line is that convention names are rather unimportant.)

At IMPs, Rosenberg prefers this:

- Dbl = penalty
- 2♣ = both majors (2♦ by advancer asks which major is longer/better)
- 2♦ = diamonds and a major
- 2♥ = natural
- 2♠ = natural

General Convention Chart

Both methods assume the opponents are using strong (15 to 17 HCP) 1NT openings. Against weak notrump Rosenberg uses the IMP setup.

“It’s important to have a penalty double not only against weak notrumps, but also at IMPs to protect against psychs. It can ruin your auction if they psych 1NT and you can’t penalize them. I’ve psyched 1NT with good results several times in my career against opponents who didn’t have a penalty double available.”

Rosenberg also notes that handling enemy interference after your side opens 1NT “is one of the hardest areas of bridge. You need detailed agreements with partner.”

One of the topics that must be discussed, according to Rosenberg, is the meaning of double in auctions such as 1NT (by you), 2X (by LHO), Double (by partner). Whether it’s penalty or takeout may depend on the force or scoring, the vulnerability, the strength of 1NT and nature of the interference.

“The most important thing is that you and your partner are on the same page,” says Rosenberg. “And sometimes that means you have to sacrifice perfection for simplicity.”

Next month: Book reviews and the Holiday Gift Guide

Bart Bramley

If Bart Bramley comes to your table and says, "We play SCUM," you shouldn't take it personally: It's the name of the convention he uses to compete against 1NT. The many-time NABC champ has been using a variation of this treatment since 1970.



SCUM is an acronym: S stands for shape, C stands for color and M is for majors. ("The 'U' doesn't stand for anything. It just makes it pronounceable," said a deadpan Bramley.) The three letters of the acronym correspond to the first three steps of the method:

- Dbl = two suits of the same shape (♣ + ♥ or ♦ + ♠). "Shape" in this context refers to rounded or pointed suit symbols.
- 2♣ = two suits of the same color
- 2♦ = majors
- 2♥ = natural
- 2♠ = natural
- 2NT = minors

General Convention Chart

In the case of double or 2♣, advancer's continuations are pass-or-correct.

Bramley uses this method against strong 1NT openings, but his definition of "strong" is any notrump range that would usually contain enough defensive strength to beat a game.

"Against what I call 'constructive' 1NT openings, typically 12 high-card points or more, I use SCUM. Against 'destructive' or 'non-constructive' 1NT, which is anything that incorporates a bad 11 HCP or worse, I use a penalty double."

The strengths of the approach appeal to Bramley. "I've had a lot of good luck with this. The ambiguities of the system (double and 2♣) are coupled. Once you know one suit, you know the other. Other systems don't have this. For example, in DONT, 2♣ is clubs and a higher suit, or in Cappelletti, 2♥ is hearts and a minor. There's no connection between the lower-ranking suit and the higher one in those systems."

Bramley is candid about his competitive style versus 1NT openings. "I hate defending 1NT. I compete on some hands that would make many people blanch. My style is hyper-aggressive; I'll come in on 4-4 hands, especially if I don't like my lead position. If my hand contains a lot of tenaces that make it unattractive to lead from (against a 1NT opening), I'll trade my lead problem for a declaring problem."

The weaknesses of SCUM, according to Bramley are two-fold. "Hands with a long minor-suit have to come in at the three level. More serious, however, is that if

you compete and they end up declaring, they'll do so double-dummy because this method pinpoints your suits."

Mike Cappelletti

With the proliferation of 1NT defenses, the reputations of older systems such as Cappelletti among expert players have sometimes suffered. The newest toy is always shiniest. Cappelletti, however, continues to enjoy immense popularity with many club and tournament players who embrace his convention for its simplicity.



The eponymous Cappelletti provides some history about the convention, as well as his views on bidding theory.

"When I started playing bridge, the convention Brozel was very popular as a defense to 1NT. At the same time, however, the Kaplan-Sheinwold system was coming into vogue, and the weak 1NT it uses was robbing us blind. We needed a penalty double, but in Brozel, double showed a one-suited hand. So I thought, 'Why not make double for penalty and let 2♣ show the single-suiter?'" Thus, Cappelletti was born. Its structure is this:

- Dbl = penalty/values
- 2♣ = one-suited hand
- 2♦ = majors
- 2♥ = hearts and a minor
- 2♠ = spades and a minor
- 2NT = minors

General Convention Chart

Cappelletti is unwavering in his view that double needs to be defined as value-showing and penalty-oriented.

"You need the penalty double. These fancy systems are giving up too much. If you have a balanced 16 or 17 points and they open 1NT in front of you, double is best in the long run. On a particular hand it might not work, but in the long run it's best. Remember that you're 'over' the 1NT opener and that you get to make the opening lead."

According to Cappelletti, whatever the range of the opponents' 1NT, double should show a good 14 or more.

On weak notrumps, he says, "If you don't double, but defeat 1NT by one or two tricks (plus 50 or 100), you get an inferior score at matchpoints or IMPs if you could have made 1NT yourself for plus 90 or plus 120. Also, it's important to compete against the weak notrump (with appropriate values). If you can show both majors, you're at a terrific advantage — your partner will have a good idea of what to do. I've run many, many computer simulations that show it's right to compete with the majors even if you're only 4-4 with hands as light as 10 or 11 high-card ▶

points.”

What about the “modified” Cappelletti convention?

“I can’t stand it. Using 2♣ to show several possible hand types is inferior to just showing your major-minor two-suiters with 2♥ or 2♠. The problem with using 2♣ as a first step in modified Cappelletti is that if the opponents compete over 2♣, your side could wind up losing the major.”

Brian Glubok

“The philosophy behind competitive bidding in tournament bridge has changed a great deal since the Seventies, particularly over the opponents’ strong 1NT opening. Thirty years ago, you competed if you had safety and thought there was a chance for game. Nowadays, you compete to make life more difficult for the opponents. Conventions such as DONT, Woolsey and others described in this series illustrate this sea change.



“I use a method that allows you to compete over the opponents’ 1NT opening in a maximum number of situations, with a maximum number of hand types. For simplicity and ease of memorization, I recommend you use the same method in direct and balancing position, and at matchpoints, IMPs and board-a-match teams.

“This method is not suitable against weak 1NT openings, for it relies upon an artificial double.”

Dbl =	at least two suits (four or more cards), fewer than three clubs
2♣ =	at least two suits, at least one major, at least three clubs
2♦/2♥/2♠ =	natural
2NT =	minors
General Convention Chart	

Advancer bids as follows:

After double (two suits, fewer than three clubs):

2♣ = please bid your cheapest suit

2♦/2♥/2♠ = natural, prepared to play there even if the suit named doesn’t match either of yours.

After 2♣ = (two suits, at least one major, at least three clubs):

2♦ = partner, please bid your cheapest (possibly only) major.

2♥/2♠ = natural, prepared to play there even if this is not one of your suits.

“This method will not always get you to your longest fit (sometimes advancer will pass 2♣ with four when there is a longer fit elsewhere) but it will allow you to compete in a maximum number of situations. This method is par-

ticularly useful in the balancing position, and when either side is not vulnerable. While the method does not need to change with the form of scoring or vulnerability, the degree of aggression may vary with these conditions.

“2NT is always forcing. We cannot play in 2NT when they have bid 1NT. Doubles of their artificial bids show that suit. Doubles of their natural bids are for takeout.

“The emphasis is not on getting to game, but on getting in the bidding, competing at the two level, and taking the opponents out of their comfort zone.

“While the opponents may occasionally double you to collect a large penalty, it is both difficult and risky for the opponents to double you at the two or three level. If the cards lie well, or you have extreme distribution, you will make your doubled partscore. This will more than compensate for the occasional penalty you will suffer. Most important, using this convention will make you a more difficult opponent and will be fun for you and your partner. What could be better than that?”

Larry Cohen

“The system I prefer and have used for more than 25 years is DONT. It was developed by my former partner, Marty Bergen. The system was initially called Bergen over Notrump, but Marty also coined the acronym DONT (Disturbing Opponents No Trump), which caught on.



DONT is a simple method for getting into the bidding when an opponent opens 1NT, and it is popular with many players. I used it with Marty and now with David Berkowitz.

“There are variations that have been invented, possibly improvements, but we prefer to keep it simple.

Dbl =	one suit
2♣ =	clubs plus a higher-ranked suit
2♦ =	diamonds and a higher-ranked suit (a major)
2♥ =	hearts and spades
2♠ =	spades
2NT =	any strong two-suiter
3 level =	natural, preemptive
General Convention Chart	

“We use this system in the direct seat and in the balancing seat. Typically, the two suits are 5-4 or 4-5 or longer either way.

“I like DONT because it allows you to show all one and two-suited hands without having to bid at the three level. You always find your fit (if you have one) on the two level, which is important for following the law of total tricks.

“The method is very effective at matchpoints, letting you get in and disturb, safely, on many hands. The downside is that the system is not great for identifying which of your two suits is the five-carder, so you sometimes miss a major-suit contract, but the goal is to just get in. It also isn't great for game bidding.

“I have had enough good results with DONT over the years that I wouldn't consider changing.

Some additional points:

- Suit quality and length depend on vulnerability and position. In the balancing seat, a DONT bidder can have a pretty weak hand.
- We presume there is no game, but if we want to ask, 2NT by advancer (the DONT bidder's partner) asks for more information (minimum, maximum, etc.).
- After a double, showing one suit, if you show spades, it is a good hand (no direct 2♠ overcall).
- After 2♣, partner bids 2♦ to play in the other suit.
- After 2♦, partner bids 2♥ to play in the major.
- It is important for your partnership to discuss what happens in competition, for example, if they double the DONT bid.

“It is my opinion that penalty doubles of 1NT are not great. It is very hard to defend against 1NT — and the double lets the opponents run to 2♣ or 2♦, contracts they can't reach without the penalty double.

“That said, we do not use DONT against weak 1NT openings. You do need a penalty double in that situation. Against weak 1NTs we use the following, but have no strong feelings about the best method:

Dbl = Penalty (at least equal strength)
 2♣ = majors
 2♦ = one major
 2 of major = that major and either minor

Mid-Chart

Jerry Helms

Helms, like many top players, loves to compete over the opponents' opening 1NT. Before he created HELLO, he disliked having to double or bid 2♣ with one suit. After experimenting with various methods, he, along with co-inventor Bill Lohmann, came up with HELLO (the name is formed from the first initials of their surnames).

“The weakness of many methods is that they can't bid 2♥ or 2♠ directly,” says Helms. “This gives the opponents free rein at the two level. They can bid Stayman or make a transfer bid. When we created HELLO, addressing this was our first priority.

“When you own a major, especially spades, you want to



be able to bid it immediately for the preemptive effect,” Helms says. “We want to interfere, but also bid accurately when it is our hand. The whole idea is to be constructively obstructive. HELLO gets your partner involved.”

The system can be used against either weak or strong 1NT because the double is not needed to show one of the hand types.

Double = penalty or a strong hand.
 2♣ = diamonds or a major-minor two-suiter
 2♦ = transfer to hearts
 2♥ = majors
 2♠ = spades
 2NT = clubs
 3♣ = minors
 3♦ = majors, stronger than 2♥

General Convention Chart

Helms points out other advantages of his system. In certain HELLO auctions, the unknown hand, the partner of the one who bid, will be the declarer. This happens when you bid 2♦ to transfer to hearts, for example.

“Partner accepts the transfer and he might have something crazy such as a low doubleton heart and a six-card club suit or just about anything.”

The strong hand is on lead and has no idea of the strength or distribution of the declarer. The hand with hearts will be exposed as dummy, but the defenders already have an idea of that hand.

The same situation is true when the intervener bids 2♣ and passes the 2♦ response or when he bids 2NT and partner bids 3♣.

There are other auctions in which the partner may be the declarer. After a 2♥ bid for the majors, the partner will prefer spades roughly half the time. After 3♣ for the minors, the partner will sometimes bid 3♦. In these cases, the strong 1NT hand is the opening leader and the unknown hand remains hidden.

In the passout seat, the methods change slightly. Double is not as valuable as penalty because the doubler is not on lead against 1NT. Instead, the double is a relay to 2♣.

Over the 2♣ response:

Pass = clubs
 2♦ = diamonds and a major
 2♥ = hearts and clubs
 2♠ = spades and clubs

With these bids, your minor is five cards or longer, but the major is only four cards long. Hands such as these are particularly hard to bid accurately, and this approach is an attempt to address that. Players who don't like to play a double as penalty in the direct seat could use this scheme instead.

"I prefer the penalty double," says Helms. "It comes up more than you think, and is definitely needed against the weak 1NT."

Mel Colchamiro

Colchamiro has a different perspective on this topic.

"Above are various methods for competing when an opponent opens a strong 1NT. They are all good, although we have seen there is a difference of opinion about which method is best. One common thread, however, is that most experts believe it pays to come in aggressively directly over a strong 1NT opener. I agree. It is not my purpose to argue for one method over another.

"I wish to cover a more fundamental question: On what types of hands should one enter the auction after a 1NT opener? I have developed a guideline that will help you answer this question. I call it Mel's Rule of 8. At the very least, it is an effective guide to 'get you into the ball park.'

To determine if it's okay to overcall 1NT directly, use this formula:

- Take the number of cards in your two longest suits
- Subtract the number of losers by loser count (see below)
- If the answer is 2 or higher, bid something
- If the answer is 1 or zero, pass.

Figuring losers

- ♠ A K 7 6 5 One loser, missing the queen
- ♥ K J 5 3 Two losers, missing the ace and queen
- ♦ Q 8 4 Two losers, missing the ace and king
- ♣ 6 One loser, missing the ace

Example 1

♠ K 7 5 ♥ A Q 8 6 5 ♦ K 4 3 ♣ 7 6

Example 2

♠ K 7 5 3 2 ♥ K 8 6 5 4 ♦ 4 3 ♣ 7

"In No. 1, there are eight cards in the two long suits, but seven losers (two each in spades, diamonds and clubs and one in hearts). You should pass despite the 12 high-card points and five-card major.

"In No. 2, you have 10 cards in your two long suits and seven losers (two each in spades, hearts and diamonds and one in clubs). The difference is three, so you should get in there. It's only 6 HCP, but distribution is the key.

"Here is an example from the 2000 Bermuda Bowl. Paul Soloway held:

♠ A K J 7 3 ♥ Q 8 2 ♦ Q 7 ♣ K 6 5

and heard Brazil's Roberto Mello open 1NT (15-17) on his right. Did Soloway bid or pass?



"Mel's Rule of 8 suggests a pass: eight cards in the two longest suits minus seven losers equals one, so pass is recommended despite the 15 HCP and nice spade suit. Soloway did indeed pass and defeated 1NT two tricks. Soloway had not heard of the Rule of 8, but he did what suggests nonetheless.

"Here is another example from this year's Silver Ribbon Pairs. With a strong 1NT opener on his right, a player held:

♠ Q 7 6 ♥ A K 3 ♦ A 10 6 5 4 ♣ 8 5

and entered the auction with a natural bid of 2♦.

"The result was a doubled contract and a score of minus 800, which he deserved. With a five-card suit and a flat hand, he should have opted for defense.

"If you use the Rule of 8, it will tell you when and when not to bid over their 1NT, and you will avoid disasters of this type."

Meckwell takes Fishbein Trophy

Partners Jeff Meckstroth and Eric Rodwell captured the 2007 Fishbein Trophy as the top masterpoint winners at the Summer NABC in Nashville.

They each earned 250 points for their squad's victory in the Spingold Knockout Teams and 100 points for their team's win in the Grand National Teams Championship Flight. They finished with 385.72 masterpoints.

Masterpoint leaders in Nashville:

1.	385.72	Jeff Meckstroth, Tampa FL
	385.72	Eric Rodwell, Clearwater Beach FL
3.	321.25	Hemant Lall, Dallas TX
	321.25	Bob Hamman, Dallas TX
5.	283.32	Geoff Hampson, Las Vegas NV
6.	273.33	Chip Martel, Davis CA
7.	250.00	Paul Soloway, Mill Creek WA
	250.00	Nick Nickell, New York NY
9.	240.58	Cezary Balicki, Wroclaw, Poland
	240.58	Adam Zmudzinski, Katowice, Poland
11.	235.09	Zia Mahmood, New York NY
12.	231.43	Norberto Bocchi, Barcelona, Spain
13.	223.68	Kalin Karaivanov, Varna, Bulgaria
14.	223.32	Marc Jacobus, Las Vegas NV
	223.32	Lou Ann O'Rourke, Portola Valley CA
	223.32	Eric Greco, Philadelphia PA
17.	222.96	Roman Trendafilov, Varna, Bulgaria
18.	222.59	Kit Woolsey, Kensington CA
	222.59	Fred Stewart, Bloomington NY
20.	211.66	Howard Weinstein, Sarasota FL
21.	200.00	Roy Welland, New York NY
	200.00	Chris Willenken, New York NY