

Try Something Different....Weak NoTrumps Perhaps?
(Part I)

An opening bid of 1NT that shows a balanced hand in the range of 10-12, 11-14, 12-14, or 13-15 HCP's (or thereabouts) is considered a Weak Notrump. Generally in the United States and Canada a standard 1NT opening bid shows a balanced hand with a point range of 15 to 17 or 16 to 18 HCP's; thus the term Weak Notrump for a similar hand with fewer values.

I am convinced that one of the best ways to learn how to play against weak notrumps is to play them for awhile. Once you get used to them, they aren't so very difficult to defend or to bid against. Besides playing them is FUN!

Jeremy Flint, the late great British bridge player and writer stated, in defense of weak notrumps (they are considered standard in Great Britain): "American writers, nurtured on their standard strong notrumps tend to inform their readers that the weak notrump creates many problems. So it does--for the opposition!" Having played weak notrumps for years I wholeheartedly agree with that assessment.

Weak notrumps seem to have several advantages over the strong notrumps:

(1) With one bid (the opening bid), the opener gets to show a minimum balanced hand. There is no problem with which "right" suit to open and there is no rebid problem.

(2) Because hands that would normally be opened with a 15-17 NT are now opened with one of a minor suit, there is the advantage of permitting the responding hand to bid on poor hands thus enabling the partnership to find a good suit fit that would otherwise have been missed.

(3) Since all balanced minimum hands are opened with 1NT, constructive bidding with unbalanced hands is enhanced when the opening bid is one of a suit.

(4) There is a preemptive value in the 1NT opening bid. Opponents must either start their own communication process at the two-level or stay out of the auction because they lack the values to overcall at the two-level.

(5) Weak notrumps seem to invite ill-advised competition and the partner of the 1NT opener is in an excellent position to judge the best position for their side.

The following two hands occurred back-to-back in a recent pairs game (read matchpoints). They are presented, not to belittle the opponents, but to illustrate the problems weak notrump present for inexperienced players.

Hand 1: East-West vulnerable; Dealer North

	North	
	♠ A1092	
	♥ Q8	
	♦ J863	
	♣ AK9	
West		East
♠ 76		♠ KJ83
♥ AK943		♥ J2
♦ A4		♦ Q752
♣ QJ104		♣ 532
	South	
	♠ Q54	
	♥ 10765	
	♦ K109	
	♣ 876	

Auction:	North	East	South	West
	1NT	P	P	Dbl
	P	2♠	P	2NT
	P	P	P	

East-West were playing Cappelletti versus both weak and strong notrumps but seemed to have the understanding (or perhaps misunderstanding), that in the passout position, double was for takeout, not penalty; hence the unfortunate ugly auction. This contract had almost no chance to make and when the smoke had cleared they were down two (-200) which was very good for North-South! Notice that if East-West had passed through out and defended well, they at least had a chance for a plus score. There are several things to consider on this hand: (1) if you double 1NT and partner doesn't sit for the double, to now bid 2NT must show

a huge hand because you're going to be playing opposite a bad hand, (2) if partner is likely to remove your double to some suit higher than one you want to play in, it's probably better just to bid your suit in the first place, and (3) if your declarer play is only average or below, be more conservative in the bidding!

Hand 2: Both vulnerable; Dealer East

	North	
	♠ 52	
	♥ 10975	
	♦ 8742	
	♣ Q104	
West		East
♠ KQ1097		♠ J64
♥ KJ3		♥ Q642
♦ A10		♦ K53
♣ AJ2		♣ K95
	South	
	♠ A83	
	♥ A8	
	♦ QJ96	
	♣ 8763	

Auction:	East	South	West	North
	P	1NT	P(!)	P
	P			

I'm convinced that this hand happened as a result of the previous hand. The West person was now afraid to bid....so what happened? This time they got no matchpoints as they have a vulnerable game available to them but instead defended 1NT undoubled and beat it only one trick. Now I realize that the East-West pair were somewhat shaken after the first board, but we all know that Rule Almost # 1 at duplicate bridge is to let go of a hand after it's played.

If the East-West pair were even somewhat consistent on these two boards and had doubled both for penalties (and defended decently) they would have at least been average for the round.

Try Something Different....Weak NoTrumps Perhaps?
(Part II)

Nobody likes an unavoidable bad score, and weak notrumps will occasionally give you some. Like anything you choose to play there are advantages and there are disadvantages. Many partnerships think that with weak notrumps the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages or they wouldn't be putting them on their convention card. In practice they are an excellent tool if the partnership is aware of the pitfalls. Some of those problems are:

(1) The danger of getting doubled (with no escape) and suffering a sizeable penalty.

(2) The danger of missing a 4-4 major suit fit.....thus play 1NT when most of the field is playing two of a major suit.

(3) The danger of missing a good minor suit fit that would play better than notrump.

(4) The disadvantage of giving the opponents room to overcall a suit at the one-level on your good NT hands because the bidding was opened with one of a minor instead of a standard 15-17 1NT.

(5) The danger of "going against the field" and getting hands played from the "wrong" side in some situations.

Based upon my experience of playing weak notrumps, I'd say that numbers (2) and (4) are occasionally a disadvantage...the other three don't seem to make a big difference. Number (1)...getting doubled and going for a number....is pretty much a myth.

When playing weak notrumps the remainder of the bidding system must accommodate notrump hands in other ranges; for example, a balanced hand with 15-17 HCP's would be opened with one of a suit with NT being the intended rebid.

Any system of responses to strong notrumps can also be used in response to opening weak notrumps, but it necessary to adjust the strength of the various responses accordingly. Non-forcing Stayman (2♣) can be coupled with transfers.

Or non-forcing Stayman (2♣) can be paired with forcing Stayman (2♦) to differentiate partscore hands from game-going hands. Almost all of the gadgets applicable to strong NT auctions can be adapted to auctions that start with a weak notrump.

It is probably better in the long run not to open a weak NT with any decent five-card major suit as you miss too many major suit fits. But remember, that opening one of a major and rebidding one notrump does NOT show a strong notrump.

If a partnership elects to play weak notrumps, it is imperative that they agree on a method to escape from 1NT into a suit contract. It helps to avoid serious penalty doubles when the responder with a poor hand runs from 1NT before it gets doubled. In fact, the experts say that to pass a weak notrump the responder should have a good 5-11 HCP's--with less or more it is right to bid.

If a weak notrump is doubled for penalty, the responder should seek to escape with either (1) a weak one-suited hand, or (2) a very weak balanced hand. On the other hand, if responder has the balance of strength, it will be necessary to inform partner that he is content with 1NT doubled. Different methods have been devised to meet these objectives. One popular method works as follows:

2♣ - Stayman

2♦ - transfer to hearts

2♥ - transfer to spades

Redouble - transfer to clubs (to play or to correct to diamonds at next turn)

Pass - willingness to play 1NT doubled

Another method, called the "Moscow escapes", is similar to Brozel and works as follows:

Redouble - one-suiter. The opener bids 2♣ so that responder can then show his suit.

2♣ - at least four clubs plus a higher ranking suit of four cards or more

2♦ - at least four diamonds plus a higher ranking suit of four cards or more

2♥ - four or more hearts and four or more spades

2♠ - five or more spades

Pass - willingness to play 1NT doubled

It also works quite well, after 1NT has been doubled, to use whatever method your partnership uses over their notrump openers. For example, playing Landy, 2♣ would be for the majors and all other bids would be natural, but playing Cappelletti redouble would be to play, 2♣ would be some one-suited hand, 2♦ would be for the majors and 2♥ or 2♠ would show that suit and a minor side-suit. Which escape method your partnership uses is not nearly as important as is the fact that there is agreement and it's part of your system.

There is no reason to fear intervention when a weak notrump is opened. In fact the opponent's bidding often helps in reaching the right contract and in providing information valuable in the play of the hand. However, you should be armed with partnership agreements on forcing and non forcing bids (such as Lebensohl) and with penalty doubles.

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February, 2006