



Ask Jerry

BY JERRY HELMS ✉ askjerry@jerryhelms.com 🌐 jerryhelms.com

Dear Jerry,

We play an opening bid of 1NT, and an overcall of 1NT, as 15–17. One of the experienced players in our club told us notrump overcalls should be 15-plus to 18 without really explaining why. Could you?

Nancy

Hi Nancy,

When you open 1NT, it merely reflects shape and specific values. Sometimes, despite your good hand, your partner is guilty of lack of support and you may go down several tricks. The good news is, if the opponents' values are equally divided, say perhaps 11–12

each, neither of them knows enough about their partner's hand to effectively double. In addition, most conventions currently utilized for competing over a strong notrump do not have any provision for a penalty double – note I said most: perhaps a shameless plug for my HELLO system!

There is, however, a big difference in the following auction:

1♠ 1NT Dbl

The standard interpretation of double in this sequence is penalty. It does not guarantee, or even imply, any form of shape, but merely suggests 10 or more high-card points. In fact, if responder does anything other than double, it is non-forcing, suggesting a long suit, with limited values. It is relatively easy for responder to envision LHO holding at most 1 or 2 points, and come to the realization that we hold the balance of power, and that the opponents are in trouble. You are more likely to be doubled for penalty when you overcall 1NT than when you open 1NT. For this reason, among others, the 1NT overcall should be a *good* 15 to 18, not just some flat, 15-point hand that you would open 1NT. In fact, there might be some “good 14s” I might open 1NT, and a few “bad 19s” I would overcall 1NT.

For example, I would open 1NT with:

♠K72 ♥KQ5 ♦KJ3 ♣QJ74.

However, if my RHO opened one of a suit, I would tend to make a takeout double. If I held:

♠AQ ♥K1043 ♦AJ107 ♣A106.

I would open 1♦, planning to rebid 2NT to describe my good 18-point hand. If instead an opponent opened on my right, I would overcall 1NT immediately.

Not that you asked, but I have another tidbit that is somewhat related. Always advance a notrump overcall more aggressively than raising a notrump opening bid! In addition to the implied slightly stronger values, there is another big factor. In an auction of 1NT–Pass–3NT when your side has 25 HCP, you are declaring in the dark. The location of the opponents' 15 HCP is unknown, as is their shape. Contrast 1♠–1NT–Pass–3NT. Holding the identical 25 HCP, declarer is far better placed. The opening bid marks the location of most of the missing values, often giving a roadmap on which way to take those two-way finesse possibilities or which honors can successfully be led towards. The information that opener holds at least five spades can also be beneficial in play. Holding:

♠K43 ♥J4 ♦K763 ♣Q1095,

I would invite game if partner opened 1NT, but would raise immediately to game if partner overcalled 1NT. Not always right, but then again, what is always right?

Note: I'm happy to answer your bridge questions, but if you want a reply, be sure to unblock me *before* sending your question if your email requires permission.

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