

THE
No TRUMP
ZONE

DANNY KLEINMAN

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“YOU ARE TRAVELING THROUGH ANOTHER DIMENSION”

Rod Serling

Author's Note. This book contains my original drafts (prior to editing by the *Bulletin* staff) of the ‘Notrump Zone’ columns that the ACBL's *Bridge Bulletin* published for three and a half years starting in March 1999, all freshly edited by me... and much, much more, as I had planned to continue the series for a long time and had compiled at least four more years' worth of material to be worked up for future columns.

- CHAPTER I -

THE
ONE NOTRUIT
OPENING
- WHY SIZE MATTERS

WHY OPEN IN NOTRUMP?

Bridge pioneer Ely Culbertson once said, ‘The logical place for notrump bidding is after information has been exchanged as to suit lengths and distribution.’ In a long 1937 World Championship match, no member of his team ever opened 1NT.

Outlandish as Culbertson's statement sounds to our modern ears, it wasn't stupid. For 1NT is preemptive in the broad sense of taking up bidding space, shutting out all bids at the one-level. That's not a good idea when you have a good hand with opening-bid strength and (depending on partner's hand) may belong in any of the four suits. Prior to the development of Stayman and other conventional responses, Culbertson was close to being right.

However, there are several reasons for opening in notrump.

- 1) **Share the load.** It's a waste and a shame never to open 1NT (the fifth-lowest bid) at all. If you remove 1NT from your opening-bid repertoire, you burden your other opening bids more heavily. Then, too, your 1NT rebids will have to cover wider ranges.
- 2) **Notrumpish values.** Sometimes you have a notrumpish hand. By this I don't mean 4-3-3-3 distribution, which is bad distribution even for notrump (though worse for suit play). A notrumpish hand, as I see it, is not only a balanced hand but a hand that is richer in lower honors than higher and contains holdings that can use protection against leads through them. In a tournament nearly forty years ago, I played three hands in 3NT despite having a 9-card major-suit fit with my partner. Each produced a ‘top,’ for I took as many tricks in notrump as others took in 4♥ or 4♠. I was bidding on ‘intuition,’ but when I asked myself what feature those three hands had in common, the answer struck me: *three queens*. In a way, that's no mystery at all. Queens are *third*-round controls, often destined to be ruffed in suit contracts. With few queens, your side will often need to do some ruffing. With many queens, however, you seldom need to ruff to win the third trick in a suit. Thus the *Rule of Three Queens*: with three queens, go out of your way to play notrump.
- 3) **No good suit.** No suit opening may be appealing. This is especially true for the many modern bridge players who have been taught never to open four-card majors, but it was true even in the heyday of Culbertson and Charles Goren, when four-card major openings were commonplace. Suppose you are a sensible middle-of-the-road bidder, preferring to have five cards for a 1♥ or 1♠ opening but willing to open a strong four-card

major when you have a convenient rebid and no other suit appeals. What else but a notrump opening looks right with either of these hands?

♠ A 9 6 5 ♥ K 8 4 3 ♦ A K ♣ K 10 2

♠ A 9 6 5 ♥ K 8 4 3 ♦ J 7 2 ♣ A Q

A 1♦ opening with the second is revolting; a 1♣ opening with the first, though permissible, is hardly desirable.

- 4) *Tweeners*. The ‘strong notrump’ range (for purposes of our discussion, 16 to 18 high-card points) is a trouble range unless you have a good suit or good distribution. If you open in a suit, you may never get the chance to show your extra strength at all. If partner responds, you may not be strong enough to make a forcing jump rebid, and you may have to hope that you get a third turn in which to show your extras. Worse still, if the opponents bid but your partner passes, it may be too dangerous for you to bid again. With balanced 19-HCP hands, you can usually bid again safely. With balanced 15-HCP hands (or worse), you won’t mind selling out to the opponents. A strong 1NT opening paints a good rough picture of your hand early.

TWO VIEWS OF POINT-COUNT

But before proceeding further, I must digress to discuss point-count.

Bridge teachers and writers alike usually teach their students to ‘count’ high-card points without explaining what high-card points are. There are two definitions:

- 1) The simple arithmetic count: an ace = 4 HCP, a king = 3, a queen = 2, a jack = 1.
- 2) A measure of high-card strength in which 10 represents an average hand.

Simple arithmetic may be good enough for third-graders, but for adult bridge players the relevant question is, ‘How strong is my hand?’

Unfortunately, too many adults are still in the third grade as far as bridge is concerned. Once, playing in a field where mine was the only partnership playing a 16-18 notrump (all the others were playing 15-17), I held a hand as dealer that was something like

♠ A K 10 8 ♥ K 10 9 7 ♦ 9 8 2 ♣ A 10

It looked like 16 HCP to me, not 14, so I opened 1NT. No one else did. A few die-hard four-card majorites opened 1♠, but the rest opened 1♦. That seemed crazy, as they don’t hesitate to open 1NT on

♠ J 5 3 ♥ K 6 4 ♦ Q 8 2 ♣ A K Q 7

a hand that is not nearly as good as mine. If you rate my hand as 14 HCP and this one as 15, then you are using definition (1). If you rate my hand as a good 16 HCP and the other example as a bad 14, then you are using definition (2).

Now examine

♠ Q J ♥ Q J 5 3 ♦ Q J 4 2 ♣ Q J 6

and decide on your call as dealer at matchpoints with favorable vulnerability, using each of the following notrump ranges: 15-17, 12-14 and 10-12.

Here are my answers: pass, pass, and pass. If you counted this hand as 12, go back to the third grade. If you counted it as 9, you're on my wavelength. If you counted it as 7½, I admire you (even though I disagree), for you were probably using Edgar Kaplan's 'Four C's' formula (found in the October 1982 *Bridge World*). Kaplan was a superb judge of bridge hands as well as an excellent analyst and writer, but he carried the downgrading of queen-jack combinations to an extreme. He was a firm believer in aces and kings, the main source of Quick Tricks. That was the basis for his supposed 11-14 weak notrump range: his '11-point' notrump always included 2½ Quick Tricks. His minimum was really 12, with a +1 adjustment to the '4-3-2-1' point-count for 2½ Quick Tricks. He would never have opened 1NT, as I saw a player who claimed to playing Kaplan-Sheinwold do not long ago, with

♠ Q 5 ♥ K J ♦ Q 6 5 3 ♣ K 10 9 3 2

I have said that lower honors come into their own at notrump, so why do I (though not to the degree that Kaplan did) downgrade queens and jacks and upgrade aces for the purposes of opening in notrump? Very simply, because *not all hands that are opened in notrump are destined to be played in notrump*. A 1NT opening should deliver a narrow range of value in support of partner's suit or on defense against an opposing suit contract.

WEAK, STRONG OR KAMIKAZE ONE NOTRUMP?

So, if we look at the four reasons for opening 1NT that I listed earlier, what do they tell us about the type of hands on which we should open 1NT? Do they suggest playing a strong notrump (somewhere in the 15+ range), a weak notrump (in the 11-15 range), or even a Kamikaze (10-12) notrump?

Reason (4), *Tweeners*, argues for playing a strong notrump.

Reason (3), *No good suit*, argues for the weak notrump (minimum opening-bid strength), for the weaker the hand, the more likely it is that none of its suits will be appealing. Let's look at those example hands again:

♠ A 9 6 5 ♥ K 8 4 3 ♦ A K ♣ K 10 2

♠ A 9 6 5 ♥ K 8 4 3 ♦ J 7 2 ♣ A Q

With the first, I wouldn't mind terribly if my system compelled me to open 1♣, but with the second I would hate it if my system compelled me to open 1♦. A 17-HCP hand is much more likely to contain a decent 3-card minor or a strong four-card major than a 14-HCP hand.

Reason (2), *Notrumpish values*, weighs in for the strong notrump, for the more high cards a hand has, the more likely it is to have some queens and jacks.

Reason (1), *Share the load*, tilts toward the weak notrump, for hands in the 13-to-15 HCP range occur much more frequently than hands in the 16-to-18 HCP range. Yet it also argues strongly against the Kamikaze (10-12 HCP) notrump, for now all balanced genuine opening-strength hands must be opened in suits unless they are strong enough for 2NT.

THE KAMIKAZE NOTRUMP

However, a case can be made for the Kamikaze notrump. It is simultaneously pre-emptive and descriptive; that puts you ahead of the game on most of the deals where you use it. Suppose your counterpart at another table isn't playing the Kamikaze notrump; he will probably pass. His LHO may be able to open, while your LHO may not have the values to enter the auction. If your LHO does enter, he'll be doing so at a higher level, with more risk, and less bidding space in which to conduct a cooperative auction. If your LHO passes, your partner will know much more about your hand and thus be better placed than the partner of your counterpart who hears only passes (or perhaps an opening bid on his right). The downside to the Kamikaze Notrump is that when the opponents do enter, they may be able to play their contracts exceptionally well because they know approximately what you have. This is true even when you don't open – you are known not to hold a balanced 10-12, and that may help place high cards in your partner's hand.

It is *not* a downside to the Kamikaze notrump that the opponents may double you — at least not if you use any of several flexible rescue systems that incorporate redoubles and passes, along with direct bids, to show a wide variety of different hand types. The opponents will seldom be able to inflict much damage with penalty doubles either of 1NT or the eventual runout because the doubler's partner

knows nothing about the doubler's hand but its *minimum* strength. In contrast, responder knows opener's strength and suit lengths approximately and can double overcalls effectively.

Some weak notrumpers have claimed that they've never suffered disastrous penalties when an opponent has doubled. I can't believe that, for I've suffered occasional (though rare) disastrous penalties when opponents have doubled my *strong* notrump. However, I do believe that successful penalty doubles of a weak notrump are rare, and only slightly more frequent than successful penalty doubles of a strong notrump. Successful penalty doubles of the Kamikaze notrump are a little more frequent again, but that's still very infrequent.

Do the benefits of the Kamikaze notrump outweigh the costs? Here is what I believe. *No, not against sound opponents*, even if the Kamikaze notrump sometimes steals the pot; this is because the loss of accuracy on the good hands that the Kamikaze notrumpers can't open some other kind of notrump is too great. *Yes, against opponents who think that opener's weakness makes their own hands stronger, or who are obsessed with penalizing the Kamikaze notrumpers.* Alas, such opponents may be the majority these days.

If you choose to play the Kamikaze notrump, you have three further decisions to make.

- 1) How will you rescue partner from a penalty double? I'll suggest a runout system ('Advanced Ripcord') later, but I'm sure there are several others that have merit.
- 2) Are you going to play the Kamikaze notrump even when vulnerable? Almost all Kamikaze notrumpers say no: the risk of -200 (down one doubled or down two undoubled) on partscore deals is too great.
- 3) Are you going to play the Kamikaze notrump in all seats? Again, almost all Kamikaze notrumpers say *no*. A fourth-seat Kamikaze notrump makes little sense: you have no opponents to preempt, and may as well pass. There is yet another reason for abandoning the Kamikaze Notrump in fourth seat: you'll seldom have the hand for it.

Because of the chance that some other player will bid ahead of you, every kind of opening bid has a *frequency gradient*; the bid will occur most often in first seat, less often in second seat, and least often of all in fourth seat. The decline in frequency, however, is not the same for all openings. The stronger the hands that qualify for an opening, the smaller the decline in its frequency, as the players ahead of you are less likely to have opening strength. Also, the more balanced the hand on which is the bid is made, the smaller the decline, as the players ahead of it are less likely to have long suits in which to preempt.

In first seat, you'll hold many more Kamikaze notrump hands than strong notrump hands, simply because the frequencies of hands decrease as their point-counts increase above the average count of 10. In second seat, the difference in frequencies is modest (the dealer is much more likely to have opened in front of a Kamikaze Notrump than in front of a strong notrump). By third seat, the frequency of strong notrump hands may have overtaken and surpassed that of Kamikaze notrump hands; and in fourth seat you'll very seldom hear three passes when you have a balanced 10-12 HCP.

There is a case, apart from its declining frequency, for abandoning the Kamikaze notrump even in third seat. Once partner has passed as dealer, game is no longer on the horizon when you have a balanced 10-12 HCP, and all the game sequences that you would have after a strong notrump opening lie unused: only signoffs and competitive bids are available to partner.

THE HIDDEN COSTS OF THE KAMIKAZE NOTRUMP

The case I have made so far against the Kamikaze notrump has not been on grounds that it is dangerous. Indeed it is usually an advantage to be able to fire the first volley of the auction with a bid that says, 'I have a balanced hand, of average to near-opening strength.' That puts responder in the enviable position of knowing, approximately, the combined partnership assets while an opponent who wants to enter must do so at the two-level having little or no information about his partner's hand.

Though occasionally a 10-12 HCP notrump can boomerang (yes, -800 or -1100 is possible), so can a strong notrump. Why just the other day I opened a sound 15-HCP notrump, got doubled by my LHO, caught a balanced near-*yarborough* in dummy, and by exiting in my weakest suit at every turn managed somehow to scrape up five tricks. That started my partner begging me to play a runout system. I don't know where my partner would have wanted to run were his favorite runout system available, but we did have a 4-4 diamond fit. In 2♦ doubled, however, we'd have gone down four, not getting the favorable diamond leads from the doubler (who had ♦K987 behind my ♦AQJ5) that I received in 1NT. The -300 we suffered in 1NT doubled was a good score, as the opponents had nine easy tricks in a vulnerable 3NT, but -800 would have been a bottom.

Similar not-truly-bad 'disasters' can afflict Kamikaze notrumpers, though perhaps not as often, for most have a flexible runout system already in place (as few strong notrumpers do) to handle even moderately unbalanced weak hands. So where's the rub?

The main disadvantage of the Kamikaze notrump — the obvious cost — is the burden it puts on other openings and rebids. Remove from your toolkit one of the

ways of describing a very common class of opening-strength hands, and many of your other tools work less efficiently.

Three-Card Minors

Opening in a three-card minor is permissible, but not desirable. Not only will you sometimes be left to play there, but — especially in today's environment of frequent preemptive bidding — your partner will sometimes be under pressure to raise at uncomfortably high levels. You'll have more three-card minor openings — as many as the strong notrumpers and weak notrumpers combined — when you play a Kamikaze notrump.

Don't tell me that you play four-card majors and won't have this problem. For what applies to three-card minor openings applies also to four-card major openings, and for the same reason: even when permissible, they're not desirable.

Wide-Range 1NT Rebids

Kamikaze notrumpers make minimum notrump rebids with 13-16 HCP. This range is slightly too wide for comfort.

Shaded Jump Notrump Rebids

Kamikaze notrumpers make jump notrump rebids with 17-18 HCP. Though this range is not too wide, it is significantly too low. Suppose you are playing a Kamikaze notrump and your partner opens 1♦ in second seat with nobody vulnerable. What would you do with a hand like

♠ 7 4 ♥ 9 7 6 5 3 ♦ J 3 ♣ K J 6 2

The player who held that hand in a recent tournament faced an ugly dilemma. If he passed, his partner might have to play in an inferior and lower-scoring 1♦, while others were reaching a superior and higher-scoring 2♥ via a strong notrump opening and a Jacoby Transfer. If he responded 1♥, his partner might be off to the races with a jump 2NT rebid.

Responder guessed to bid 1♥, and opener, who had a balanced 17-HCP hand, did indeed jump to 2NT. Down one! A strong 1NT opening would have led to 2♥, just making. Given that opener might have a strong 1NT hand, the only 'normal' contract that could be reached was 3♥. That could happen if opener had a prime 17 HCP with hearts, in which case he'd raise a 1♥ response to 3♥, while 15-17

notrumpers enjoyed a ‘normal’ transfer—super-accept—pass auction. Which brings us to one of the truly subtle hidden costs of the Kamikaze notrump...

Wrong-Siding

We just saw that under certain circumstances the ‘same’ 3♥ contract might be reached by Kamikaze notrumpers and strong notrumpers alike. However, the strong notrumpers would reach it from the strong (and usually advantageous) side. Wrong-siding can occur in many different ways. Here are some auctions that can occur when a good balanced 17-HCP hand faces a balanced 9-HCP hand:

Strong Notrumpers

<i>Opener</i>	<i>Responder</i>
1NT	2NT
3NT	pass

<i>Opener</i>	<i>Responder</i>
1NT	2♣ ¹
2♥	3♥
4♥	pass

1. Stayman

<i>Opener</i>	<i>Responder</i>
1NT	2♥ ¹
2♠	2NT
4♠	pass

1. Transfer

Kamikaze Notrumpers

<i>Opener</i>	<i>Responder</i>
1♦	1NT
2NT	3NT
pass	

<i>Opener</i>	<i>Responder</i>
1♣	1♥
3♥	4♥
pass	

<i>Opener</i>	<i>Responder</i>
1♣	1♠
2NT	3♣ ¹
3♠	4♠
pass	

1. Checkback

Furthermore, when a first- or second-seat Kamikaze notrump hand faces a third- or fourth-seat strong notrump hand, 3NT may be reached via a 1NT opening and 3NT raise (or a similar Stayman sequence hunting for a 4-4 major-suit fit) no matter which of these two kinds of notrump openings you play, but again, the strong notrumpers will usually reach it from the superior side.

Pattern-Showing

Suppose the bidding starts

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♦
1♥	1♠ ¹
3♦	

1. Possibly artificial.

The usual inference is that a player who bids three suits with a jump has a singleton in the fourth, a valuable aid to slam bidding. The last time I saw this auction, opener, a Kamikaze notrumper, had

♠ 10 3 ♥ K Q 7 4 ♦ K 6 5 ♣ A K Q 4

Responder had to guess whether to try for slam. As it turned out, a singleton spade would have been more useful for slam than either of opener's queens.

This loss of useful inference from 'three suits with a jump' affects weak notrumpers also. Yes, remedies are possible (I'd be glad to look at yours if you have one), but are you sure the cure isn't worse than the disease?

Three-Card Support

Recently I saw a Kamikaze notrumper open 1♣ on

♠ J 7 6 3 ♥ K 10 9 ♦ A 4 ♣ A K 8 2

a balanced hand that I'd rate as 16 rather than only 15 HCP. Her partner responded 1♥, and she rebid 1♠. Everybody agree? No problem yet, right?

The problem arose at opener's third turn, after responder rebid 1NT. Should she pass, or bid 2♥? Passing figures to be 'right' if responder has only four hearts (and most likely a 3=4=3=3* pattern for players who bid up the line). Bidding 2♥ figures to be 'right' if responder has five hearts. Opener has no way of knowing. (Don't take this as a challenge to invent a 'New Minor Forcing' for opener to use over responder's 1NT rebid. That wouldn't help here, as opener isn't strong enough to handle a reply denying a fifth heart.)

How much easier it is after a strong 1NT opening! A responder with five hearts uses a Jacoby Transfer, a responder with only four hearts uses Stayman (if strong enough).

* The = signs will be used to designate exact hand shapes, rather than – signs. Thus 3=4=3=3 is a hand with four hearts.

EVALUATION OF WEAK NOTRUMP HANDS

Some of the arguments against using the Kamikaze notrump in third and fourth seats apply, with less force, to the weak notrump. Although game sequences are still available to a weak notrumper's passed partner, he will seldom have a good enough hand to use them.

Well, what about the 'weak notrump' then? The phrase may embrace any of several different ranges, supposedly all within the limits of 11 to 15 HCP. A logical range for 'Precision Club' players, whose 1♣ openings show 16 points or more, is 13 to 15; 'a *good* 12 to 15' is better still. Kaplan-Sheinwold players say they use an '11 to 14' range, and I've seen a few pairs use an 11 to 13 range.

Influenced by Kaplan, I favored the weak notrump for many years. The theory behind it is this. Playing a strong notrump and five-card majors, you'll open some hands in three-card minors, perhaps weak three-card minors. What is partner to do if second hand preempts? If he raises your minor to the three-level or four-level and catches you with the dreaded *bad hand*, *bad suit*, then fourth hand can nail you with a penalty double. If instead he passes and you have a *typical* 1♣ or 1♦ opening (an unbalanced hand with a real suit), you may lose a partscore swing, perhaps even miss a game.

The weak notrump avoids this dilemma. Partner can raise your minor-suit openings confidently, knowing that you have either extra strength (a strong notrump hand) or extra shape.

However, Kaplan's is not the only school of weak notrumpers. Marshall Miles belongs to another. Keenly aware of Reason (2), *Notrumpish values*, Miles would open 1♣ on

♠ A K 8 2 ♥ 6 4 ♦ 10 9 5 ♣ A J 9 3

because it's a suit-oriented hand, despite playing a weak notrump. He might even do so with a three-card club suit. A Milesian and a Kaplanite playing together may suffer several disasters before they discover their differences and resolve them (or abandon the weak notrump altogether).

The weak notrump has merits other than the 'tell me the worst immediately' message that it sends. For players who steer a middle course between rigid five-card majorites and die-hard four-card majorites, they provide comfortable openings on almost all hands. Hard-to-bid strong notrump range hands seldom resemble our earlier examples:

♠ A 9 6 5 ♥ K 8 4 3 ♦ A K ♣ K 10 2
♠ A K 10 8 ♥ K 10 9 7 ♦ 9 8 2 ♣ A 10

but when they do, you needn't cringe at opening 1♣ on ♣K102 with the first or 1♠ on ♠AK108 with the second. It is the *weak notrump* hands that can embarrass middle-of-the-road strong notrumpers who hate to open 1♦ on ♦J72 with

♠ A 9 6 5 ♥ K 8 4 3 ♦ J 7 2 ♣ A Q

With which of these next two hands would you open 1♠ and rebid 2NT over partner's 2♥ response?

♠ A K 10 5 2 ♥ 8 3 ♦ K 7 3 ♣ A Q 4

♠ A K 10 5 2 ♥ 8 3 ♦ K 7 3 ♣ Q 6 4

Someone who learned 'Goren' many years ago would say the first one, for Goren defined opener's non-jump 2NT rebid as showing extras. Someone who learned 'Walsh' or certain other modern methods would say the second hand. The weak notrump resolves this conflict of opinion automatically: non-jump 2NT rebids, like 1NT rebids, show strong-notrump hands like the first example, except for the Kaplanites who still rebid 1NT on weak-notrump hands over a 1♠ response to 1♥.

The weak notrump makes things easy for responder after opener rebids 1NT (strong), because now responder's 3-level rebids can be played as forcing while his 2-level rebids, though weak, do not bar opener from bidding again with a maximum. In contrast, strong notrumpers cannot force in a bid suit or bid a new suit constructively after a 1NT rebid, so many are driven to playing some sort of Checkback — which has its own costs. However, the weak notrump has three drawbacks.

- 1) *Even simple overcalls can wreak havoc when responder passes.*

If you play a strong notrump, then this sequence shows a hand too strong to open 1NT (18-19 or so):

West	North	East	South
1♣	1♠	pass	pass
1NT			

The same is true if you play a weak notrump, so what can you do with a strong-notrump hand that you've opened 1♣ when LHO's 1♠ comes back to you? And what will you do when the auction goes

West	North	East	South
1♣	1♠	pass	2♠
?			

When you have a balanced 19-HCP hand, you won't often encounter even such mild obstruction, but when, thanks to the weak notrump, you open 1♣ with a balanced 16 or 17 HCP, auctions like this won't be uncommon.

- 2) *You'll often miss superior suit partscores.*

If you open 1NT on

♠ Q 9 8 3 ♥ K 10 7 ♦ A J 8 4 ♣ K 2

you may play there facing

♠ K J 7 2 ♥ A 3 ♦ 5 2 ♣ 9 8 6 4 3

You may make 1NT for +90 or go down for -50, and then open the traveling scoresheet to see a bunch of +140s or +110s your way. No wonder: others, playing a strong notrump, reached 2♠ after a 1♦ opening and a 1♠ response.

Won't you come out ahead on the hands where the field opens a strong notrump and misses a superior spade partial that you find after opening 1♦? Yes, but there will be fewer such hands because you'll have a weak notrump opening more often than the field has a strong one. Moreover, on some of the hands that you open 1♦, the field will still reach a spade partial via Stayman. In general, strong notrumpers will find their major-suit partials after opening 1NT far more often than weak notrumpers will. Here's why. The average number of HCP that responder has facing a 16-HCP hand is $(40-16)/3 = 8$, just enough to use Stayman over a 16-18 notrump. The average number of HCP that responder has facing a 13-HCP hand is $(40-13)/3 = 9$, but he needs 11 to use Stayman over a 13-15 notrump. Every 3-HCP decrease in opener's strength produces only a 1-HCP increase in the average strength of responder. The weaker your notrump opening, the less often your partner will be able to probe for a superior suit contract.

How about probing for close games? That's where the third drawback of the weak notrump arises.

- 3) *It's sometimes too dangerous to make a game try.*

Suppose responder has long spades in a hand not strong enough to invite game over your 1NT opening. He'll attempt to sign off in 2♠: by bidding 2♥ with the intention of passing opener's 2♠ reply if playing Jacoby Transfers, by bidding 2♠ directly if not. Now '16-18' may be your initial range for a strong 1NT opening, but as soon as responder shows long

spades that range expands to 15-20 based on the degree of your fit for spades. Thus

♠ 8 5 ♥ K J 4 3 ♦ A K Q 4 ♣ Q J 6

initially worth 16, drops to 15 because of its poor spade support and the likelihood that some of its picture cards in the other suits will be facing a singleton or doubleton. However,

♠ K Q 8 5 ♥ A 7 4 3 ♦ A 8 4 ♣ A 9

initially worth 18 (don't anyone question my arithmetic), rises to 20 because of its superb spade support, likely ruffing value, and high cards (aces) that won't be wasted even facing shortness. Playing a 16-18 notrump, you have ample values to raise a natural 2♠ response to 3♠, or jump to 3♠ over a 2♥ Jacoby Transfer. Even facing

♠ 9 7 6 4 3 2 ♥ 8 2 ♦ 9 3 ♣ 6 4 3

or an equally wretched hand, you'll be reasonably safe in 3♠. Though once in a while 3♠ may fail, far more often partner will have a hand good enough to bid and make 4♠ — something like

♠ A J 7 6 3 2 ♥ 8 2 ♦ 9 3 ♣ 6 4 3

will do nicely.

If you play a 13-15 notrump, it is equally true that your hand may sink to 12 or rise to 17 once you learn that partner has long spades. However, you can no longer raise a natural 2♠ response to 3♠ (or super-accept a 2♥ transfer) if your hand has improved beyond its initial maximum. Although partner's maximum is 3 points higher, his average strength is only 1 point higher, and his minimum is the same yorborough that it is when you are playing a 16-18 notrump. So 3♠ will be one too high much more often, and 4♠ will make much less often, when you are playing a weak notrump rather than a strong one.

By now, after switching back and forth between them a few times, I've settled on the strong notrump. So unless otherwise specified, for the rest of this book, I will assume that strong notrump is being used. However, you can adapt what I say to other ranges when appropriate, for I will not describe responses and continuations by the point-counts shown or required. I will simply refer to them as *attempted signoffs*, or *invitational*, or *game-forcing*, or *slammish*, and so forth.

THE KNEE-BONE'S CONNECTED TO THE THIGH-BONE

Before I receive midnight visitations from the ghost of Edgar Kaplan or polemical letters from Eric Kokish (two leading advocates of the weak notrump), I must add that the case for the strong notrump isn't decisive. Indeed, tests with a computer program suggest that the weak notrump works about equally well in a Standard American structure. Its drawbacks don't cause harm *often enough* to be serious.

Obviously, Strong Clubbers who open 1♣ on all hands with 16 or more HCP should play a weak notrump. Not so obviously, the weak notrump blends better with certain other methods. Even basically natural bidders would do well to make their 'Strong Notrump or Weak?' decision conjointly with other system choices.

- Do you (and your partner) scrupulously avoid opening four-card majors?
- Do you play forcing 1NT responses to major-suit openings?
- Are your 2-over-1 responses forcing to game (or nearly so)?
- Do you play Inverted Minor Raises?

'Yes' answers to each of these questions strengthen the case for playing a weak notrump, as the following problems will illustrate:

1. As dealer, you hold

♠ 10 7 2 ♥ A K Q 8 ♦ K 2 ♣ J 7 6 3

as I did recently. What is your call?

If you belong to the old school, the 'Goren'-style Standard American of fifty years ago, you will open 1♥ gladly. As a middle-of-the-roader, reluctant to open a four-card major but not absolutist about it, I too opened 1♥. However, if you are a strict five-card majorite, I say to you: a weak notrump (if available) is a more helpful opening than 1♣. And that's on a hand that contains four weak clubs; I haven't even resorted to showing you any of the hands with *three* weak clubs (or diamonds) that five-card majorites routinely open in the minor.

If you play a weak notrump, you won't often have to open 1♣ or 1♦ on a bad suit with a hand in the strong notrump range because the three extra points you have beyond minimum opening strength will usually give you a respectable three- or four-card minor.

2. ♠ K 9 7 6 2 ♥ A Q 3 ♦ J 6 4 ♣ K 10

You open 1♠ and partner responds 1NT. What is your call?

If this 1NT response isn't forcing, you'll be happy to pass. If it's forcing, you must rebid 2♦ on a weak three-bagger. Wouldn't you much rather have been able to open a weak 1NT?

3. As dealer, you hold

♠ K Q 7 6 2 ♥ 8 6 ♣ A K 4 ♠ A 7 3

What is your call?

If you belong to the old school (2-over-1 responses forcing only one round), you can open 1♠, planning to rebid 2NT (showing extras) over partner's 2♥ (his most awkward response). In most 2-over-1 game-forcing systems, however, a non-jump 2NT rebid shows a hand too weak to have opened (a strong) 1NT. So you must choose among 1♠-2♥; 2♠ (which doesn't tell partner that you have a balanced hand with extras), 1♠-2♥; 3NT (if your partnership agreement is that this jump shows a hand in your strong notrump range but not stronger), and a 1NT opening (not really what you'd like to bid). In some of my 2-over-1 game-forcing partnerships (forgive me, Marshall Miles, for succumbing to social pressure), I've finessed the problem by adopting a weak notrump, so that opener's 1NT rebid and non-jump 2NT rebid both show *strong* notrump hands.

4. Partner opens 1♦ (caution, may be a weak four-card or three-card suit).

What do you respond with

♠ 9 8 6 ♥ A 5 3 ♦ Q 7 6 4 3 ♣ 4 2

If you play standard raises, you have an easy (weak) raise to 2♦. If you play Inverted Minor Raises, you must choose between 1NT and (a weak) 3♦. Neither is nearly adequate. A 1NT response misses out on a diamond contract when you belong in diamonds and wrong-sides the contract when you belong in notrump. Meanwhile, 3♦ can fail miserably when partner has the dreaded balanced minimum with bad diamonds, often losing more points than the opponents can score in a contract of their own.

I've played Inverted Minors as part of *Bridge World Standard* (a strong-notrump, five-card-major, but 2-over-1 not quite game-forcing system) often, without ever having a hand suitable for a raise of a 1♣ or 1♦ opening to the three-level. However, playing a weak notrump and knowing that partner cannot have a balanced minimum, I could bid 3♦ confidently, as it figures to make when partner has a strong-notrump hand, and to steal the contract when he has the other kind of hand he can have for his 1♦ opening, an unbalanced hand with real diamonds. When 3♦ goes down, it won't often go down much, and the opponents will almost always be able to make more playing in their own contract.

Edgar Kaplan invented Inverted Minors because they blended well with the weak notrump he loved. Reversing the process, devotees of Inverted Minors might do well to adopt the weak notrump. Plug a weak notrump into *Bridge World Standard* or most versions of 2-over-1 game-forcing, and you improve the system.

THE NOTRUMP ZONE

WARNING: DO NOT ENTER UNLESS PREPARED TO THINK!

This book will challenge some of your most deeply-held beliefs about notrump bidding. Just some of the topics you will encounter are:

- Why size matters – the plusses and minuses of different notrump ranges
- The optimum notrump range – and it's not 15-17!
- Point count methods, and how to evaluate hands for notrump with and without counting points
- The right hand patterns for notrump
- The kind of bidding structure you should use after a notrump opening
- Why Gerber is useless
- Why you need a defense to 1NT openings, and what it needs to accomplish
- What's wrong with the popular 1NT defenses
- Cutting edge bidding ideas including new conventions (OMAR, Yellow Rose, etc.) and improved versions of many old ones
- Notrump responses to opening bids
- Notrump overcalls – why they should be different over a minor
- Competitive auctions that begin with 1NT



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