



THE WEAK NOTRUMP

HOW TO PLAY IT

HOW TO PLAY AGAINST IT

ANDY STARK

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For Rosemary

I would like to dedicate this book to the memory of my mother, my first bridge teacher. One of the game's greatest gifts is the opportunity it provides for people of all ages to spend time together and I shall always be grateful for the time we spent playing bridge.

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INTRODUCTION

Even if you've never played it yourself, you must have heard of the weak notrump; in fact, you've probably encountered it at the table already. You know how it goes: an opponent opens one notrump and his partner announces, 'Twelve to fourteen.' Perhaps you've even felt a little intimidated playing against the players who use a weak notrump. You didn't know how to compete against it. You either stayed silent in the bidding and lost the partscore battle or, even worse, you entered the auction and got punished! You may have wondered, 'What's so weak about the weak notrump?'

Up until now you've never delved further into understanding the weak notrump or its bidding structure and responses. Perhaps you've seen already how opening the bidding 1NT with a balanced hand and 12-14 HCP (instead of one of a minor) has created some swings or interesting results — who knows, maybe even a top or bottom board. Well, now is the time for you to learn more about the weak notrump.

Is it time to toss aside the 15-17 range and give your system an overhaul? If it is, this book will highlight almost everything you need to know about the weak notrump so that you and your partner can feel confident playing it at the table. You'll know what to do when you have the auction to yourself, and also when it becomes competitive. In addition, this book will show how best to defend against the weak notrump, so that if your opponents open it up against you, you'll know the best tactics to brush it aside and continue bidding to your side's best spot.

The objective of this book is to make you a better, stronger player. Perhaps you have been playing for a year or so and you would like to emulate some of the great players you've read about in books and magazines. Perhaps you are intrigued and curious because you've noticed these top players using notrump ranges *other than 15-17*. Or maybe you have been playing for years at the club level and have become bored of the strong notrump. You wish to spice up your game a little. Well, let there be no doubt — the weak notrump will spice up your game, maybe more than just a little.

You have a challenge ahead of you, to be sure. However, if you take your time to absorb the weak notrump and all its intricacies, you will not only find yourself having a lot of fun at the bridge table but you'll also be achieving good results. Fun and good results — those two go hand in hand, don't they?



HOW TO PLAY IT

SECTION ONE



CHAPTER 1

THE OPENING BID

Anyone who learned to play bridge in North America has been taught that a 1NT opening bid shows a good hand. In the old days, it showed a balanced 16-18 HCP; but time takes its toll on everything, including opening bids, and these days beginners are encouraged to open 1NT with 15-17 HCP. Sooner or later, perhaps in a tournament or even in a club game, they will come to realize that not everyone plays this way. Indeed, a surprising number of opponents seem to favor what they call a ‘weak’ notrump opening, often on far less than a comfortable 15 HCP. I’m not going to discuss why they do this — not, at least, until the final chapter of this book. Suffice it to say that there are sound practical and theoretical arguments in favor of opening 1NT on minimum balanced hands. Instead, I’m going to make the assumption that you picked up this book at least partly because you want to know how weak notrump systems work: either you are tempted to play one or they are causing you trouble when your opponents play them. So we’ll look at the mechanics first and then get into the why’s and wherefore’s at the end.

Let’s start off by clarifying exactly what we mean by a ‘weak notrump’. One definition is ‘any notrump range weaker than the strong notrump of 15-17 HCP’. So by that logic we might consider the ranges of 13-15 or 14-16 as weak. But that doesn’t quite make sense. Certainly those two ranges are weaker than 15-17, but they are a tad more hefty than the traditional weak notrump range of 12-14.

A better definition of the weak notrump is an opening bid of 1NT with a minimum balanced hand. Since some 15-point hands are considered stronger than a minimum, we can't really consider any of the millions of hands with 15 HCP as 'weak' under this guideline. Therefore, for most bridge players, this definition would imply a range of 12-14 HCP. I say 'most', because some weak notrump tournament players like to open 1NT with 'good' 11-point hands, which gives them a notrump range of 11-14.

Can the weak notrump ever be weaker than 11-14? Yes, it certainly can. Some players bring their notrump range down to 10-12, especially at matchpoints. (Granted, they usually do so only when the vulnerability is in their favor.) This range is known widely as the 'mini-notrump', or the 'Kamikaze notrump', and some later chapters are devoted to talking about how to play it and how to play against it.

What about lower still? Can your notrump range be weaker than 10-12? By all means — you can bring it down to 4-6 HCP if you like, but most likely you'll be playing in a kitchen somewhere and the hour will be well after midnight. In North America, the ACBL does not allow any ranges lower than 10-12 HCP in its tournaments. Well, actually it does, but with one major caveat: you are not allowed to play any conventions over a notrump opening that is weaker than 10 HCP. This means not even Stayman and certainly not Jacoby Transfers. So it's safe to say that you probably won't encounter anything out there weaker than the 10-12 mini-notrump. An interesting note about that range is that if you do open a 10-12 notrump, most of the time you will have a hand that isn't even a true opening bid for most people, let alone a minimum, so (as we shall see) you tend to get unusual results.

Enough talk about the ranges; let's now delve deeper into the world of the weak notrump. Unless otherwise indicated, everything that follows and all example hands that feature a 1NT opening will assume a 12-14 HCP range.

WHAT DOES A WEAK NOTRUMP LOOK LIKE?

The weak notrump looks much the same as a strong notrump opening bid of 15-17 HCP, with the only obvious difference being that it is about a king (3 HCP) less in value. It contains 12-14 HCP; no more, no less.

The hand on which you bid a weak notrump will be balanced. This includes the three standard balanced distributions of 4333, 4432, and 5332. The weak notrump might also be semi-balanced — it may contain a five-card suit, a four-card suit and two doubletons, i.e. 5422. With this shape, the five-card suit should not be a major, however. If you hold a minimum hand with 5422 pattern and a five-card major, open in your major. Also, the weak notrump should never contain a singleton. If you open 1NT and the opponents later discover you hold a singleton, you may hear the familiar cry, ‘Director!’

If you want to upgrade beefy looking 11-point hands, counting them as 12, that’s up to you and your partner to agree upon. You may also want to downgrade some 15-point hands and treat them as 14-pointers, but again, it’s a subjective opinion when to do that and requires both judgment and partnership discussion. Here are four 11-point hands you might want to consider upgrading. Note their compensating values, such as an array of nines and tens and/or a decent five-card suit and/or aces and kings.

♠ J 10 9 4	♠ A 3	♠ A J 10	♠ 8 3
♥ Q J 10 8	♥ 10 9 6	♥ 10 9	♥ K J 10 9
♦ J 10	♦ A K 10 9 8	♦ Q J 9 8	♦ J 9
♣ A Q 10	♣ 10 9 7	♣ K 10 9 6	♣ A Q 10 8 7

Now that you have the basics, see if you can recognize what a weak notrump opening bid looks like. As dealer, what is your call with each of the following hands?

- | | | | |
|----------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|
| (1) ♠ J 10 5 4 | (2) ♠ A 3 | (3) ♠ K Q 8 7 4 | (4) ♠ 8 5 2 |
| ♥ A J 9 | ♥ Q J 9 8 3 | ♥ Q 9 4 3 | ♥ A 9 |
| ♦ K 8 6 | ♦ J 6 4 | ♦ 10 9 | ♦ Q 8 |
| ♣ K 10 2 | ♣ A J 7 | ♣ A Q | ♣ K Q J 7 6 3 |
| (5) ♠ K Q 8 | (6) ♠ Q 8 3 2 | (7) ♠ K J 3 2 | (8) ♠ 9 7 4 |
| ♥ 4 3 | ♥ K 9 4 | ♥ A 9 8 5 | ♥ 10 8 4 |
| ♦ A J 9 5 | ♦ J 7 4 3 | ♦ Q 10 3 | ♦ A Q J |
| ♣ K 7 6 5 | ♣ A J | ♣ K Q | ♣ A Q J 5 |

[To Answers 1 - 6](#)

[To Answers 7 - 8](#)

With (1), open 1NT. You hold 12 HCP and a balanced hand.

With (2), open 1NT. It's okay to hold a five-card major and open a weak notrump. There are some weak notrump aficionados who prefer to open this hand one heart and that is fine. However, the majority of weak notrumpers will open this 1NT and you should too. More to come on this topic.

With (3), open 1♠. Since your hand is semi-balanced and you hold five spades along with four hearts, you are better placed if you open one spade and rebid two hearts. Even if your four-card suit were a minor, you should prefer the major-suit opening. The difference between this hand and (2) is that this hand is only semi-balanced, so pattern out naturally.

What is an acceptable semi-balanced 1NT opening bid? Both of these hands should be opened 1NT:

♠ K 4 ♥ Q 8 ♦ A 10 8 5 4 ♣ K J 3 2

♠ J 3 ♥ K 9 8 3 ♦ Q 8 ♣ A K J 7 6

With (4), open 1♣. Although I know of many weak notrumpers who would open this hand with 1NT, you have an easy rebid of 2♣ after a 1♣ opening. Don't distort your hand type; keep it simple.

With (5), open 1NT. Again this hand is a textbook weak notrump. You hold a fine 13-point hand and the weak doubleton in hearts is not to be feared. (Although it might have been feared in 1932 — back then they needed stoppers in every suit — but they also wanted 16+ for a 1NT opening!). With only 12 HCP or so, you'll never have stoppers in all suits, so don't worry about it — partner's supposed to contribute something.

To Questions

With (6), don't open at all — pass! While many players might treat this hand as a 'good eleven' (because all 11-counts are considered good), you should not. This hand is not even close to being a 'good eleven'. There is nothing wrong with passing balanced 10 and 11-point hands in first and second seat. If partner opens a major in third or fourth, you get to use the Drury convention. Plus, as Danny Kleinman, author of *The Notrump Zone*, is fond of saying, 'balanced hands defend'. Defending with hands like these is fun and often leads to extra down tricks. Declarers can't believe you hold 11 HCP. After all, you might have opened, but didn't. In the words of one of my

partners after I opened a trashbag hand like this, ‘Did you have between 12 and 14 high card points? No? Then don’t open a weak notrump.’

With (7), open 1♦. Did you count your high card points? 15, right? Is that between 12 and 14? No. So don’t open a weak notrump. Instead open your better minor and be prepared to support partner’s major-suit response.

With (8), open 1NT. Don’t be afraid of being wide open in two suits — you hold a decent 14-count and you are balanced. It’s a simple game. Even if either one of your queens were a deuce, making your hand a 12-count. Open 1NT.

[To Questions](#)

Review

You should open 1NT whenever your hand meets all of the following criteria:

- * You hold a minimum hand containing 12-14 HCP. Even if you hold a 12-count that is flea-bitten, tattered and “holey” — just do it, open 1NT.
- * Your pattern is 4333, 4432 or 5332. You may also be 5422 if your five-card suit is a minor.
- * You hold thirteen cards (with fewer, call the director).

FITTING THE WEAK NOTRUMP INTO YOUR SYSTEM

If you play Standard American or 2/1, you should not encounter a big problem incorporating the weak notrump into your system. Just remember to change your treatment of the hands on which you used to open 1NT. You’ll see a complete rebid structure later, in Chapter 5. For now, just know that the balanced hands containing 15-17 HCP will usually be opened with one of a minor (or in a major if you hold a five-card suit, of course).

WHAT ABOUT VULNERABILITY?

The original Kaplan-Sheinwold System, devised by Edgar Kaplan and Alfred Sheinwold, stipulated that all balanced 12-14 hands were to be opened 1NT. However later on, perhaps after a minus 800 or two, they decided to alter their 1NT ranges depending on seat and vulnerability. This decision is up to you. I have played with partners who like to keep 1NT openings as 12-14 in every seat no matter the vulnerability and I have played with partners who prefer to play 'chicken notrump'.

'Chicken' is a notrump system that represents an attempt not to get carved by the opponents. So when you think it is easier for the opponents to sit back and double you, such as when you are vulnerable and they are not, then don't open 1NT with a minimum strength hand. Instead, revert to a 15-17 notrump (or 14-16 at least).

Chicken notrump comes in two varieties; you might refer to them as 'regular chicken' and 'super chicken', although there are no definitive terms in the bridge literature. Regular chicken notrump means that you only open a 12-14 1NT in first and second seats and only at favorable or equal vulnerability. That means whenever you are not vulnerable and whenever you and the opponents are both vulnerable. If the vulnerability is not in your favor, then you revert to a strong notrump system. Super chicken notrump means you need the vulnerability even more in your favor. You only open a 12-14 notrump whenever you are not vulnerable in first or second seat. If you are vulnerable in first or second, or at any vulnerability in third or fourth seat, you open 1NT with 15-17 HCP.

Should you adopt chicken notrump? Well, you may as well get used to this familiar refrain now: that decision is up to you and your partner. If you have a bold bidding style or if you like to roll the dice a little, then by all means keep your 12-14 range. However if you feel a little snake-bit, or if you simply feel more comfortable having fuller values when vulnerable, then by all means alter your notrump ranges depending on seat and vulnerability. Perhaps the best advice is to get out to the club and try both versions. Then decide for yourself a few months down the road.

ADVANTAGES OF OPENING A WEAK NOTRUMP

Although there is a later chapter which discusses the rationale for playing the weak notrump, it doesn't hurt to mention now the advantages the weak notrump has over its stronger cousin.

In no particular order, here are some of them:

- * *The preemptive effect.* Opening 1NT with minimum hands takes up the whole one-level and thus forces the opponents to enter the auction at the two-level or higher. In addition, a 1NT opening bid might be just enough to keep the opponents from bidding at all.
- * *Frequency.* There are more possible balanced hands containing 12-14 HCP than there are hands containing 15-17 HCP. Therefore you will be opening 1NT more often.
- * *Rebidding becomes easier.* Since all minimum balanced hands are opened 1NT, you won't have to worry about which suit to open, nor will you fret over your rebid. You get most of your hand off your chest with one bid.
- * *Punish your opponents when it's right to do so.* Many of your opponents will be eager to compete against a weak 1NT opening bid. Perhaps they think you are stealing the hand from them. For example, if you are playing against a DONT fan and he steps into the auction over partner's 1NT because he doesn't feel like being shut out, well, trot out the red card. That is, if you have the values of course. But thanks to partner's 1NT opening, you will have a pretty good idea of what he will be contributing to the defense.
- * *An improved bidding structure when partner opens one of a minor.* Responder is allowed to bid with fewer than the usual 6 HCP required for a response, since opener is either unbalanced or holds 15 or more HCP. This last point requires further clarification and will be dealt with in detail in the next chapter.

Before we move on to the next chapter, let's take a look at a deal that illustrates how effective the weak notrump can be. The weak notrump's preemptive value is such that it keeps the opponents guessing just enough, and sometimes they decide on the wrong course of action. This deal is from the finals of the 1994 Canadian National Team Championships. Notice how the preemptive effect of the weak notrump was just enough to keep the North-South pair from reaching their best spot.

Dealer: West

N-S vul.

<p>♠ J</p> <p>♥ 9 8 7 5 2</p> <p>♦ A J 7</p> <p>♣ A 10 7 4</p>	<p>♠ 10 9 7 6 3 2</p> <p>♥ K 4</p> <p>♦ K 6</p> <p>♣ J 9 2</p>	<p>♠ K 5</p> <p>♥ A J 6 3</p> <p>♦ 10 4</p> <p>♣ K Q 8 6 3</p>									
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	N										
W		E									
	S										
<p>♠ A Q 8 4</p> <p>♥ Q 10</p> <p>♦ Q 9 8 5 3 2</p> <p>♣ 5</p>											

At one table, Fred Gitelman and Joey Silver, playing the weak notrump, stole the pot in two hearts (and made three) when North-South could not find a bid. This was their auction.

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
<i>Gitelman</i>	<i>Caley</i>	<i>Silver</i>	<i>Schwartz</i>
pass	pass	1NT	pass
2♥	all pass		

Note that North-South are on for 4♠, a game that is a lot easier to bid if East-West are playing a strong notrump system. East will open the bidding with one club, allowing South an opportunity to overcall at the one-level, after which North gets a chance to show his spades. Will North-South get to 4♠? We'll never know. What we do know is that versus the weak notrump, *North-South never took a bid.*

CHAPTER 2

RESPONDING TO 1NT

As mentioned earlier, you can adopt the weak notrump into your current system without committing to a huge amount of memory work. The invitational sequences will require some study, since you will be working with different ranges, but they are not all that difficult to learn. This chapter will highlight the use of Four Way Transfers, and how you can continue to use this system over a weak notrump opening.

More and more partnerships that play the weak notrump are comfortable with transfer responses. You too should feel free to stay with what you are accustomed to — bridge can be tough enough as it is, and it's often best to stay within your comfort zone. Keeping with what is comfortable for you is probably the number one advantage of continuing to play transfers — just remember to factor in the three-point differential between ranges.

So now you need at least 12 HCP to drive to game. All (balanced) responding hands with ten or fewer high-card points are played in a partscore. The tricky hands are those with exactly 11 HCP. You may wish to give up on bidding a game or you may wish to invite partner immediately — this decision is more a matter of your partnership style. I recommend treating them as invitational, especially when looking for a major-suit game, since distributional features can increase the chance of success.

Let's assume you are already comfortable playing Jacoby Transfers or Four Way Transfers over 1NT openings. Keep in mind that you typically need 3 more points in order to bid game (partner is 3 points short of what he would have had if you were playing a strong notrump). What is your bidding plan when partner opens 1NT and you hold the following hands?

♠ J 9 7 5 3 ♥ A Q 10 ♦ K 7 4 ♣ J 9

With this hand, transfer to spades, then invite to game with 2NT. You have 11 HCP, partner has 12-14. You want to be in game, either

3NT or 4♠, if partner has a maximum (14 HCP) or a hand that revalues to that with a spade fit.

♠ 4 ♥ K Q 10 8 2 ♦ K 9 8 4 3 ♣ 7 4

With this hand, simply transfer to hearts and pass. With only 8 HCP and a partner limited to 14, you know the limit of the hand is partscore. Granted, there are some magic hands that produce game, but that will require luck and good breaks . . . best to avoid those kinds of games.

♠ A 8 7 4 2 ♥ K Q J ♦ Q J 8 ♣ 10 8

With this hand, transfer to spades and then bid 3NT. This offers a choice of game contracts, either 3NT or 4♠. Partner will prefer the suit contract with appropriate support.

♠ Q 2 ♥ K J 9 7 2 ♦ Q 10 3 ♣ K 10 2

With this hand, transfer to hearts and then bid 2NT — invitational to game. Again, partner can choose between hearts or notrump, in addition to picking between game and partscore.

To sum up, you require at least 12 HCP to leap to game after a transfer. With 11 HCP, you should invite. With anything less, transfer and pass — unless you have a sixth card, in which case you can invite by repeating your major at the three-level. The auction would proceed like this:

OPENER

1NT

2♠

RESPONDER

2♥¹

3♠²

1. Transfer to spades.
2. Invitational with six (or more) spades.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Turning the tables, let's look at a transfer auction from opener's point of view. You have opened 1NT and partner transfers you to hearts. You hold a good hand with four-card heart support, something like:

♠ A 5 3 ♥ Q J 10 5 ♦ A K 9 2 ♣ 4 2

The auction goes:

OPENER

1NT

?

RESPONDER

2♦¹

1. Transfer to hearts.

The question is, do you bid 2♥ or 3♥? Is there anything else to consider? Some tournament players merely accept the transfer at the two-level for fear that responder has a weak hand and that maybe eight tricks are the limit. Others prefer to follow the Law of Total Tricks and jump to the three-level in hearts to tell partner about the nine-card fit. A more sophisticated strategy is to use the bid of 2NT to show four-card support and a maximum for hearts. (The corollary is that now you can bid three of the major (the Law level) with four-card support for partner and *minimum* strength.) Finally, there are others who will bid 3♣ at their second turn to call; this shows a worthless doubleton in clubs as well as four-card support, but says nothing about strength.

Any one of the above strategies is fine. The advantage of showing a worthless doubleton by bidding it at the three-level (or bidding 2♠ if partner transfers to hearts and your worthless doubleton is in spades) is that *responder can now become the declarer*, thus protecting his holding in your weak suit. In addition, responder knows where most of your values lie for slam bidding purposes. If responder knows you have a worthless doubleton (which is defined as J-x or worse) in a side suit, plus four-card trump support, ostensibly he will be able to count your side's losers in that particular suit.

Using the methods just described, try bidding these hands as opener. In each case, you open 1NT and partner bids 2♥, transferring you to spades. What is your call? You hold:

♠ J 10 7 4 ♥ A Q J 3 ♦ K Q 8 ♣ 8 6

Bid 3♣. This promises four-card spade support and exactly two clubs (not including the club ace, king or queen).

♠ A J 9 3 ♥ Q 3 ♦ K J 5 4 ♣ K 9 8

Bid 2NT. This promises four-card spade support and a maximum strength hand — usually 14 HCP, but sometimes a very good 13. You can't bid 3♥ because your doubleton is headed by the queen. Too good — if your hearts were J-x or worse you could bid 3♥.

♠ 8 7 5 4 ♥ A 9 3 ♦ 10 3 ♣ A K J 7 4

Bid 3♦. Since you are now playing according to the Law, you can bid worthless doubletons on any strength. The only time you indicate a difference between a minimum and a maximum is when you have four-card support for partner's major and no worthless doubletons. Therefore, this bid merely announces your four-card support and a doubleton diamond.

♠ Q 10 9 4 ♥ A 10 4 ♦ Q J 6 ♣ A 5 4

Bid 3♠. The choice is really between showing a minimum and a maximum, so this is one of those judgment calls. But since you have just 13 HCP and a 4-3-3-3 pattern, perhaps you should indicate a minimum hand to partner while showing your good spade fit.

The strategy of using 'superaccepts' over transfers is not favored by all tournament players. Sometimes responder transfers on nothing but junk and a five-card major, and so the three-level is simply too high. On other hands, it's important to tell partner about the nine-card trump fit. Once again, partnership agreements will be necessary here. But by playing 2NT as a maximum with four-card support (sometimes you will even have five-card support), you will be able to continue investigating slams at a low level. Therefore, it's good for game and slam bidding, but potentially disastrous to your partscore bidding. Oh well, you can't have it all in this game.

TRANSFERRING TO MINORS

In addition to using transfers to show the majors, you can transfer to show each of the minors. So:

1NT–2♠ shows clubs

1NT–2NT shows diamonds

From here, opener can indicate how much he likes his hand for that minor based on high-card strength and fit for partner. Many partnerships agree that honor-third is a minimum requirement for a positive attitude. This would include the queen, king or ace in responder's minor. However, jack-fourth or better should suffice, too.

Some play that bidding responder's known minor at the three-level shows a positive attitude towards that strain; it's as if opener is saying, 'I like my hand for this minor'. Others play the in-between

step to say, 'I like it'. Either is fine, but there are some slight advantage to playing the former. Here's why.

Take a weak hand with clubs:

♠ J ♥ 8 5 3 ♦ 10 4 2 ♣ Q J 9 8 5 4

Your plan is to transfer to clubs and play it there. If partner bids 3♣, you will pass — you are not worth going beyond a 3♣ contract. If partner bids 2NT, saying, 'I don't like my hand for clubs', then you will bid 3♣ yourself and play it there.

Now let's take a hand where you are weak with both minors:

♠ 8 ♥ 9 4 ♦ Q 10 9 4 3 ♣ K J 8 5 2

What do you do? Do you pass 1NT? Do you guess which minor to transfer to? Try this. Transfer to diamonds and see what partner has to say. If partner likes his hand for diamonds (by bidding 3♦), then pass. If partner bids 3♣ to say he does not like his hand for diamonds, then pass that too! The thinking is that if partner does not like his hand for diamonds, then by inference his hand is better for clubs. Partner might hold something like:

♠ A J 9 2 ♥ Q 7 4 3 ♦ 8 3 ♣ A Q 7

If so, then you can reach a club contract. Unfortunately, it is at the three-level, but that's the way it goes; at least you are getting to the best strain.

The other small advantage is that when opener bids responder's minor, the opponents still don't know the strength of responder's hand. If he is weak, it is harder for them to balance.

WHAT IS A DIRECT THREE-LEVEL BID OVER 1NT?

The short answer to this is that there are lots of possibilities. Let's quickly look at the old-fashioned style where direct three-level bids are to play. This means anywhere from a preempt to a fairly decent hand, but not enough to be interested in game. This treatment works well if you are only playing transfers for the majors. Also, if you are playing Two-Way Stayman (described in Chapter 3), then direct three-level bids to play work well. In a bit more detail, they work like this.

If you jump to three of a minor, you promise at least a six-card suit; if you jump to three of a major, you promise seven cards (a six-card suit is acceptable if the hand is distributional.) Partner is not invited to bid again. Your desire here is to jam up the opponents,

who may have a fit. Here are some typical hands for a three-level response; in all cases partner has opened the bidding 1NT.

♠ Q J 8 7 5 3 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ 10 8 3 ♣ J

Bid 3♠. Your seventh spade means you have a nine-card fit. By jumping, you might get away with shutting out the opponents completely — who knows what they can make?

♠ K 9 ♥ J 9 7 6 4 3 2 ♦ 8 3 ♣ 7 4

Bid 3♥. Same strategy as before. Even with 7222 shape, it's worth the preemptive call.

♠ 4 ♥ Q 9 8 ♦ A 10 9 7 6 5 ♣ K 7 4

Bid 3♦. Although your high-card strength is better, can you envision a game contract? (Well, yes — if partner has a diamond fit, a spade stopper and three fast tricks outside diamonds, but how likely is that...?) The most your side would have is 23 HCP — best to play in three diamonds. Note: if you are playing Four-suit Transfers, then your bid is 2NT and your plan is to pass partner's 3♦ call.

♠ 9 4 ♥ 9 ♦ 9 7 6 ♣ J 10 9 8 6 4 2

Bid 3♣. Playing transfers, you would transfer to clubs, but playing weak three-level bids you jump to 3♣ yourself.

If you have a five-card minor and a weak hand, pass partner's 1NT opening. You may run out to that suit if you are doubled, but wait until that happens. (See "Rescue Bidding.")

USING THE THREE-LEVEL FOR MINOR-SUIT HANDS

A common modern style that goes hand-in-hand with transfer systems is having three-level bids show various hands with both minors. The thinking behind this method is that if you are playing transfers, you already have ways to show all the hand types which include length in a major suit. Therefore you can use the three-level to show the minor-oriented hands. One version looks like this:

3♣	Both minors (5+5+), weak
3♦	Both minors (5+5+), forcing
3♥	Both minors, 5-4, forcing, shortness in hearts
3♠	Both minors, 5-4, forcing, shortness in spades

Another version looks like this:

3♣	Both minors (5+5+), weak
3♦	Both minors (5+5+), forcing
3♥	Both minors, 5-4, forcing, fragment in hearts (short spades)
3♠	Both minors, 5-4, forcing, fragment in spades (short hearts)

Say, as responder, you pick up:

♠ 4 ♥ K 8 7 ♦ A K 10 8 3 ♣ A Q 9 8

Over partner's 1NT opening, you can now bid 3♥ to show both minors (at least 5-4 in length) and shortness in spades. From here, partner can insist on hearts, because he opened 1NT with a five-card heart suit. Or partner can bid 3NT with lots of values in spades and a bad fit for your minor-suit slam interest. Alternatively, partner can bid four of a minor which is a cooperative call, looking to continue on to a minor-suit slam.

3♣ AS PUPPET STAYMAN

Many tournament players like to play some version of Puppet Stayman. This is a Stayman bid asking about major-suit length. Opener can show five-card length, four-card length or deny having either. Using 2♣ over 1NT as Puppet Stayman doesn't actually work out that well (the original convention was designed to work over a 2NT opening, where inviting or stopping short of game are not really issues). However, instead of playing Puppet Stayman at the two-level, you can use a 3♣ call over 1NT, showing a game-forcing hand and asking for five-card majors. Thus, as responder, you could hold:

♠ K 10 8 ♥ 8 ♦ K Q 10 8 3 ♣ A J 9 2

Here you have enough values for game but are worried about hearts. If partner has a five-card spade suit, then your 3♣ Puppet Stayman inquiry will reveal it. If partner bids 3♦ — promising one or two four-card majors — you can subside in 3NT and hope for the best. However, if his response is 3NT (no four- or five-card major) you're probably going to wish you had been playing one of the minor-suit methods discussed above!

WHAT ABOUT FOUR-LEVEL BIDS?

Play what you like. If you are accustomed to Gerber and Texas transfers, then by all means keep playing them. You may even want to consider playing the original version of Texas transfers, also known as ‘South African Texas’.

South African stipulates that you give up the Gerber bid of 4♣ over 1NT (be honest — when was the last time you used it?). Now 4♣ shows hearts and 4♦ shows spades, while 4♥ and 4♠ are both natural and to play. One reason to do this is that it’s harder to have a bidding accident — 1NT-4♥ just sounds so natural! There’s a theoretical advantage too: playing South African allows you to choose whether to play the hand as responder or let partner play the hand as opener. Your decision is based on whether or not your hand features tenace positions such as A-Q or a guarded king. For example:

♠ A Q J 9 7 3 ♥ A 8 6 ♦ J 9 5 ♣ 10

With this hand, bid 4♦ — a transfer to spades. You prefer to have the opening lead coming around to partner’s hand. With this hand, however:

♠ Q J 10 9 7 3 ♥ K 8 6 ♦ A Q 3 ♣ 10

Bid 4♠; natural and to play. You prefer the lead coming around to your hand, especially if your LHO leads a diamond away from his king. Or perhaps your LHO holds the ace of hearts. If you allow partner to play the hand, a heart lead through your king might be enough to set the contract.

Whatever your partnership chooses to agree on will be fine. Texas is good; South African Texas is good; playing natural four-level bids are good. They’re all great, in fact. Just make sure you and your partner are on the same page — if one of you is playing a convention and the other is not . . . hello, bad result! (Believe me, I know from experience.)

THE WEAK NOTRUMP

Did you know that the weak notrump works extremely well with many natural systems, especially the popular modern 2/1 style? If you want to play it, this book will show you how it affects the rest of your system. If you have had poor results playing against it, you can find out what the best methods are for countering it. Among the topics covered here are:

- The best bidding structure after your side opens a weak notrump
- What to do when the opponents double you
- What to do when the opponents overcall
- How the rest of your system changes
- 10-12 notrump openings — playing them and playing against them
- The advantages of playing a weak notrump
and many more



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