

Competing in the Bidding Pt4: The 1NT Overcall

In Lesson 20, we discussed options to bid when the opposition open 1 of a suit. One of those options is to overcall 1NT. Today we'll look at that in a bit more detail.

What do I need to overcall opposition's opening 1-of-a-suit with 1NT?

So, let's say the opposition have just opened 1 of a suit. What sort of hand would you need to **overcall** 1NT?

- 16-18 HCP (or a good 15)
- A balanced/ semi-balanced hand
- A stop in the opposition's opening suit (a must-have!)

If your hand satisfies these criteria, then you **should** overcall opposition's opening 1-of-a-suit with 1NT.

Why 15/16 to 18? What if you're even stronger than 18HCP? That will be quite rare, as you are not often going to have 19+ points when an opponent has already opened! However, it does occasionally crop up. In such a case, you will first **X**, then bid 1NT next time round. You should get the opportunity to bid your 1NT next time round, as if opposition pass your **X**, partner must bid her best suit, even with a very weak hand.

How should I respond if partner overcalls opposition's opening 1-of-a-suit with 1NT?

We can use exactly the same responses to partner's 1NT overcall bid as we would if they had **opened** 1NT, except allowing for the higher point count. That means Stayman and Transfers apply. This approach is called "Systems **ON**", and it is an option you and your partner might agree to play. It is a popular and well-accepted method, and you will find it widely recommended.

However, when an opponent has an opening hand, and partner has 15+ HCP, the remaining points in the other two hands are in the range 9 to 14, say typically about 11. An important priority when partner overcalls with 1NT is a system which caters for a cheap landing spot, eg the ability to stop in 2 of a minor suit. This method is called "**Systems OFF**".

Using the Systems Off approach, your options in responding to partner's 1NT overcall are

- Pass
- 2♣, 2♦, 2♥, or 2♠: a weak take-out "rescue" bid, to play. No Stayman or transfers. Partner must pass.
- 2NT: 8-9HCP, invitational: partner will raise to 3NT if she is upper end of the range.
- 3NT: to play
- 3-level bids in a new suit: this promises at least 5 cards in the suit, and a hand that can play either 3NT, or 4 of the suit with any help in that suit from partner.

This way, you are unlikely to miss game if it's on, and much less likely to get too high and achieve a score in the minus column.

I recommend at this level, if you are not yet a reasonably expert club player, that Systems Off is the preferred option. But if you choose to play Systems On, that is perfectly fine.

Whichever option you choose, it is of course essential that you and your partner agree which it is that you're playing, or you'll get in a mess!

Here is an example, where Systems Off works best.

Both sides vulnerable, dealer N.

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

North opens 1♥. East, with a heart stop and 16 HCP, overcalls 1NT. South, with an unpromising 4-3-3-3 shape, passes. (Note that if South had held a heart honour in her 3 cards, or had bit of shape, she would bid 2♥ rather than pass). It's now over to West. Playing systems on, West would be reluctant to transfer to diamonds which would mean playing at the 3 level (bidding 2♠ to transfer to a minor), and passes, hoping that 1NT will be OK. On a ♥ lead from South (leading partner's bid suit), declarer can win the ace on the first or second trick, and then force out the A♦ to establish diamonds. No good. South takes the ace and leads back a heart. After cashing the hearts, North continues with a small club through east's Q, and NS eventually take 8 tricks: 4 hearts, the diamond ace, and 3 clubs. That's 2 down, and +200 to NS.

However, playing systems off, West bids the 2♦ "rescue" over partner's 1NT overcall, and that is the final contract. She makes 8 tricks: 2 spades, ace of hearts, a heart ruff, and 4 diamonds.

Of course, there will be other hands where Systems On works better. It is up to you and your partner to agree what you prefer, but for the non-expert player, Systems Off is probably slightly better overall.

