

Notrump Contracts—Part I  
(July 12, 2021)

1NT Shapes: 4-4-3-2  
4-3-3-3  
5-3-3-2  
2-2-5-4 (Honor-x in the doubleton suits)  
4-4-4-1 (With stiff A, K or Q)  
5-4-3-1 (with stiff A, K or Q; but not 5-4 in the majors)

1NT Sizes: 15 – 17/18  
14 plus to 17 minus (14 HCP with a good 5-card side suit)  
10-14 (Weak NT)

If you hold a five-card major and 15-16 HCP, open with 1NT; but, if you have the same holding and 17 HCP, it is better to open with one of the major.

2NT Shapes: Same as for 1NT openings

If you hold a five-card major, open 2NT.

Special Case: 2C 2D 2NT is your best rebid holding the following type hand:

AKxx A KQxx AQxx or AKJx x AKQx KQxx

For more information on the above, refer to the lesson notes from the April 12<sup>th</sup> class on the Smolen Convention and Puppet Stayman.

Recommended Reading: Bidding Basics by Larry Cohen, April 2017, **Bridge Bulletin**.

## Defensive bidding strategies over a strong NT opening:

Most of you are familiar with and use the DONT Strategy (don't let your opponents play in 1NT). The most common bids are as follows:

2C = clubs/higher suit	
2D = diamonds/higher suit	Be sure to alert all bids that
2H = hearts/spades	should be alerted in these
2S = spades	responses as well as those below.
2N = clubs/diamonds	
Dbl = promises a long suit (partner is forced to bid 2C)	

Another common strategy is Cappelletti. The bids are as follows:

2C = a one-suited hand	(Partner should respond 2D)
2D = both majors	
2H = hearts and a minor (2NT asks for the minor)	
2S = spades and a minor (2NT asks for the minor)	
Dbl. = penalty (showing a strong hand)	

Today, the more advanced players are using Meckwell (named after Meckstroth and Rodwell). The basic bids are as follows:

Dbl. = long minor or both majors (partner is forced to bid 2C)
2C = clubs and a major
2D = diamonds and a major
2H = hearts
2S = spades
2NT = clubs and diamonds

NOTE: Be very careful about using any of the above bids. If you do not have your bid, remember that the responder can **double you for penalty** if the pair is using the Lebensohl Convention (see previous two lessons).

There are several other strategies such as Brozel, Landy, Roth, and Woolsey.

Defensive bidding strategy over a weak NT opening bid” The best strategy in use is known as “**Hello**”. The bids are as follows:

Dbl = penalty  
2C = forces 2D  
Pass = To play  
2H = 5H and a 5-card minor (2N = ask bid)  
2S = 5S and a 5-card minor (2N = ask bid)  
2D = 6+ hearts  
2H = 5/5 in majors  
2S = 6+ spades  
2NT = 6+ clubs  
3C = 5/5 in minors

If the opponents double for penalty your partner's opening 1NT bid, the runout bids are as follows:

2C = 5+ clubs, to play  
2D = 5+ diamonds, to play  
2H = 5+ hearts, to play  
2S = 5+ spades, to play  
P = denies a five-card suit

If responder passes, the opener can bid as follows:

2C = 5 clubs, to play  
2D = 5 diamonds, to play  
2H = 5 hearts, to play  
2S = 5 spades, to play  
Pass = 4-3-3-3 shape  
XX = asks responder to bid 4-card suits up the line

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## The Playing of NT Contracts\*

The bidding is over. The contract is set. You find yourself playing in a 3NT contract. The opening lead is made. The dummy is tabled. The basic declarer play strategies, which you learned when playing in a suit contract, apply as well in the playing of notrump contracts, i.e., 1NT, 2NT, 2C-2D-2NT, etc.

### General Approach:

1. Plan the play of the hand before you call for the first card from dummy.
2. Count your top winners—tricks that can be cashed right away.
3. Look for additional tricks, either secondary honors which you might score (Q, J, or 10) or a long suit to run.
4. Do you have sufficient entries to execute your action plan?
5. What is the significance of the opening lead? Fourth best? Top of nothing? Does it threaten your contract?
6. Is there a danger hand to keep off lead?
7. Do you need to hold up on taking the opening lead?

### Key Recommendations:

1. If you need to lose tricks in a suit, do so early while you still have controls in the other suits.
2. If you have a long suit, run it. This will force the opponents to discard potential winners. **WATCH THOSE DISCARDS!!**

\*Material taken from one of Bob Schulman's Lessons: Click on Lessons Tab, [swvabridgeclubs.org](http://swvabridgeclubs.org) website.

Example 1.	54 1075 KQJ53 AQJ  AK3 KQJ 10842 K63	Contract: 3NT  Opening Lead: 6 of spades
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General Approach:

1. Number of top winners: 2S, 3C = 5 tricks
2. Sources of additional tricks:
  - a) drive out ace of hearts to gain 2 additional tricks, or
  - b) drive out ace of diamonds to gain 4 additional tricks.

Whichever suit we attack, the defenders will take their ace and drive out your last spade stopper. The better play is to knock out the ace of diamonds, establishing four tricks in the diamond suit. Thus, 5 top tricks + 4 diamonds = 9 tricks

Other things to consider in the play of the above hand:

1. Entries are not a problem in this hand. You can use the club suit to move between the two hands.
2. The opening lead of the six of spades has attacked our shortest, most vulnerable suit. You need to set up your extra tricks immediately.
3. Neither hand is a danger hand in this example. The fact is that once they drive out the A/K of spades, the opponents will score enough tricks to set the contract.
4. In this example, there is no point in holding up on the opening lead as they will continue with another spade anyway.

Key Recommendations:

1. Drive out the ace of diamonds while you still have a spade control, as well as controls in all the other suits.
2. Run the diamond suit and claim your nine tricks.

Example 2.

74  
KQ4  
8532  
A1092

A63  
AJ8  
AKJ  
KJ73

Contract: 3NT

Opening Lead: King of spades

Analysis of Hand:

You have 8 top tricks: 1S, 3H, 2D, 2C

To get your ninth trick, you can finesse either the clubs or the diamonds.

Entries are not a problem in this hand. You can use hearts to move between the two hands.

What is the significance of the opening lead? West probably is leading from the KQJx of spades and has led the top of the sequence. West **MUST NOT** be permitted to establish and run the spade suit.

Is there a danger hand to keep off lead? Yes, West is the danger hand.

Do you need to hold up on the opening lead? Yes. You should hold up and not take the ace of spades early. West will probably continue leading spades. You need to hold up until the third round to take the ace. Play the king of clubs and finesse West for the queen. If this finesse loses, East may not have a spade to return. And, if he does, the spades are breaking 4-4. All you lose are 3 spade tricks and the queen of clubs.

The above hand is a classic example of the **Holdup Play**. The holdup consists of refusing to take a trick early in the play of the hand. The purpose in not taking a trick early is to deplete one of the opponents out of that suit.

In other words, you plan to take the trick at such time that the partner of the opening leader will have no more of that suit to return to the leader. If the opponent with the established suit is unable to regain the lead later on in the play, he will not be a threat to your contract.

Your plan by holding up taking your stopper in the suit being led is to exhaust his partner of that suit. You then have to hope that the partner of the opening leader can obtain all subsequent leads.

Whether or not to holdup is the question which declarer usually has to answer early in the play. Perhaps the best way to learn when to hold up is to learn the converse—when not to holdup.

Example 3.	J3 107 A103 KQJ963		Contract: 3N by South  Opening Lead: 2 of spades
	K972 9853 8765 7	Q1064 J62 KQJ9 A5	Possible Bidding:  1C 2D 2H 3C 3NT
	A85 AKQ4 42 10842		

Analysis of the Hand: West leads the 2 of spades, the jack is played from dummy, and East plays the queen. If East is permitted to hold the trick, he might find the devastating diamond shift which would defeat your contract. There, WIN the first spade and lead a club trying to establish the club suit while you still hold the ace of diamonds.

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Another reason for not holding up would be if you can develop an additional trick by lower cards in the suit which you might lose if you held up. Example 3 below illustrates this situation.

Example 3.	a. J2 A103	b. 93 A1086
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In (a), West leads the 5 of spades; dummy plays the 2 and East plays the queen. You MUST NOT hold up. If you do, you will win only one trick in the suit. In (b), West leads the 5 of spades, dummy plays the 3 and East plays the queen. Here, again, you do not want to holdup because by taking the first trick, you will be assured of another trick later on in the hand.

Example 4 is a classic example of the holdup play in action.

Example 4.	762	Contract: 3NT by South
	A43	
	AKQJ	Opening Lead: 10 of spades
	1054	
	A98	Bidding: 1D (2S) 2N (P)
	K62	3N
	853	
	A987	

Analysis of the hand:

You have 8 top tricks. Your only chance for a ninth is in clubs. Since East has shown at least five spades for his overcall, West can have only one/two. You should holdup winning the ace of spades until the second round. Then, play clubs by finessing East for the club honors. If West wins, he has no more spades to return. This strategy will work if East has any one of the club honors.



On some deals, you cannot afford to let either opponent win a trick since they are both dangerous, i.e., will be able to cash enough tricks to set you. In such cases, you will have to look for a way of making the contract without giving up the lead. The hand below will illustrate such a dilemma. I want to finish today's discussion with just such a hand.

Example 5.	K74	Contract: 3NT by South
	95	
	KQJ8	Opening Lead: 4 of hearts
	QJ63	Rule of Eleven: 7 cards out higher than the 4.
J96	1083	
K10742	QJ63	
A52	743	
95	872	
	AQ52	
	A8	
	1096	
	AK104	

In 3NT, you have 3S, 1H, and 4C tricks for a total of 8 tricks. It may look easy to develop extra tricks by driving out the diamond ace. But, be careful!!!!!!!!!!!!!! West has led a heart, and even if you holdup with your heart ace, you can do so for only one round. If you give up the lead, even if the missing hearts divide 5-4, the opponents will get four heart tricks to go along with the diamond ace. Down at least 1.

Your only play to develop a ninth trick may lie in the spade suit. You have seven spades and the opponents have six. If the missing spades divide 3-3, your remaining low spade will be a winner after you cash the A/K/Q in the suit. Even though this play goes against the odds (usually 6 cards will break 4-2 the majority of the time), it is your only play to make your contract. Go For It!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Note: It does no harm to take your four club winners first. This gives you the added chance that an unsuspecting opponent who started with four spades may discard a spade when declarer is playing his clubs. Remember to watch those DISCARDS in the spade suit.



Next Week: We will continue looking at the play of notrump contracts, especially focusing on the **safety (ducking) play.**