

## Tools to Use Against "Strong Club" Pairs

You play at the local club and most of your opponents play either Standard American or 2/1 Game Forcing. And you're gotten pretty comfortable with understanding and competing in their auctions.

Now and then, you run into that rogue pair that's playing a system with which you're not as familiar. They Alert their 1♣ or 1♦ or 1NT openings and (usually) the two or three bids following... So you sit there and pass, waiting for the next round to be called.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Because you don't run into very many pairs playing these systems, you haven't spent any time developing tools to compete in these auctions. You don't want to ask about the Alerted bids, because (i) asking may work to your detriment, and (ii) what would you do differently anyway? Those rounds cannot end quickly enough; and they frequently end with disappointing results.

Those that play Strong Club systems and weak notrumps tend to be more experienced players. They will claim that their success is due to the accuracy and efficiency of their systems. Often, however, a large part of their success is due to the fact that the rest of the field is ill-equipped to compete and is intimidated by their methods.

If the opponents are playing a weak notrump system, frequently their 1♦ openings are simply minimal opening unbalanced hands (unsuitable for notrump), but nothing special about the diamond suit. These bids should be Alerted, but often are not.

### Against Their (Possible) Strong Club Opener

When the opponents open a Strong Club (or a similar system where a 1♣ opener can be a 15-18 type notrump opener) it is particularly important to have a treatment that allows you to show either a single suit (standard overcall type), or a two-suited hand. And because the opener often has said nothing about his distribution or his best suits, interfering at low levels is critical to disturbing the low-level exchange of information that usually follows their minor suit openings.

Once the opponents Alert their 1♣ opener, you are permitted to use otherwise unavailable methods. One method of interference is particularly useful. Use of the **Suction** convention (descriptions of Suction usually address its use over NT openings) against artificial openings is powerful. It will sound difficult to use, but in practice is pretty easy to absorb. Generally, it can be viewed as: When we overcall the artificial bid, we promise either (a) the next suit in sequence (fundamentally, a transfer to that suit), or (b) the other two suits (a two-

suited hand). Partner should bid the suit we requested, and if it were the other two suits, we correct by bidding that next suit...

Sounds confusing? Yes, but it's not.

If the opponents open 1♣ (Alerted), and I overcall 1♥, I am asking you to bid the next suit (1♠). If that's my suit, I am happy to pass or take whatever action is appropriate. If it's not my suit (I have a two-suiter with clubs and diamonds), I correct to 2♣ and you can choose. Similarly if I bid 1♦ over their 1♣ opening, I hold either a heart suit, or both spades and clubs). You bid the hearts, as requested, and I indicate which hand I hold.

The only wrinkle to this is when I hold a two-suited hand and the suits are non-touching. I start with a double. This alerts you that I hold such a two-suited hand, and you bid your **cheapest suit of three cards or longer**. Since I have either clubs and hearts, or diamonds and spades, I can either pass or correct to the next highest suit. Once you know my two suits, you can now pass or correct. An example:

(1♣) - X - (Pass) - 1♥<sup>1</sup> - (Pass) ...  
(1♣) - X - (Pass) - 1♥<sup>1</sup> - (Pass) - 1♠<sup>2</sup> - (Pass) ...  
(1♣) - X - (Pass) - 1♥<sup>1</sup> - (Pass) - 1♠<sup>2</sup> - (Pass) - 2♦<sup>3</sup> - (Pass) ...  
(1♣) - X - (Pass) - 1♦<sup>4</sup> - (Pass) ...  
(1♣) - X - (Pass) - 1♦<sup>4</sup> - (Pass) - 1♥<sup>5</sup> - (Pass) ...  
(1♣) - X - (Pass) - 1♦<sup>4</sup> - (Pass) - 1♥<sup>5</sup> - (Pass) - 2♣<sup>6</sup> - (Pass) ...

- <sup>1</sup> I have at least 3 hearts, but have less than three diamonds
- <sup>2</sup> Nope, I have spades and (non-touching) diamonds
- <sup>3</sup> I only have one spade (or none), so I'll choose the diamonds
- <sup>4</sup> I have at least 3 diamonds
- <sup>5</sup> Nope, I have hearts and (non-touching) clubs
- <sup>6</sup> I prefer the clubs (enough to be at a higher level)

Some players prefer to use a double to show clubs and hearts, and 1NT to show diamonds and spades, but that leads to a lot more two-level contracts.... I do NOT recommend this. If you would like to find a better use for a 1NT overcall, make it natural (15-17), whereby your partner can take the appropriate action.

## Against Their Weak Notrump Opening

Advanced players like the weak notrump opening. It eliminates that nuisance minor suit opening with a balanced hand, and it serves as a very effective preemptive bid against you.

You and your partner need to agree (**now!** ... not when you first encounter this at the table) upon a treatment that you like over weak notrumps. There are several available, but make certain that you **choose one that includes the ability to double the opponents for penalties**. For that reason, conventions such as DONT, Meckwell, and Suction (see above) are less effective. As long as you can't double them for penalties, their world is very comfortable. Many players prefer to utilize the double of a weak notrump as the equivalent hand to a strong (15-17) point notrump, with the emphasis on passing the double for penalties if possible.

Treatments such as Cappelletti or Brozel are easy to play against weak notrumps, so you should probably learn one of them and play it unless you have something else with which you are comfortable.

Those who play weak notrumps also employ "run-out" escape sequences to permit them to avoid playing 1NT doubled, so you should probably inquire about their escape sequences when you first discover that they are playing weak notrumps, and should decide what your follow-up bids will mean.

The key to neutralizing the opponent's weak notrump openings is to discuss your methods immediately and preparing yourself to compete. Always check the opponent's card(s) when you first sit down to play. Otherwise you may be caught off-guard in the bidding.

### **An Interesting Way of Countering Strong Club Systems Regular Openings**

When those that play weak notrumps and/or strong opening club systems make regular opening bids at the one-level, they are showing a limited hand that is unbalanced. Major suit openings are five-card suits, but a 1♦ opener may consist of a hand that is limited, but unsuitable for a weak 1NT opening; hence, it may not indicate a sincere interest in the diamond suit. In other words, it's a limited unbalanced opening. Since you don't know much about their distribution, it follows that they don't, either.

A relatively effective way of dealing with one-level openings (1♦, 1♥, 1♠) is to **reverse the traditional meaning of double and 1NT overcalls**. If we use a 1NT overcall as a three-suited takeout of about opening strength, we find that the ensuing sequences are much more effective. With the only length in the opponent's suit, advancer can easily pass the 1NT bid without risking catastrophe (as would be likely by passing a regular takeout double). And if our double of a limited opening bid represents a hand with a balanced 15-17 HCPs, it is simultaneously easier to pinpoint a reasonable contract (including 1NT) or to decide to pass for penalties. The occurrences of actually deciding to defend (doubled) are much more frequent on these sequences than on the more

"traditional" passing-for-penalties when partner is showing shortness in the opponent's suit.

Not to be lost is the fact that the opponents are unlikely to be well prepared for these treatments. Turning the table on pairs that are accustomed to being "bullies" by the nature of their systems can be satisfying, even if that pleasure is momentary.

## **Summary**

There is no need to be intimidated by strong club, weak notrump, and unbalanced diamond systems. Although they all possess some advantages, a major element of their effectiveness lies in your unpreparedness. And that's an advantage that you can overcome.