

Splinters Over 1NT Opener

There are probably as many ways to use three-level responses over a 1NT opener as there are bridge players. Many partnerships utilize these responses to show 5-5 distribution in either minors or majors. Others use the minor-suit jumps to show a reasonable six-card suit with an invitation to 3NT.

But the sacrifice of an entire level of bidding comes at a heavy price. Therefore, it should be reserved for the kinds of hands that are likely to render a significant gain and which cannot be easily described otherwise.

Such a hand is the one with a 4-4-4-1 (or 5-4-4-0) distribution and sufficient honor strength (10+ HCP) to force game. Such hands cannot be described by common methods.

If, by partnership agreement, a three-level response to a 1NT opening (showing the singleton or void) promises such a hand, it will be easy for opener to determine the proper denomination in which to play the final contract.

There are two important considerations when this situation arises. The first concerns the existence of a double-stopper in the short suit. If the NT opener holds any less than A-J-T or K-Q-J in this suit (which is almost certain to be led by the defense), 3NT is in great peril.

Therefore, a response of 3NT to the splinter bid guarantees a double-stopper in the short suit (or possibly a five-card suit) and a disinterest in playing in any suit contract.

If responder has sufficient honor strength, further bids would indicate slam interest in notrump. A 4♣ bid would be Gerber, other bids would be cue bids.

If the NT opener does not have the required double-stopper in the short suit, it is important to choose the proper suit in which to play. This is done by bidding the selected trump suit. This permits the responder to either pass the selected suit at the lowest level, jump in the selected suit,

cue-bid another suit, or begin an ace-asking sequence. The trump suit is established. These bids have (somewhat) natural meaning.

a) If the lowest level of the suit chosen is a game-level contract, this will end the bidding, unless responder chooses to explore slam;

1NT - 3♠ (shortness) - 4♥ - Pass

b) If the lowest level of the suit chosen is below a game-level contract, a jump to the game will end the bidding;

1NT - 3♦ (shortness) - 4♠ - Pass

1NT - 3♠ (shortness) - 5♦ - Pass

c) If the lowest level of the suit chosen is below a game-level contract, bidding the trump suit below game indicates extra values and suggests mild slam interest; if opener is maximum and has no wasted values in the splintered suit, opener should cue-bid. Otherwise, a raise to the game will end the bidding;

1NT - 3♦ (shortness) - 3♠ (general slam interest in spades) - 4♣ (I am interested and have the ace of clubs) - ??

1NT - 3♦ (shortness) - 4♣ (general slam interest in clubs?) - 5♣ (no, thanks) - Pass

1NT - 3♠ (shortness) - 4♦ (general slam interest in diamonds?) - 4♠ (ace of spades, denies ace of hearts) - ??

d) Once the trump suit is established, 4NT is (keycard) Blackwood;

1NT - 3♥ (shortness) - 3♠ - 4NT (RKCB for spades) - ??

1NT - 3♠ (shortness) - 4♦ - 4NT (RKCB for diamonds) - ??

Several notes on such sequences:

Deciding on 3NT as a final contract should only occur when the splintered suit contains a hard double-stop, as its lead is virtually assured. Further, with the existence of a singleton (or void) in responder's hand, a suit contract will frequently take more tricks in any 4-4 (or better) fit.

In nearly all suit-oriented sequences, the responder is the captain of the auction. The NoTrump opener selects the original denomination and answers subsequent questions.

The NT opener should discourage slam interest when holding any wasted values in the splintered suit unless the hand is worth a NT opening without those values.