

For The Advancing Player

Defense Against Weak No trump Openings



By Maritha Pottenger

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This column is in answer to a reader's query. It's also my swan song. After writing for the Forum for years, and then the D22Connection, I am ready to retire. (I will continue my personal Teaching Points for my subscribers through 2021.)

Establish what is “weak”

The first step is to agree with your partner what the range of a “weak” versus a “strong” no trump bid is. Clearly the Kamikazi NT (10-12 or 10-13) is weak. What about 12-14? What about 12-15? What about 14-16? A common agreement is that any NT which includes 15 HCP in its range (at top OR bottom) is strong. Anything below that is weak. Thus, 12-14 is weak, but 12-15 is strong.

As with most partnership agreements, the most important action is that you and your partner agree (and remember your agreement). The specific agreement is not as important as being in sync with partner.

Have a penalty double in your conventional agreements

It is vital to use an overcall system in which the double is penalty oriented. Otherwise, the weak NT bidders are stealing the bid often, and not getting punished enough. You are losing matchpoints. Hamilton (Capelletti) and similar systems treat a double by you or your partner as penalty. The system upon which you agree is not as important as ensuring that your double is penalty oriented.

A penalty double shows an equal or better hand

In terms of HCP, when you double their NT opening, you should have an equal or better hand in the direct seat. The lower their range, the better your range should be when doubling. So, if their range is 12-14, plan on having a great 13 or more—preferably 14+. If their range is 10-12, plan on a great 13 or 14+ in the direct seat. Doubling with the same 10 or 12 HCP when the next opponent may be sitting there with a decent hand is asking for trouble. (I'll discuss bids in the balancing seat later.)

A penalty double includes a good lead

Beware of making a penalty double if your hand is full of tenaces where you will be finessing yourself again and again. If you are lacking in good intermediate spot cards, be wary of doubling. If you hear 1NT (12-14) on your right and you hold: ♠KJxx ♥Axx ♦AQxx ♣xx, do not double. You have no spot

cards and are likely to just be finessing yourself on the opening lead, and each time you win a trick. Pass and hope your partner can do something in the balancing seat.

By contrast, if you hold ♠KQJ9 ♥A10xx ♦xx ♣A109, you are thrilled to double. You have an excellent lead and some good spot cards. All 14 HCP hands are not created equal.

When your partner makes a penalty double

Doubles are penalty oriented, so you will usually pass. With any balanced hand, just pass. Even if you are totally “broke,” do not try to improve the situation. -180 (1NT doubled, making) is not the end of the world. It is certainly better than -500 or -800 if you go to the 2 level and get doubled.

So, when should you bid something if partner makes a penalty double? The answer is: when you have a long suit and a very weak hand. If you have 0-4 HCP and a 5-card or longer suit, bid your suit and hope you can survive at the two level. Note—all bids are natural. Do NOT play that no trump systems are on. You need to be able to escape to 2♣ and 2♦, as well as to 2♥ and 2♠.

When should you bid (rather than double) in the direct seat?

Mel’s Rule for overcalling NT in the direct seat works just as well for weak as strong NT openings. For review: Step #1 is: Do you have at least 6 HCP? If yes, go to Step #2. With Step #2, take the sum of your two longest suits. (For example, if you are 5-3-0-5, the sum is 10. If you are 5-4-3-1, the sum is 9, etc.) Calculate your losers by Losing Trick Count. [I discussed LTC in the April issue of Connections, or refer to Ron Klinger’s book on the topic for more about counting losers. Any 3-card or longer suit, count losers for any Ace, King, or Queen you are missing. Doubleton suits, count losers for any Ace and/or King you are losing. Singleton suits are 1 loser if that singleton is NOT the Ace. Each hand has a maximum of 12 losers.] Subtract your losers from the sum of your two longest suits. If the answer is 2 or higher, you can bid. (If it is only two and you are vulnerable, playing against the best pair you know, passing is an option!)

In addition to including a penalty double, the convention you choose to employ over the opponents’ NT openings should include the capacity to show single-suited as well as two-suited hands. Mel’s Rule tells you whether it is advisable to bid or not. The convention you agree to play with partner tells you what to bid. (For example, with ♠KQxx ♥AJxxx ♦Kx ♣xx, you have 6 losers by LTC. The sum of your two longest suits is 9. So, subtracting 6 from 9 leaves 3—it is advisable to bid. If you are playing Hamilton, you would bid 2♦, showing both majors.)

If you don’t have a penalty double, and your distribution does not meet Mel’s rules, pass!

What about the balancing seat?

In the pass-out seat, caution is strongly indicated. The logic is that partner has already passed and RHO can pass with as many as 10 HCP (if they are playing a 12-14 HCP NT) with a balanced hand. The penalty double is extremely rare here because you no longer have the positional advantage of playing after the NT opener. Instead, all of the honors in the NT bidder’s hand are behind your good cards—not promising for your side. Plus, you are not the opening leader, so partner will not know the best suit to lead. So, I would almost never double here. If I have a good 14, the opponents could still have 14 opposite 10 and it won’t be pretty. Even if I have 17, the risks usually outweigh the possible reward.

So, I am only bidding in the balancing seat if I have some cards AND good distribution. If I have at least 6 HCP and a 5-5 or better hand which meets Mel's Rules (no more than 8 losers—although 7 would be even better), I will usually bid. Against a Weak NT opening, you must meet Mel's Rules for the direct seat even though you are in the balancing seat in order to bid. Do NOT bid just because you have a singleton, void, or two doubletons. Again, your RHO could be sitting there with 10 HCP!

This hand: ♠KQxxx ♥xxxxx ♦xx ♣x can act in the balancing seat when it goes a strong NT-pass-pass. It should pass when a weak NT is opened on the left. By contrast ♠KQxxx ♥Kxxxx ♦xx ♣x is happy to show both majors even when the weak NT is opened, and it goes pass-pass to you. If you barely meet Mel's rules (the answer of 2) and you are vulnerable, you have to weigh the risk of a possible -200. For example, ♠KQxx ♥Kxxxx ♦xx ♣xx is theoretically 7 losers and you have 9 cards in your two longest suits. However, with only 4-5, there is a greater chance of you ending up in a 4-3 fit, and you have a minimum hand. Vulnerable, I might not risk it. (If you happen to know that your opponents never double, that makes a difference in your bidding.) So, if you meet Mel's rules with the 6-card or longer suit, or with 5-5 hands, be more eager to bid. With only 5-4 hands, be a bit more cautious, particularly if you are vulnerable.

What are your goals?

As with all overcalls of a NT opening by opponents, think about your basic goals. You hope to: (1) Make a partscore. [Game is almost always beyond reach, especially with a strong NT opening] (2) Go down less than they would have made; (3) Get partner off to the best lead even if you do not win the bid; (4) Interfere with their auction so that they do not get to the best spot; (5) collect a plus score through a penalty double.

That means partner rarely raises your known suit—unless s/he has a super, super fit and lots of cover cards. (Cover cards are cards that cover your losers, usually Aces and Kings since Queens are iffy, depending on distribution.) If you push the opponents to the three level, pass happily as they are more likely to go down, and you probably know what suit to lead now (unless you have that super fit and good cover cards—then compete to 3 level). If defending 1NT doubled, expect to get a good score for a successful set as most pairs do not double enough.

With bids, you hope to get a plus score, or a small minus score (less than what they would have scored playing in 1NT or perhaps a transfer their way). That means when partner shows a 2-suited hand, you just pick your best option, even if both options are poor. [For example, partner bids 2♦ over opponent's weak NT opening which shows both majors. You hold ♠xx ♥Kx ♦Axxxx ♣xxxx. Bid 2♥ and hope. To pass 2♦, you would have to hold 7 diamonds and be 1-1 or 2-1 in the majors.]

Be prepared to make penalty doubles at the three level when partner's overcall forces them too high. For example, 1NT (12-14) on your left. 2♦ by partner for the majors. 2NT (Lebensohl—relay to 3♣) by RHO. Pass by you. 3♣ (forced) by LHO. Pass, pass to you. Your hand is ♠xx ♥xx ♦AJ10xx ♣QJ109. Double for penalty. You have two trump tricks and a diamond trick. Your partner has the majors, and the NT opener probably has majors as well, but partner has the positional advantage of sitting behind the NT opener. They will not make 3♣. Take out the red card. [If partner has a "normal" 2♦ overcall with 5-5 or 5-4 in the majors, s/he will pass. If partner has a "freak" hand that is 6-6 or 6-5, s/he is allowed to

pull the double, forcing you to pick a major at the 3 level if she thinks it is right. Even with extreme distribution, s/he may pass, as long as s/he has defensive values, knowing that you will hold club and diamond cards for your double. If partner has ♠AQxxx ♥AQxxxx ♦x ♣x, s/he will happily pass. If partner holds ♠QJ109xx ♥QJ109xx ♦x ♣VOID, s/he will bid 3♥—pass or correct and you will pass.] ♣