

The Advancing Player

Common Intermediate Bidding Errors



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I'll be discussing—in no particular order—common bidding errors that I see more than one intermediate player make.

FAILING TO OPEN ONE NO TRUMP WHEN IT IS THE MOST DESCRIPTIVE BID

Some people still think that you need stoppers in all four suits, or stopper in at least three suits to open 1NT. Not true. 1NT shows 15-17 HCP with a balanced hand. Balanced hands can be 4-4-3-2 (in any mixture); 4-3-3-3; 5-3-3-2; 2-4-5-2; and (occasionally) 2-3-6-2. Current ACBL rules even allow you to open 1NT with a singleton, as long as that singleton is an Ace, King, or Queen. I do NOT recommend the latter, but sometimes it works. I would NOT do it with a singleton in a major suit because Murphy's Law practically guarantees that partner will transfer you into that suit.

Here is an **example of a hand that should be opened 1NT despite holding TWO doubletons: ♠Kx ♥K10xx ♦Kx ♣AQ10xx**. With three Kings to protect, you want to “grab” the NT from your side of the table. Even if the hand is ♠xx ♥KQ10x ♦Kx ♣AQJxx, open 1NT. **Only when the hand becomes something like ♠xx ♥AKQx ♦xx ♣AKxxx should you open 1♣ and reverse into hearts**. With ALL your HCP in two suits and an excellent 16 HCP, it is good enough to reverse. Some people would still open 1NT on that one!

The following is a classic 1NT call despite having two suits “wide open”: ♠xxx ♥AKQ ♦xxxx ♣AKx.

This is the sort of hand that should be **opened 1NT because you have tenaces to protect and your 6-card minor is NOT of the quality that you would want to jump rebid in it: ♠AQ ♥Kxx ♦Kx ♣K10xxxx**.

This is the hand that jump rebids in clubs (showing 16-18 HCP): ♠xx ♥KQJ ♦xx ♣AKQJxx.

Should you open 1NT when you have 15-17 HCP and a 5-card major? My suggestions (largely based on what Eddie Kantar recommends):

With 17 HCP and a 5-card major, you really “have” an “18 HCP hand. Open your major. If partner bids 1♠ over your 1♥, jump to 2NT—showing 18-19, balanced. If partner bids 1NT over your 1♠, bid 2NT—showing 18-19 HCP, balanced.

With 15-16 HCP, opening 1NT will avoid the rebid problem, e.g., when your partner's response is 1NT. [People who play Two Over One have an advantage here because they can open their major. If partner bids 1NT Forcing, Opener can bid a convenient minor and can get additional information about partner's hand. It also offers a chance for partner to get out at the 2-level in a long minor with a weak hand—where you would usually be getting out at the 3-level if partner opens 1NT.] Consider also the following points.

If the hand has a worthless doubleton in the other major, I am more likely to open the suit.

If the major suit is poor with most of my values elsewhere, the NT opening stands out.

Kantar is more willing to open 1♠ (the boss suit) and more likely to open 1NT with hearts because 1NT is a bit tougher to bid over.

Don't neglect the balancing NT bid. That shows approximately 10-14 (HCP adjustable based on partnership understanding) and is made when Left Hand Opponent opens the bidding and it goes pass, pass to you. The 1NT call shows a balanced hand and a stopper in the opponents suit if it a major. You usually have a stopper if the suit is a minor, but it might occasionally be something like 10xxx. Your hand is NOT suitable for making a takeout double in the reopening seat. That means you usually have too much length in the opponent's suit or you have a doubleton in an unbid major. An example hand would be: 1♣ on your left, pass, pass and you hold ♠xx ♥Kxx ♦AQxx ♣KJxx. Bid 1NT. Make sure you and your partner have an agreement as to whether Stayman, transfers and other systems are on over your balancing NT bids.

MAKING OFF-SHAPE TAKE OUT DOUBLES AND MISLEADING PARTNER

Some people think they HAVE to bid just because they have 13 HCP. Consider the following travesty. Right Hand Opponent bids 1♣ and you hold: ♠xx ♥KJxx ♦AJxx ♣KJx. Your correct bid is PASS. You should NOT double with 2 cards in an unbid major. You canNOT overcall NT in the direct seat (not balancing seat) with only 13 HCP. Neither your hearts nor your diamonds are good enough to overcall a 4-card suit at the one level (more on that later). If you are unwise enough to double, you will almost always hear some number of spades from partner—1♠ if you are lucky, but 2♠, 3♠ and even 4♠ are possible. Partner will NOT be pleased to see 2 spades in Dummy even if s/he has five of them (and s/he will often have only 4 of them). If you panic and bid 1NT over partner 1♣ response, you have now show 19 OR MORE HCP!! (If you had 15-18 HCP, you would have overcalled 1NT in the first place, rather than making a take-out double.) Good Luck digging yourself out of that hole!

A take-out double shows opening hand values (usually 12+ HCP) and shortness in the suit opened (usually 2 or less). It promises 3 or 4 cards in each of the three unbid suits, and you try VERY hard to have 4 cards in any unbid major. The exception is that BIG, BIG hand (18+ HCP unable to overcall 1NT) can double with any shape and further describe their hand on the next round of bidding. That is why doubling and THEN bidding a suit shows 18+ with the suit (and 19+ with NT following a double).

FAILURE TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN OVERCALLS AT THE ONE LEVEL AND OVERCALLS AT THE TWO LEVEL

More tricks are lost on the opening lead than anywhere else in defense. So, **when you only want ONE lead, try to bid your suit at the one level**—even with a very weak hand. For example, 1♣ on your right and you hold ♠AKxxx ♥xxx ♦xx ♣xxx. Please have NO HESITATION about bidding 1♠. It is the only lead you want, and this is the only chance you have to get your suit in at the one level. Do it!

Remember, if partner has a great hand and a fit with you, s/he will cue bid (clubs in this case) to show you the Limit Raise or better. You can calmly bid 2♠. If partner bids 3♠, saying: “Please look again. I LOVE my hand. I have an opening hand!” you can calmly pass.

Overcalling a 4-card suit at the one level is rare, but there are times when it is right. YOU CAN ONLY OVERCALL A 4-CARD SUIT AT THE ONE LEVEL. [Read that twice!] An example hand would be ♠AKQx ♥Kxx ♦KJx ♣xxx. RHO opens 1♣ You REALLY want a spade lead and partner may not have enough to balance if you pass, so bid 1♠. With three small clubs, you do NOT want to overcall 1NT, and this is a poor shape for a takeout double. This is not a common occurrence. I only do it one to three times a year, but it does come up. Do NOT overcall a 4-card suit at the 2-level and above. That is how you can go -800 and more.

Two level overcalls promise an opening hand. This is a major issue. People are bidding on trash hand. The only reason they keep on doing it is: (1) To quote Bruce Ferguson: “They don't play money bridge.” (2) Intermediate players hardly ever make penalty doubles. If you play against good competition and make lousy overcalls with 9 and 10 HCPs, you will get doubled. Going for -800 and -1100 or just -300 and -500 against a part-score by the opponents will teach you the error of your ways.

There are, of course, caveats. The stronger your suit is, the more you can stretch, especially to indicate a lead. If RHO opens 1D and I hold ♠xx ♥xxx ♦xx ♣AKQxxx, I am going to stretch to make a lead-directly 2♣ overcall. (It also takes away 1♥, 1♠ and 1NT bids from LHO.) With six cards, I am not in terrific danger if they double me. An example of a hand that should not even think of overcalling would be ♠Qxx ♥Kxx ♦xx ♣KJxxx.

If all you have is a good suit, then jump to show a weak jump overcall whenever possible, e.g., 2♥ over 1♣ with AKxxxx and nothing else. Take up some of their bidding room!

You can take more liberties when you are nonvulnerable, particularly when the opponents are vulnerable. I will be more aggressive when partner is passed (so is unlikely to get carried away in bidding), particularly when I want to indicate a lead. So, if partner has passed and RHO opens 1♠, with ♠xxx ♥Kx ♦xxx ♣AQJxx, I will risk 2♣ to get the lead—if we are nonvulnerable.

Another circumstance is **when the opponents open 2♣ (strong) I love to interfere** with those auctions as many people have not discussed how to handle interference by the opponents. So, with a decent suit, or a two-suited hand, I will enter the auction, especially if nonvulnerable. You get a fair degree of protection from the fact that MOST people would rather play the hand than defend, especially when they have a big, exciting, powerful hand. They are more likely to bid on than double you.

Similarly, when the opponents open a strong NT, if you follow Mel's Rules (ask for handout if not familiar with Mel's Rules), you can bid over the NT when appropriate. Most of the time, it works out—you either make your bid, go down less than their game or part score, or they bid on over you and you break even. In ten years of using Mel's Rules often, I've only gone for a big minus score twice: 500 and 800.

FAILURE TO MAKE LEAD DIRECTING DOUBLES

Again, more tricks are lost on opening lead than anywhere else. When the opponents make artificial bids (e.g., 2♣ for Stayman; 2♦, 2♥, and 2♠ for transfers; answers to Key Card queries, control-showing bids when looking for slam), be willing to double to ask partner to lead that suit! Help partner get off to the best lead.

Please note: **You must have both length and strength to double low-level bids.** Do NOT double a 2♣ Stayman call with AKxx. NT bidder might have opened with QJ109x and will redouble to play and make doubled overtricks! You should have a GOOD 5- or decent 6-card suit for such a lead-directing double.

At higher levels, you can double to show an Ace, or a King behind a control bids, or a KQ combination. You don't have to have length, but just be sure you are NOT doubling a suit in which they can play.

So, if the opponents bid 1♠-P-3♠-P-4♣ (control bid, showing 1st or 2nd round control of clubs with slam interest)-P-4♦—if you are sitting there with the ♦A or ♦Kxx(x)—and neither opponent has bid diamonds—double for the lead. If Responder is showing the ♦K, you are happy to have the Ace behind it and want the lead. If Responder is showing the ♦A, you want partner to lead the suit to knock that Ace out right away. Similarly, you can double answers to Roman Key Card. Your partners will be grateful for your help. ♣