

PROS AND CONS OF 1NT OPENING WITH 5 CARD MAJOR

There are two reasons normally cited for suggesting intermediate or beginner players open 1NT with all balanced hands with 15-17 HCP, including those with 5 card majors. These days many advanced players, using an essentially natural bidding system, also open 1NT with a five card major, but they often use complicated artificial conventions to find major suit fits and may only open 1NT with a 5 card major under some circumstances and open the major suit otherwise. . There is more to be gained from opening 1NT with 5 hearts than with 5 spades and some players won't open 1NT with five spades but will with 5 hearts. It is, however, a matter for personal choice and there are other things that will determine whether you win or lose more major tournaments.

The first reason cited is that it is much simpler to open 1NT with all balanced 15-17 HCP hands; there are enough complications already.

The second reason cited against opening 1♥ or 1♠ with a 5-3-3-2 distribution and 15-17 HCP is that you may have a rebid problem. For example:

♠ 9 8 5
♥ K Q 9 4 3
♦ A K 2
♣ A 7
1♥ 1♠
???

This hand is too strong to bid 1NT (12-14 HCP), not strong enough for 2NT (18-19 HCP), too strong and hearts too weak for 2♥, too strong and only 3 spades for 2♠, too few spades for 3♠. The only option is a strange 2♦ bid on a 3 card suit, hoping that the lack of diamonds doesn't cause a problem. A similar problem arises after a 2♣ or 2♦ response instead of 1♠.

Suppose you do bid 2♦ on this hand. Your partner is going to have problems distinguishing this hand from something like: ♠ 5 ♥ KQ943 ♦ AQ732 ♣ 52. Remember a new suit by opener is not forcing (unless you want to change the bidding system so that it is forcing, introducing other problems). You could easily find yourself playing in 2♦ in a 3-3 fit if your partner had a minimum and singleton heart. (There were example hands in week 4 where responder would pass with this or a similar hand.)

The main downside to opening 1NT with a 5 card major is that you may miss a major suit fit and play in no trumps instead. On some hands, you can make as many (or more) tricks in NT than in a suit with a fit and missing the major suit fit can be advantageous. However, overall, with a fit, a suit contract usually plays a trick or two better than no trumps. You may find yourself going down in 1NT rather than making 2♥ or 2♠ when responder has a weak hand with three or four cards in your five card major suit and passes 1NT. However, a similar problem arises because you cannot find a minor suit fit when you open 1NT with a five card minor and nobody seems to care about that.

When responder's hand is strong enough to make a game try or force to game, it is possible for responder to find out about the five card major but you must play Extended Stayman or one of the large number of variations that are used.

WHAT CHANGES IF YOU DON'T OPEN 1NT WITH A 5 CARD MAJOR

The obvious change is that you don't need Extended Stayman any more.

However, you do need to be able to deal with the possibility that the opening 1♥ or 1♠ is based on a balanced hand with 15-17 points. There are a number of ways to do this, none of which are without problems. One way is as follows:

Extend range of 1NT, 2NT and 3NT rebid by opener

In the following, 1M denotes either 1♥ or 1♠ and 1m denotes 1♣ or 1♦.

1♥-1♠-1NT: Balanced 12-poor 16 HCP instead of 12-14.

1♥-1♠-2NT: Balanced good 16-18 HCP instead of 18-19.

1♥-1♠-3NT: Balanced 19 HCP.

1M-1NT-2NT: 16-18 HCP instead of 18 HCP.

1M-2m-3NT: Balanced 15-19 HCP instead of 18-19.

1♠-2♥-3NT: Balanced 15-19 HCP instead of 18-19.

The broadening of the HCP range for the various 1NT rebids means that responder may have to keep bidding in case you have a maximum. If you have a minimum, you are almost certainly too high. Also you don't really want to be in 2NT or higher with 16 HCP opposite a minimum response with 6 HCP.