



Chris Jagger

# The case for the weak no-trump

Two top players debate a hot bridge topic. Tell us whose argument has won you over by e-mailing the Editor at [elena@ebu.co.uk](mailto:elena@ebu.co.uk)

ONE of the fundamental principles of bidding is to tell partner what you have as soon as possible. This allows him to know your combined assets and hence select the final contract, while the opponents are still guessing. A weak no-trump is the most common opening hand type you can have, and therefore this is the best use of the bid. It is constructive for partner, and pre-emptive for opponents, taking up a round of their bidding.

Most opponents find it difficult to defend against it: it is weak enough that they have to bid constructively over it, but strong enough that they want to be able to come in frequently. There is much less need for opponents to bid constructively over a strong no-trump, as game is unlikely to be on.

Of course, there are disadvantages to the weak no-trump. For example, it can go for a penalty. However, this is not always easy, with numerous 380s and 670s being conceded after a weak no-trump has been opened and doubled; if the auction starts 1NT – Double – 2♠, the next hand knows that the doubler has points, but nothing else.

The biggest problem of the strong no-trump is the impact it has on the rest of the system. When I sit down opposite strong no-trumpers, they start explaining that ‘Of course you have to . . .’ and then list a number of distortions that occur in the rest of the system. One of the beauties of the

weak no-trump is that it is simple to play (provided you open the lower suit with two four-card suits when you have a strong no-trump hand), with few repercussions on the rest of the system – so much so that it is much easier to teach a beginner the weak no-trump.

For example, many who play a strong no-trump end up opening six-card minors and 5-4 hands with a five-card major 1NT, because these common hand types are ‘bad hands for the system’. If you open 1♣ with a six-card club suit and a 15 or 16 count, what rebid do you make? You would like to rebid 1NT, but that is usually played as a weak no-trump. Instead, you are left with a weighty 2♣ or an uncomfortable 3♣ rebid. Opening five-card majors with a strong no-trump is also a fairly common source of missed games when the 5-4 major fit is not discovered, as fewer points are needed for game when a good major fit is available.

Some strong no-trumpers play a short club, due to the problems of opening at the one level and having to respond 2NT with a weak no-trump over a two-level response. Or, to cater for the same problem, they play game-forcing two-over-one responses. Any one of these is not

necessary – but most people play some things to cater for their strong no-trump.

In contrast, when playing a weak no-trump, every time you don’t open 1NT, partner knows you have either extra shape or extra strength to fall back on – what opener won’t have for a suit bid is a minimum balanced hand. Strong no-trumpers

tend to spend their time worrying about bidding lest partner has a weak no-trump; if you are going to worry about it, wouldn’t it be much

better just to know right at the outset whether he has one or not?

Last time I lost a double game swing at teams the auction went 1♣ – (4♥) – 5♣ at our table, making exactly. In the other room team-mates were playing a strong no-trump and passed out the 4♥ overcall. ‘The problem is that partner is likely to have a weak no-trump; it is too dangerous to bid on in these situations,’ I was told. A 15 IMP loss sounded pretty dangerous to me! In fact, every time I score up with team-mates playing the strong no-trump, they very patiently take the time to explain why ‘you can’t do this’ or ‘you have to do that’.

Realistically, most of the top analysts of the game agree that any theoretical advantage either way is fairly marginal. Far more important will be to play what you and your partner are happiest with. On the whole most people are a lot better at playing the weak no-trump; it has its flaws, but by and large it tells partner what you have quickly and makes life easy for him – it leaves the opponents to do the worrying. Opening a weak no-trump makes partner ‘the boss’, and when you don’t open it you won’t suddenly find out hidden problems of the system. □

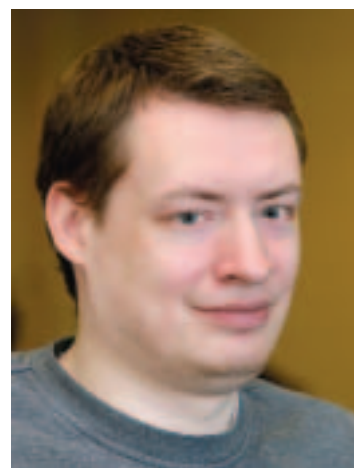
**‘Playing a weak no-trump, every time you don’t open 1NT partner knows you have either extra shape or extra strength to fall back on.’**

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# The case for the strong no-trump

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Tom Townsend

♠ K 4 3 ♥ A 10 9 3 ♦ K 10 6 4 ♣ K 3

The perfect weak no-trump. To rephrase that, your opening bid is seven tricks without a trump suit. A bit optimistic with one ace and three unsupported kings but if partner has his share, you may reach that target or at least come close. Unfortunately when this hand was dealt in the Brighton Swiss Pairs partner held the following:

♠ 10 9 6 2 ♥ 8 5 4 ♦ 9 7 ♣ 10 8 5 4

The doubling begins and you are vulnerable against not. Do you leave partner to rot in 1NT? Or do you fish about for a 4-4 fit which may play for a few tricks? That's what I decided to do when I held the responding hand, and we reached 2♠ doubled. Despite playing the hand to its full potential, partner recorded the following score:

## Minus fourteen hundred!

Anywhere else in the world this would be a cold bottom, but in the land of the weak no-trump we do score a handful of match-points.

Strong no-trumpers opened one of a suit. The next hand overcalled 1NT and was raised to 3NT, making 400 or 430.

Now fast forward a week to the Brighton teams qualifying. Needing a decent win to qualify for the finals, we wait by the bar to compare scores from our final match. I venture to partner that our card looks solid, we may have half a chance. He does not agree: 'What about the last board?' 'What about it? I made 3NT plus one on a strip-squeeze, you know.' 'Nicely played for +430, maestro, but how do you think it's going to go in the other room? Our pair play 12-14. 1NT will go for a packet.' On their return, team-mates duly announce the following:

## Minus eleven hundred!

The match is drawn and Sunday afternoon is a relaxing one spent in the consolation Swiss.

Weak no-trump supporters may say, come on, this is the worst case, how often does it really go for a number? Often enough to spoil my Brighton. Others will say that it's only vulnerable or in third seat that the weak no-trump is too dangerous to play, so why not play strong no-trump in these positions, otherwise weak? Logical enough – the variable no-trump was the original Acol of Gray, Marx and Simon. But do you really want to play two bidding structures depending on the board markings? More system to agree, so many opportunities to forget. Not for me.

So if we accept shelling out all these penalties as the occupational hazards of the weak no-trumper, what do we get in return? A little pre-emptive value when the vulnerability is right, otherwise nothing in my view. Or less than nothing.

The most common argument I hear *in favour* of the weak no-trump is that when partner opens one of a suit you know he has either extra strength or extra distribution. This is true but, paradoxically, I believe it to be the strongest argument against. Playing the strong no-trump, balanced opening bids divide into three ranges:

- 12-14 Open one of a suit, then pass or rebid minimally (typically raise partner to two or 1NT).
- 15-17 Open 1NT (routinely with a five-card major in my view).
- 18-19 Open one of a suit, then rebid to show extra strength (typically a jump raise or 2NT).

In this structure, opener knows where he stands when he opens one of a suit with a balanced hand. He's either minimum or very strong.

Now back to the weak no-trump world. Playing Standard English Acol (SEA) we pick up this collection:

♠ K Q 10 3 ♥ A 10 ♦ J 4 3 ♣ A Q 7 6

The perfect strong no-trump. Let's see how easily it works out starting with the SEA systemic opening bid of 1♠:

- (i) Partner responds 1NT. With our extra strength perhaps we can raise to 2NT? Wrong, partner passes. He holds: ♠ J 2 ♥ 7 4 2 ♦ Q 10 9 2 ♣ K 8 4 2 2NT got us too high, so next time we pass. Now he turns up with the following: ♠ J 2 ♥ Q J 5 3 ♦ Q 10 9 2 ♣ K 8 2 – and we miss an easy 3NT. If you think responder was worth 2♦, there's another can of worms . . .
- (ii) Partner responds 2♣. 3♣ might be convenient but isn't that what we do with a minimum distributional hand like this one? ♠ K J 7 4 3 ♥ A ♦ J 10 3 ♣ K 8 7 2 So is it 4♣, going past our likely contract of 3NT, or 2NT keeping quiet about the fit? Neither appeals.
- (iii) LHO overcalls 3♦ and partner makes a negative double. 4♣, bypassing 3NT and inviting unwanted preference to 4♠? 3NT with no stop? Pass with no trump trick? On another occasion partner supports to 3♠ after the overcall. Do we continue to game or pass?

If any reader thinks he knows the answers, please don't write in as none of these problems are mine. I open the hand 1NT – strong! □