

3NT versus 4 of a major RO by

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Introduction

With two roughly balanced hands of 26 points or so, the contract should usually be 4♥ or 4♠ with an 8-card fit, but 3NT without. The merit of the suit is not ruffing tricks, but ruffing _control_.

AKx	AKxx
xxx	xxx
AQx	AQx
Kxxx	Kxx
QJTxx	QJTxx
xx	xx
Kxx	Kxx
Axx	Axxx

At left you have 10 tricks in NT or ♠s, but in NT the opponents might take 5 or more off the top. In the suit, you can cut in with a trump and take 10 after they take only 2. Ruffing provides a sort of ♥ stopper, but does not gain a trick. At right, you have only 9 tricks, which suggests 3NT. But with a 4-4, the ruff does produce an extra trick, so again you are safer in the suit.

But there are exceptions to the 8-card formula -- exceptions in both directions. The hand may belong in a 5-2 or 4-3 suit, or in 3NT despite an 8- or 9-card major fit. We will look at some hands on which the decision is close, and the reasoning which should influence the decision. We won't go much into the issues of pairs scoring, in which a probable 450 is better than a cold 430, for example.

Positional factors

4♥ by North might be a better contract than 3NT by North _or_ South, but if the bidding has already put the suit in the South hand, 3NT by North might be best choice. The reasons are familiar: tenaces may need to be protected from the opening lead, and various features may need to be concealed in the closed hand.

Well-known conventions, called transfer bids, address these positional factors, aiming to permit either the suit or NT to play from the better side.

A tricky move I sometimes use is to try to protect a singleton king by bidding NT. One way it can gain is on an underlead of the ace against NT.

Positional factors play a part in some of the illustrations that follow.

3NT with more than enough for game

It is better to be in 3NT with 10 certain tricks than to be in 4♠ with the same 10, plus a ruffing trick, plus a chance of going down!

Partner opens 1NT (15-17) and you hold

KQxx
 Ax
 Jxxx
 Kxx

Forget Stayman and bid 3NT. If you use Stayman, and partner has both majors, you will end in 4♠ rather than the colder 3NT. (If he has ♥s only, Stayman will give away some information on the way to 3NT, but that is unlikely to matter.)

Well then, what if you have a weak side suit?

KQxx
 xx
 AJxx
 Kxx

Partner could have the wrong cards for 3NT, such as:

JTxx
 Qxx
 KQx
 AQJ

Even if a ♥ is not led, they will shift when they get in with SA. We will look into this problem in a later section. The principle is quite simple: When you have a lot of high cards, the defence needs ruffs; but they won't have any ruffs if you don't nominate any of their small cards as trumps.

If the hands are less balanced, so that ruffing might produce 2 extra tricks, then either the suit game will be safer, or you are close to slam and will probably get beyond 3NT.

3NT on a solid suit plus aces

In this case 3NT may be better than game in a major, not because you have notrump-type values (you don't) but because 3NT requires 9 tricks rather than 10. This is a rare and exceptional case; in practice 3NT will seldom be attempted and, if it is attempted, will be speculative.

xx	Axx
AQJTxx	AKQJTx
Ax	Axx
xxx	J
Ax	Kxx
Kx	xx
xxxx	xxxx
Axxxx	T9xx

At left 3NT is a laydown, but unlikely to be reached. At right, with 8 tricks, North might speculate on 3NT, depending on how the auction begins.

I recall a hand from a team match on which this kind of speculation was one of several factors pointing to 3NT.

KQJTx	NS vulnerable			
xx	S	W	N	E
xxx	1NT*	2♣	3NT	End
Axx				
	*16-18			
Axxx				
AKx				
Axx				
Qxx				

I was North. My 8-loser hand is no powerhouse in ♠s, but pretty impressive in NT. I figured that if partner had SA, we would have close to 9 tricks on top, while if he had only small cards in ♠s, then he would have a second ♣ stopper. Anyway I didn't want the lead coming up to my bare hand. West led CJ from KJTxxx. Partner called for a small ♣ and claimed ten tricks. At the other table

North was in 4♠. East led a singleton ♣ through the Q, and the contract had no real chance.

A related problem is whether to attempt 3NT when an opponent has shown a good suit plus a probable entry. Now you don't want 26 scattered points and flat hands; you want a good suit of your own and immediate tricks on the side.

3NT on notrump-type values

This is the commonest and most interesting case in which to avoid an 8-card major fit.

In the 4-3-2-1 count, as you are aware, aces are rather overvalued for notrump play, but undervalued for suit play. The opposite is true for queens and jacks. So, when you are quack-heavy, you might venture 3NT when you would not expect game in a major fit to succeed.

Axxx

Kxx

Kx

Axxx

Kxxx

QJx

QJx

Kxx

At ♠s you will have 4 practically certain losers. 3NT is not cold, but feasible. South can see that his red QJ's will depreciate if ♠s become trumps. If you experiment by moving some of South's quacks into the black suits, you can watch the prospects of 4♠ improve while the chance of 3NT diminishes.

Ax	S	N
AJ9xxx	1♣	1♥
xx	1NT	3♥
Txx	?	

KJx

QTx

QJx

KQxx

South is surely not worth 4♥. Valued at ♥s, his hand is scarcely 13 points, if that. The choice is between 3NT and a pass. In some cases 3NT will hinge on the ♥ finesse, but 4♥ will almost certainly need that finesse.

"But at ♥s I should revalue my QTx upwards," you say. Yes, along with your side aces, of which you have none, while you revalue your fistful of side quacks downward.

4M with balanced hands and a weakness

Let's have another look at this one:

KQxx	S	N
xx	1NT	3NT
AJxx		
Kxx		

JTxx

Qxx

KQx

AQJ

Opener has the wrong cards for what we thought would be a cold 3NT. But such a hand with opener is quite unlikely on the evidence available to North. After 1NT, opener tends to have 4 cards opposite a specific small doubleton, since 11 are distributed among the other 3 hands, and opener very probably has some of the high ones. Of the 27

points that North cannot see, South has about 16; therefore South will hold, on average, about 6 points in ♥s, since North has none.

An exaggerated specimen:

AJT
Tx
AQxx
Kxxx

KQxx
xxx
KJ
AQJx

Let's suppose South opens 1NT. 3NT turns out to be no laydown despite 30 HCP and two balanced hands. 4♠ and 5♠ are both superior. I suppose suitable bidding apparatus might avert 3NT in these rare cases, but a convention which advertises a specific weakness is apt to help the defence as well. The Schenken system has such a method of responding to its 16-18 1NT opening: 2♦ is a game force asking initially for major-suit stoppers. But I want to stress the point that this problem is exceptional. All bidding systems have problems on deals in which the high cards are abnormally "massed": doubleton AQ opposite doubleton KJ, for instance, or 33 HCP missing an AK, or 30 points in three suits and zero in the fourth, as here.

The chance of avoiding 3NT is better if the auction develops with suit bids. Say North deals and opens 1♦. South will not respond 2NT or 3NT (unless 2NT is Baron -- a good convention). It might begin

N S
1♦ 1♠
2♠ etc.

and 3NT will be avoided. North should not ignore the fact that he has a small doubleton alongside 3 good ♠s.

A variation:

AJT	N	S	N	S
xxx	1♠	1♠	1♠	1♠
AQx	2♠	etc.	1NT	3♠(if forcing)
Kxxx			3♦/♠	etc.

KQxx
Tx
KJx
AQJx

5♣ is straightforward to play; if South ends up in 4♠, and ♥s are led, he just discards on the third round, preserving his trump length.

It is rare to prefer 5 of a minor over 3NT with a mere 4-4 fit, at any form of scoring. And when, moreover, the hands are balanced, there is usually a playable 7-card major fit.

4M with unbalanced hands and 7 trumps

xxxx	xx
Axx	xx
Kxx	KQx
QJx	Axxxxx
Kxxx	AKQT9
KQx	Axxxx
AQx	x
Axx	Kx

Strange to tell, the same pairs who reach 4♠ on the cards at left will be observed playing 3NT on the cards at right.