

HOW SHALL WE DEFEND, PARTNER?  
by EOK

PART TWO: THE MINI-NOTRUMP (10-12)

This creature is unbelievably popular in the tournament world, and not just in Matchpoint Pairs.

The basic idea is that these moderate hands occur with high frequency and so should probably be treated positively in any active bridge system.

Mini-notrump fans recognize the preemptive nature of a 1NT opening and feel that the possible gains in shutting out all opening one-level suit bids and inducing a competitive misjudgment more than justify the risk of an occasional penalty or an inferior partscore. Sounds good, doesn't it? So, why don't we all switch to the mini? Well, unless you play a strong club system and are willing to open 1♣ on a dull 16-count, you have to find some way to deal with balanced hands in the 13-14, 15-17, and 18-20 ranges (or overlapping variants).

Strong notrumpers or less adventurous weak notrumpers can open in a more or less real suit and rebid 1NT or 2NT, or simply open 1NT. They are not concerned with this additional range of hands - 10-12. The mini-notrumpers must corrupt their minor suit openings to deal with the so-called "better" balanced hands. For example, 1♣, then 1NT might show 13-14; 1♦, then 1NT might show 15-17. With 18-20, they can either open in their true suit, or (say) always open 1♣, thus defining 1♦ as "either diamonds or 15-17 BAL," with 1♣ showing "either clubs, 13-14 BAL, or 18-20 BAL." This may not seem a major hardship, but those maligned minor suits have a nasty habit of coming back to bite their tormentors. It's not just a question of minor suit partscores; the games and slams also suffer from the flimsy foundation - the uncertain one-of-a-minor opening. Everything comes with a cost.

So what do these mini-notrumps look like in practice? You start out by expecting something like:

Axx Qxx Jxxx Kxx

... but as you encounter the creature in the bridge wars, you find...

Qx xxx AKxxx xxx

QJxx xx xx AKxxx

Kx xx AJ10xxx xxx

K Jxxx Qxxx KJxx

... and worse. Against some of these hands, you will very definitely want to be in the auction, but against others, like the last example hand, it will often be better to defend. It's not right to get indignant and claim that your opponents can't open 1NT with a singleton.

That's the way bridge is played today.

Of course, your opponents should tell you whether they open their 10-12 1NT with some 8/9-point hands or with some odd patterns, but in the end you've got to approach the game with your eyes open. It's a fact of bridge life that the mini guys are out to get you.

Are you ready to fight back?

Before you begin to form a plan, you will want to have a look at your mini opponents' convention card.

Do they play negative doubles after you interfere with their notrump?

Do they have some "weakness" sequences that you will want to be ready for in advance?

Do they use transfer bids or two-way Stayman [you have two chances to "reopen" after 1NT-(Pass)-2♥/2♠: both partners can take fairly safe action here since the opponents are limited; you have only the true reopening opportunity against transfer bidders, since the auction is still "live" after opener takes the transfer: 1NT-(P)-2♦-(P); 2♥-(???)-(P)-(???)]. Is there anything on their card that you'd like to know more about.

You might wish to ask a few questions about things you might not find on their card.

First, what is their style with dull weak hands after 1NT-(Pass)-???

Do they tend to pass or escape immediately, or perhaps even psych in this position (some pairs virtually guarantee some strength by passing 1NT and you are entitled to know this before you reopen; you will feel more comfortable if you don't have to ask this sort of question when the situation actually arises. And second, do they have an escape mechanism after 1NT-(DBL)-???

Does their system allow them to play in 1NTx? A few moments before you start to play might avoid some ethical, technical, or "poker" problems later.

Before settling on a defensive scheme, you need a philosophy. Against the strong notrump, your main concern is to fight for the partscore since opener has already shown a good hand and your side is so unlikely to have the assets for a game or slam. Against the strong notrump, you don't need much more than some shape and suit quality to take an active part in the proceedings. 1NT will often be a good contract for the bad guys so trying to get them out of 1NT is an attractive idea.

So much so that many pairs are willing to give up on a penalty double of 1NT in order to use the double artificially as part of a comprehensive scheme to show various one- and two-suited hands.

Against weaker notrump openings, you are more likely to have a chance for the game bonus and 1NT is less likely to be a good contract for the opponents, so it makes sense to adopt a more sound approach when you are considering a competitive action. I have heard it bandied about that an appropriate minimum to double a weak notrump is "the top of their range" ... so you need 14 points to double a 12-14 point notrump. That sounds reasonable enough when your double shows a hand of some quality, but against the mini, do you really want to get involved with a balanced 12-count, a hand that you might not open as dealer? Although you may on occasion be frozen out of the auction by not coming in with these marginal opening bids, I think that you will fare better overall by waiting for a respectable hand to double in the direct seat, say

14 points or an exceptional 13.

Although you may make exceptions for certain distributional hand, it is more or less true that failure to double 1NT limits the strength you would have for other competitive actions ...

So, with:

K10xxx AQxx Ax Qx

... you would double 1NT rather than use a conventional bid showing both majors.

But with:

AQJxx KQJxxx A x

... you might prefer to show your major two-suiter immediately, planning a strong followup action.

We will explore developments after a "penalty" double a bit later, but first, let's consider the rest of our competitive scheme.

The first point to appreciate is that the mini has deprived your side of the opportunity to open the bidding, and at (the) other table(s), your hand might have been able to strike the first blow, perhaps on a light but shapely collection ...

AJ10xx x Q109x Axx

Although our BT editors might well pass this sort of hand as dealer, it is a type that most players would open. It is also the sort of hand that calls for action over the mini. In an ideal world, your pet methods would enable you to show at least five spades and at least four diamonds no higher than the level of 2♦, or would enable you to show short hearts and five spades. Alas, without using a double of 1NT in an artificial sense, you simply can't do those things and still cater to normal one-suiters. Although I believe it is unsound to give up a high-card double of the mini-notrump, there are some world-class pairs who do just that in order to develop their own auction more easily. They reason that it will often be difficult to penalize the bad guys anyway since they usually have some sophisticated runout machinery, and that it would sometimes be better not to take direct action with a moderate balanced hand.

If you settle for something simple like Landy (2♣ for the majors) or 2♣ for the minors, 2♦ for the majors, you won't be able to compete meaningfully with major-minor two-suiters.

If you play a variant of Astro (2♣ for hearts and a minor, 2♦ for spades and another), you will often have to guess your way into a playable fit (finding a five-three fit in the "other" major can be particularly challenging). Furthermore, it will often be impossible to bid quantitatively because a true fit has not yet been established. Still, Astro has the advantage of getting you into the auction on most two-suited hands, and that is important over the mini. Any time you have more than one place to play, you have a bit of extra safety. To overcall 1NT with a natural 2♠, for example, wouldn't be terrible with a chunky suit like AJ10xx, but turn the SJ into a small card and add a jack somewhere else, and you wouldn't want to commit to spades with no hint of a cooperative fallback position.

Another method, particularly popular in North America, is Cappelletti: 2♣ for any one-suiter, 2♦ for the majors, 2♥ for hearts and a minor, 2♠ for spades and a minor. The two-suited actions show at least nine cards in the two suits, but precise lengths are uncertain.

Then there is Multi-Landy: 2♣ for the majors, 2♦ for an unknown major one-suiter, 2♥ and 2S for that major and an unknown minor. I like this one a bit less because you can't reach 2♦ when you have a natural overcall in that suit.

A bit different is a scheme of transfer (or canape transfer) overcalls. You can't play in 2♣ but you can show all one-suiters and reserve the option of bidding again.

Although you can't show a two-suiter directly, you can transfer and bid a second suit, making whatever agree-ments suit your partnership, e.g.

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1NT	2♦(♥)	P	2♥
P	2♠		

... could be treated as a moderate hand with at least five spades and at least four hearts. If you transfer to spades and bid hearts, you would have at least four spades and at least five hearts. Alternatively, you could play 2♣ for the majors, Landy-style, with 2♦/2♥/2♠/3♣ as transfers. Now when you transfer to one major and bid the other, you have a good hand in context.

Whichever method you choose, you must keep in mind that against the mini, you can't really afford to wait for five-five or even for five cards in the known suit. You've got to get into the bidding on most promising hands with at least nine cards in two "convenient" suits (inconvenient suits would be both minors if your methods call for an overcall of 2NT or 3♣ to show them).

What are the strength requirements for these "promising" hands? The example hand above would be close to minimum for a direct action with only five-four.

KQ10x x AJ10xx xxx

... is marginal, at best, particularly if your methods call for a 2♠ overcall to show spades and an unknown minor.

KJxxx xx KJxxx x

... is only worth considering because it's five-five with all the honors in the long suits. If you define your direct actions as "constructive," you might be more comfortable passing this hand.

AQ10xx Qx AKxxx x

... is slightly too strong for 2♠, even if 2♠ shows spades and diamonds. Double instead. If you could bid overcall 2♦ to show both specific suits, you might do that, since you could risk a second bid over preference to 2♠ and your most likely game will be in spades.

KJ10xxx Ax KQxx x

... is more or less strong enough to double 1NT, but that feels wrong. If your alternatives are to show a one-suiter or a two-suiter, I believe you should show a one-suiter, particularly if you can do so artificially. Six-card majors don't go on trees, and you may get a chance to show your second suit later after emphasizing spades. Best of all, perhaps, would be a canape-style 2♦ overcall.

An action that is often not discussed is a jump overcall. I suppose you could make a case for playing these as weak, but should you really be preempting against a balanced 10-count, even at favorable vulnerability?

A jump overcall should be made with a hand inappropriate for a double and too strong in playing tricks for a one-suited two-level action. A central feature is a long, non-solid suit with a hole or two in it.

KJ109xxx	x	AJ10x	x	3♠
AQx	QJ10xxxx	x	Kx	3♥
x	KJx	AQxxxxxx	x	3♦

You might prefer to have less at favorable vulnerability, more at unfavorable vulnerability, but it is something worth discussing.

Let's get back to the "high cards" double of 1NT in the direct seat.

It's beyond the scope of this article to go into the sort of detail this subject merits, but we'll try to get you pointed in the most important directions.

The first thing you'll want to decide is how far your side should be forced after the initial double if the bad guys should escape from 1NTx.

The conservative view is "through 2♦." A more aggressive approach is "through 2♠."

Since you have to tell your opponents about any agreement you make on this subject, it's easy to see that they might be able to take advantage of you by bidding (in the "aggressive" scenario) to 2♠ with a good hand, waiting for you take further action before handing you your head. I would vote for the conservative approach here.

(a)	WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
	1NT	DBL	2♣/2♦	P
	P	???		

... North must not pass.

(b)	WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
	1NT	DBL	P(1)	P
	RDBL(2)	P	2♣/2♦	P
	P	???		

(1) Forces West to redouble

(2) I do what I'm told

... North must not pass.

(c)	WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
	1NT	DBL	RDBL(1)	P
	2♣(2)	P	P	???

(1) Forces 2♣; East has any one-suiter

(2) I do what I'm told

... South must not pass.

In all three of these cases, some information has been exchanged before the bidding gets to the player in the passout seat. The nature of this information will depend on the meaning you assign to alternatives to those previous passes.

In (a), South could have doubled 2♣/2♦. Just so we'll have something relevant to

discuss, let's say that you agree to play that after the initial double, each partner has one chance to make a takeout double if the other has not yet done so. Obviously, you might be happier playing all doubles for penalties, and in that approach, forcing passes are like takeout doubles. You ought to choose the plan that suits your partnership personality.

Here South's pass denies the sort of hand that would make a takeout double of East's suit but South might have a pure penalty double or simply nothing to say. When it gets back to North, he can make a takeout double himself, catering to a penalty pass by South. What North cannot do is double for pure penalty.

That's the price you pay for having this sort of agreement. It's an extension of negative double theory. Essentially, you can get them if one of you has a trump stack; you might not get them so easily when your trumps are three-three. If North has not been dealt a true takeout double anyway, he can double just the same if other actions seem worse. Alternatively, he can bid a suit minimally or with a jump, bid some number of notrump, or cue-bid to establish a game force, showing a two-suited hand inappropriate for a direct action other than double. You will decide on the parameters. In (b), South had a chance to run himself after East's pass. Should he do so with any very weak hand? That's another partnership decision. If you think he should, then perhaps a bid of 2♣ should simply send that message, with no long suit. Thus, with a weak hand and long clubs, you might have to get to 3♣ or you might wish to pass, then hope to run to 2♣ later if partner doesn't get in your way. If South's first pass shows some values by agreement, you may consider this a different sort of scenario. You might wish to agree on penalty doubles by both partners in this situation. If you wish to retain the same agreements as in (a), both South and North can double 2♣/2♦ for takeout.

(c) might seem like a variant of (b), but here North-South might be off the hook altogether; East might convert 2♣ to 2♥/2♠, and there would no longer be a forcing situation for the defending side. Still, you can make a case for South's pass over the redouble to show some values. South may have to act over 2♣ or 2♦ at his second turn and ought to be prepared to do so, particularly since there will be some ethical considerations if his action is out of tempo. This is not at all easy for the defenders, but it is even more difficult if you do not look at the opponent's convention card before you start.

What should you do if the bidding begins ...

(d)	WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
	1NT	DBL	P(1)	???

(1) no special meaning

If your hand is balanced, I suggest that you pass and take your chances, even with a very weak hand. You might go minus 180 or 380 or worse by passing but it might be much worse if you bid. East has not redoubled so there is no game bonus to worry about and East's silence suggests that North will have a good hand when South has a bad one. The picture changes if East makes a business redouble or makes a conventional pass and then

passes West's forced redouble. It might still be correct to pass, of course, but with less

than 4-5 HCP, you will often do better (notice that I am not saying "do well") to try to grope your way into a playable spot. It is moments such as this that the mini notrump aficionados dream about.

If you have a bit of shape, you ought to decide how much you need to pass

1NTx or 1NTxx. With 5/6 points, you could go either way. With less, you will probably prefer to take out, and with more you ought to pass.

If you're content with a simple approach: two-level takeouts are natural and weak, and jumps are invitational, based on distribution rather than high cards. A takeout to 2NT shows a distributional two-suiter with some interest in game.

If you want to get fancy, there are some methods on the market. One of them [suggested by Marc Smith] uses a 2♣ takeout to show any weak one-suiter (you can't play in precisely 2♣),

2NT to start game-forcing one-suiters, jumps as natural and invitational,

2♦ to show any weak two-suiter, 2♥ to show a strong two-suiter without spades and 2♠ to show a strong two-suiter including spades.

Various relays are employed to identify specific combinations. This is good stuff, but it involves some study and memory work and is certainly not for everyone. The point, I guess, is that you don't have to be caught with your pants down after 1NT-(DBL)-Pass-???

(e)	WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
	1NT	DBL	2♠	???

Here pass is no longer forcing, according to agreement. I suggest that you play negative doubles here, a method that will appeal to you if you already play negative doubles after 1NT-(2♠ overcall). In fact, what you might wish to do is treat other actions as you would in that sequence, i.e.

South uses Lebensohl, or Rubensohl, or whatever methods you use now after an opponent overcalls partner's 1NT with 2♠. Although North might not have a balanced hand for his double of 1NT, this technique enables South to show a wide variety of hands without going past 3NT and without overstating his values. Here is a sample scheme ...

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1NT	DBL	2♠	???

Pass Nonforcing; might be a moderate penalty DBL of 2♠

DBL Negative; say 7/8+ HCP; if 4♥/strong ... no ♠ stop

2NT Puppet to 3♣ (then 3♦/3♥=long/weak; 3♠=4♥/♠ stop

3♣ Invitational or better, diamonds

3♦ Invitational or better, hearts

3♥ Invitational or better, clubs

3♠ Invitational or better, both minors

3NT NAT/♠ stoppers

4♣ 6+♣/4♥/FG

4♦ 6+♦/4♥/FG

- 4♥ NAT, but not strong
- 4♠ Extreme minors, slam try
- 4NT Simple Blackwood

Even if you cannot act directly over 1NT, responder will often make a move to get out of notrump. Not infrequently, your side will still want to take a part in the proceedings.

It is normal technique against the weakie and the mini for a hand that has not yet passed to double a Stayman-family 2♣ to show (not clubs but) the sort of hand that would have doubled 1NT in the direct seat. That is a good idea as far as it goes, but you might want to do a bit more ...

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
	1NT	P	2♣
???			

DBL A hand that would have doubled 1NT in the direct seat

- 2♦ Transfer to hearts
- 2♥ Transfer to spades
- 2♠ Sound hand with clubs or diamonds (2NT relays)
- 2NT Sound hand with both minors
- 3♣/3♦ NAT, but not as good as 2♠ (one minor)
- 3M Distributional, fair hand
- 3NT NAT, based on tricks

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
	1NT	P	2♣
2♦(♥)	P	2♥	P
???			

3♣/3♦ 5-5+ decent hand

2NT Canape-style, 4♥, longer minor; East bids 3♣ if he prefers clubs to hearts, bids 3♦ if he has game interest in clubs but prefers diamonds to hearts

The same treatments would work if North tries 2♠ over the transfer, but a double by East would then be for penalty. A reopening double of 2♠ by West would be for takeout (perhaps 6331 or 5431).

Credit Paul Soloway-Bobby Goldman for this scheme.

There are other ways for South to get out of 1NT ...

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
	1NT	P	2♦(♥)
???			

DBL A hand that would double 1NT in the direct seat

2♥ Spades.

2♠ Sound (one) minor hand.

2NT Sound, both minors.

3♣/3♦ Lesser hand than 2♠ (one minor).

3♥ Asks for stopper (e.g. Kx x Ax AKQxxxxx) 3♠ Distributional, fair hand

3NT NAT, based on tricks

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
	1NT	P	2♥(♠)
???			

DBL A hand that would double 1NT in the direct seat

2♣ Clubs

2NT Diamonds

3♣ Both minors

3♦ Hearts, with a second suit.

3♥ Hearts, one-suited.

3♠ Looking for a spade stopper.

3NT NAT, based on tricks

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
	1NT	P	2♠(minors)
???			

DBL A hand that would double 1NT in the direct seat

2NT 6♠/4+♥ or 5-5+ both majors

3♣ 6♥/4+♠ (memory aid: clubs=hearts)

3♦ Hearts

3♥ Spades

3NT Solid M plus stopper(s)

4♣ 6+♥/5♠ strong (clubs=hearts)

4♦ 6+♠/5♥ strong (diamonds=spades)

In all the foregoing cases, West hand can first pass, and then double for takeout, his hand being constrained only by the definition given to his other direct actions. In other words, the delayed double is for takeout but it is not defined as a "balancing" action since there is no other way to make a takeout double in these methods.

Furthermore, sequences like...

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
	1NT	P	2♥(♠)
P	2♠	DBL	

... are takeout... but limited by the failure to double 1NT. Since these live auctions are

very dangerous, East would not stretch to get into the bidding. The classic hand for a delayed double is a shape-perfect 13 HCP (not quite good enough for a direct double of 1NT).

If the bidding begins ...

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
	1NT	P	P
???			

... you have to be careful. If you remembered to ask your opponents about this situation before you started to play, you may be able to avoid giving away information about your hand by passing in tempo with marginal values. It is very much a personality matter whether you should shade the values for a reopening double in South's position. I don't think that you should do so because East is a favourite to have his fair share of strength when North could not act over 1NT and you hold something like a mini-notrump yourself. Your other reopening actions can be shaded a bit because you are aiming for a fit and not a preponderance of high cards.

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
P	1NT	P	P
???			

Should a reopening double by a passed hand be used to show a maximum for the initial pass? If you like the idea, go with it, but I think it makes more sense to use the double as part of a scheme to show as many offensive hand types as possible. For example ...

DBL Clubs or both majors (over East's 2♣, 2♦=equal majors)

2♣ Clubs and a longer major

2♦ Diamonds and a longer major

2♥ Hearts and a longer minor

2♠ Spades and a longer minor

If you'd rather bid your long suit first, do it that way. If you play weak two-bids in diamonds, hearts, and spades, it is probably unnecessary to cater to that sort of hand in your reopening structure. If you use weak two-bids in the majors only, then West could double with clubs, diamonds, or both majors. Then, over East's puppet (unless he passes) to 2♣, West passes with clubs, bids 2♦ with diamonds, and bids 2♥ (exceptionally 2♠) with both majors. If you're inclined to reopen with five (of a major)-three-three-two, you're more or less committed to starting with a three-card minor.

Go back now and decide how much (if any) of this you'd like to play. Choose a method for direct intervention. To practice, you might choose a particular sequence and write down a few sample hands. Ask yourself how you would bid with each of them. You can use the same hands to test your defense in other situations, or you can make up new ones.

If you like what you're doing, you can use the same principles against stronger weak

notrumps ... 11/12-14 and 12/13-15.