

What's Standard?

Using Grant Standard: Notrump Openings — by David Lindop 

Previous articles in this series, the *Grant Basic and Grant Standard Summary Charts*, and corresponding convention cards can be found at www.audreygrant.com.

Having put together a set of up-to-date agreements, it's time to see how they work. A Summary Chart is just that ... a summary. The bulk of the partnership methods lie hidden beneath the surface. Consider, for example, the section on notrump openings:

OPENING BIDS	
1NT: 14+ to 17	(can include 5-card major)
2NT: 20 to 21	(with 22-24 open 2♣ and rebid 2NT) (with 25-27 open 2♣ and rebid 3NT)

This gives the strength range for an opening 1NT or 2NT bid but says nothing about the distribution required. It's assumed we know enough to open notrump with a balanced hand. It's also assumed we know how to handle balanced hands that lie outside these ranges. Let's take a look at the bigger picture.

Opening Balanced Hands

We actually have a way to show a balanced hand of any strength range:

BALANCED HANDS

- 12-14 Open one of a suit, planning to rebid notrump at the cheapest level.
- 15-17 Open 1NT.
- 18-19 Open one of a suit, planning to rebid notrump jumping a level.
- 20-21 Open 2NT.
- 22-24 Open 2♣, planning to rebid 2NT.
- 25-27 Open 2♣, planning to rebid 3NT.

With a balanced hand of fewer than 12 points, we simply pass. If we keep picking up hands with 28 or more points, we should play for high stakes, but we can handle those hands as well. With 29 points, for example, open 2♣, planning to jump to 4NT, showing 28-30 points.

Notice how easy it will be for responder to decide whether the partnership belongs in partscore, game, or slam when opener describes a balanced hand. If the opening bid is 1NT for example, responder can assume partner has 16 points and never be wrong by more than a single point!

The notrump structure still leaves room for judgment. In the following examples, we are the dealer with neither side vulnerable.

Balanced Hands of 12-14

♠ 10 3 This is a balanced
♥ K Q 7 4 hand with 12 high-
♦ Q 10 5 card points (HCPs).
♣ A J 7 5 The first decision is
whether to open. At one time, the guideline was to pass with fewer than 13 points. Many of today's players use the *Guideline of 20* with borderline hands in first or second position: **Add the HCPs to the number of cards in the two longest suits; if the total is 20 or more open, otherwise pass.** 12 HCPs plus 4 cards in hearts and 4 in clubs gives a total of 20, qualifying this hand as an opening bid under the guideline. Such considerations are why the range for balanced hands too weak to open 1NT is typically stated as 12-14 rather than 13-14.

Since we are too weak to open 1NT and don't have a five-card major suit, if we choose to open this hand we would bid 1♣. If partner responds 1♠, we then rebid 1NT to show a balanced hand in the 12-14 point range.

Although the initial plan is to describe this hand by rebidding 1NT, other factors come into play. Suppose partner responds 1♥ instead of 1♠. Our priorities change. With four-card support for partner's suit, we raise to 2♥ instead of rebidding 1NT. We are still showing a hand in the minimum range, but partner won't know for sure that our hand is balanced.

Suppose partner responds 1♦. We have three options. We could rebid 1NT to show a balanced hand. With three-card support for partner's suit, we could also choose to raise to 2♦. Standard practice, however, is to rebid 1♥, continuing to look for an eight-card major suit fit.

Suppose partner responds 1NT, showing a balanced hand of about 6-10 points. Now we pass since the partnership is likely in its best contract. Similarly, partner might raise to 2♣, showing club support and about 6-10 points. Holding a minimum hand, we would pass. The partnership is high enough.

The opponents' bidding can also impact our planned rebid. We open 1♣, partner responds 1♠ and the opponent on our right overcalls 2♦:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
			1♣
Pass	1♠	2♦	?

We can no longer bid 1NT. A bid of 2NT would show a hand too strong to open 1NT, 18 or 19 points. Instead, we pass. Partner already knows we have enough to open from the 1♣ bid. Passing simply says we have nothing more to say at this point. Although partner's response in a new suit is forcing, we don't have to bid when our right-hand opponent intervenes. Partner will get another chance to bid.

So, whether we actually get to describe our hand with a 1NT rebid depends on how the auction goes.

Balanced Hands of 15-17

This is the range that we get to describe nicely with a 1NT opening bid. But that doesn't mean there is no controversy.

♠ Q 8 2 This hand is balanced
♥ K J 9 7 5 —no voids, no single-
♦ A J tons, and only one
♣ K Q 7 doubleton—and has
16 HCPs. Perfect for 1NT. However, it includes a five-card major suit, so there's also an argument for opening 1♥. What should we do?

There's no universal agreement, but the majority of expert opinion is on the side of opening 1NT (see this month's *Point of View*). That's why "can include 5-card major" is on the Chart and the corresponding box is checked on the convention card.

The reason is that such hands are difficult to describe if we open the major suit. Suppose we bid 1♥ and partner responds 1♠. A rebid of 1NT or a raise to 2♠ would show a minimum opening; a jump to 2NT or a raise to 3♠ would show about 18-19 points; a rebid of 2♥ or 3♥ would promise a six-card suit and be an underbid or an overbid. We're stuck. Better to open 1NT and describe the basic strength and distribution with a single call.

Might we miss a 5-3 fit in the major suit? Certainly, but that isn't always a bad thing. A concealed five-card suit can work to our advantage during the play. What if partner responds 2♣, the Stayman convention? We simply bid 2♥, showing a four-card *or longer* major suit.

Do we have to open 1NT with a five-card major? No. We're still free to exercise judgment. With this hand,
♠ A K Q 9 3 where the strength is
♥ 6 2 so concentrated in
♦ A K 10 two suits, we can
♣ 8 4 2 choose to open 1♠
and worry about what to rebid later.

♠ K 10 How about this
♥ Q J 9 hand? It's balanced,
♦ A Q 10 9 5 but there are only
♣ Q 10 5 14 HCPs. Many
players add 1 point for a five-card suit when valuing a hand and also

upgrade a bit for 10's and 9's. So, this hand could—and in my opinion should—be opened 1NT.

If we put a range of 15–17 for a 1NT opening on the convention card, some players might object if we were to open 1NT with this hand, even though there is no 'rule' that we can only use HCPs to value our hand and the convention card doesn't specifically state that 15–17 means HCPs. Nonetheless, to keep the nitpickers at bay, we'll state the range for a 1NT opening as 14+ to 17, allowing us to exercise our judgment on such hands.

Notice the range for 1NT is in blue. Current ACBL regulations require the range to be *announced*. If partner opens 1NT, we must say, "fourteen plus to seventeen."

♠ Q 3 What about this
♥ K J 5 hand? The point
♦ K 4 count is right for a
♣ A Q 9 7 5 2 1NT opening but
there are two doubletons. Most experts would open 1NT with this hand, and we should feel free to exercise similar judgment.

♠ K I'm nervous about
♥ Q J 5 putting in this hand.
♦ A J 6 2 Many clubs and tour-
♣ K J 7 5 3 nament officials
don't allow players to open 1NT with a singleton. In my opinion—and I'm not alone—there's nothing wrong with choosing to open 1NT with this hand. It may not work well if the opponents run the spade suit against us in a notrump contract, or if partner insists on playing with spades as trumps, expecting us to have at least a doubleton, but opening 1♣, or even a 'prepared' 1♦, will typically lead to an awkward rebid problem. Still, if partner won't respect us if we open 1NT with this hand, open a minor suit. Keeping partner happy is also part of exercising our judgment.

Balanced Hands of 18-19

Balanced hands too strong to open 1NT but not strong enough for 2NT are similar to hands too weak to open 1NT. The initial plan is to

open one of a suit and then jump in notrump to describe the strength and distribution, but the auction can proceed in many ways.

♠ A Q This hand has 18
♥ K J 7 5 HCPs, too much for
♦ Q J 6 our 1NT range. We
♣ K Q 8 3 start by opening 1♣.
If partner responds 1♠, we can follow through with our plan and jump to 2NT, showing a balanced hand of 18-19 points.

If partner responds 1♥, however, our priority becomes showing support for partner's suit. An invitational jump raise to 3♥ is probably enough with this hand. With a slightly stronger hand, we could raise all the way to 4♥. Whether to raise to 3♥ or 4♥ is a matter of judgment and partnership style. With so many queens and jacks, I'd judge this hand to be worth only a raise to 3♥, especially with an aggressive partner who is likely to bid game anyway on most hands. Others might commit the partnership to game.

It's a similar situation if partner responds 1NT. An invitational raise to 2NT is sufficient to show a balanced hand of 18-19 points. With a balanced hand of 12-14 points we would pass 1NT and with 15-17 points we would have opened 1NT.

What if partner responds 1♦? With a minimum balanced hand, we suggested that showing the four-card major tends to take priority over describing the balanced hand. With 18-19 points, however, the descriptive jump to 2NT would be the more popular choice. Reserve the jump shift to 2♥ for strong, unbalanced hands. Most partnerships have a way to find a heart fit after the 2NT rebid. Responder can simply bid 3♥ with a four-card suit, or the partnership may adopt some more exotic methods.

Balanced Hands of 20+

We'll leave opening balanced hands with 20 points or more points until we discuss strong opening bids.

(In the next issue we'll look at responding to 1NT using Grant Standard.)