

What's Standard?

by David Lindop

This series is based on Grant Standard, a set of conventions and agreements that are in popular use today, such as 15-17 INT openings, five-card majors, and weak two-bids. A summary chart of Grant Standard and the corresponding convention card can be found at www.AudreyGrant.com. The site also has Grant Basic, a simpler set of agreements.

Earlier articles in this series appeared in the Bridge Bulletin and can also be found under 'Articles' at www.AudreyGrant.com.

Opening notrump bids put the partnership in very familiar territory. Responder has an accurate picture of opener's strength and distribution, making it easy to decide both **How HIGH** and **WHERE** the partnership belongs. Responder also has tools such as Stayman and Jacoby transfer bids to help out.

So when the opponents open the bidding we want to keep our notrump structure intact whenever possible. We can do that, but with a few adjustments here and there.

The Direct 1NT Overcall

A direct overcall of 1NT is similar to an opening bid of 1NT:

- DIRECT 1NT OVERCALL
- Balanced hand.
- 15-18 points.
- Stopper(s) in their suit(s).

One small difference is that **the upper limit is a little higher**, 18 points. That's because it's more dangerous to overcall 1NT than to open 1NT. Our left-hand opponent is in a better position to make a penalty double if the deal belongs to their side. The opening bid has both shown some strength and given an indication of the best opening lead. So we'd like a little extra when we come into the fray.

Notrump Overcalls

Although double of a 1NT opening bid is for penalty in standard methods, many modern partnerships prefer to use it as a conventional takeout. Even when it is for penalty, the partner of the doubler may be unsure about leaving it in with a weak hand. There's no such doubt about the double of a 1NT overcall. It's almost universally for penalty and the opening bidder will usually choose to defend except with a very distributional hand.

The other difference from the 1NT opening bid is that **we need one or more stoppers**—high cards and length—in their suit(s). This is because our left-hand opponent now has a good idea what to lead, especially if the opening bid is in a major, promising five or more cards.

Suppose we are South and our right-hand opponent opens 1♠:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♠			?

This hand is a sound overcall of 1NT. We have a balanced hand, 16 high-card points, and stoppers in spades. If left-hand opponent leads a spade, we'll get at least two tricks in the suit.

We'd definitely open this hand 1NT. We wouldn't worry about the spades. But when the opening bid on our right is 1♠, an overcall of 1NT is not such a good idea. We expect an opening spade lead and have nothing to prevent the opponents from taking all their tricks in the suit. Fortunately, we have a suitable alternative. With support for the unbid suits, we can make a takeout double of 1♠.

Suppose the auction starts:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♦	Pass	1♥	?

Even though both the opponents have bid, we can still overcall 1NT with this hand. We have a maximum: 17 high-card points plus 1 length point for the five-card club suit. We also have stoppers in both their suits.

Overcalling between the opponents is very dangerous. The opponents each know something about their partner's hand and are well placed to double the 1NT overcall for penalty. So we need a sound hand.

Some partnerships prefer to give up the natural notrump overcall in this position. Instead, they use the 1NT bid as a conventional weak takeout for the other two suits. However, this is not standard.

Stronger Notrump Overcalls

Suppose we are sitting South and the auction starts like this:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♦			?

With a balanced hand and 21 high-card points, we would have opened 2NT with this hand. However, we *don't* make a jump overcall of 2NT with this hand. There are a couple of reasons.

Strong hands like this are quite rare when the opponents open the bidding. So most partnerships assign a conventional meaning to the jump overcall of 2NT, *the unusual 2NT*. We'll discuss this convention in an upcoming issue.

More importantly, we have another way to show this type of hand. We start with a takeout double. When partner bids something, 1♥ for example, we then bid 1NT. **Doubling and then bidding notrump shows a hand too strong to overcall 1NT**, about 19-21 points.

With an even stronger hand, we can double and then jump in notrump. Of course, the stronger we are, the more likely partner has a very weak hand, especially with our opponent having an opening bid.

1NT in Balancing Position

When the opponent on our left opens and the next two players pass, we are in the *balancing position*. If we pass, the auction is over. In this position, it's standard practice to compete with up to about a king—3 points—less than in direct position. Following this principle, **1NT in the balancing position shows about 12–15 points**. For example:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♥	Pass	Pass	?

With a hand unsuitable for a suit overcall or a takeout double, we can make a balancing 1NT bid. We expect partner to hold some values since left-hand opponent didn't open with a strong two-bid and right-hand opponent didn't have enough to respond.

We don't want to over-use the balancing 1NT. With a hand like this, it's probably best to pass and leave West to struggle in 1♥. If we bid, East-West might find a better spot.

With a stronger hand, start with a takeout double and then bid notrump.

Higher Level Overcalls

We usually don't want to come into the auction when the opponents have bid to the two level or higher. They probably have most of the strength. An exception, however, is when an opponent makes a preemptive bid. **A notrump overcall after a weak two-bid or three-bid shows about the same as a 1NT overcall, 15–18 points.**

This might seem a little strange. We typically need more strength to overcall at the two- or three-level than at the one level. However, the opponent's preemptive bid has taken away bidding room, and hands in the 15–18 point range are quite common. We need a way to handle them.

Also, it's a little safer to overcall at the two-level or higher when the opponent's opening bid shows a weak hand. We can expect partner to hold a little something. The contract will often belong to our side.

Suppose we are South and the bidding begins:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		2♠	?

We can't afford to be shut out of the auction by the weak two-bid when we have a hand this strong, 16 high-card points plus 1 length point for the five-card suit. If partner has about 9 or 10 points, we have enough combined strength for game, but partner is unlikely to enter the auction at the three level. The hand is unsuitable for a takeout double and partner would expect a better suit for a 3♦ overcall. The most descriptive call we can make is 2NT.

If East opened 3♠, we'd have to risk an overcall of 3NT with this hand or run the chance of being shut out of the auction by the preemptive opening. Could we be too high? Certainly, and if left-hand opponent has the balance of strength, we'll probably hear about it with a penalty double. But bidding will likely lead to more good results than bad results in the long run. We can't let the opponents push us around!

We have to use some judgment. This hand has 15 high-card points but no real source of tricks and a dubious spade stopper. We should probably pass over a weak 2♠ bid, and we should definitely pass after a 3♠ preempt. It's not even a sound overcall of 1NT over a 1♠ opening bid.

In contrast, a hand like this is worth a bid of 3NT over either 2♠ or 3♠. We'd expect to take nine tricks on a spade lead with very little help from partner—some length in clubs perhaps.

Advancing Notrump Overcalls

Most partnerships agree to play “front of the card” (FOC) after a notrump overcall. This refers to the front of the Convention Card, where the responses to opening notrump bids are described. What this means is the partnership uses exactly the same methods when advancing a notrump overcall:

ADVANCING A 1NT OVERCALL

- 3NT - To play
- 3♥/♠ - Slam invitational
- 3♣/♦ - Invitational, 6-card suit
- 2NT - Invitational
- 2♠ - Relay to 3♣ (to play in 3♣ or 3♦)
- 2♥ - Jacoby transfer to spades
- 2♦ - Jacoby transfer to hearts
- 2♣ - Stayman

We should discuss this with our partner beforehand, because there are other possibilities. The older style is to play “systems off” when advancing the 1NT overcall. That would make all bids natural and the cuebid of the opponent's suit would be used as Stayman.

Let's assume we have agreed to use “front of the card” as South and the auction begins:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♦	1NT	Pass	?

With this hand we can bid 2♦, asking partner to bid 2♥. We would then pass.

With this hand we would bid 2♣ as the Stayman convention. If partner bids 2♥ or 2♠, we'll invite game by raising to the three level. If our partner bids 2♦, we'll bid 2NT.

When advancing a 2NT overcall, we can use the same approach.

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
2♥	2NT	Pass	?

Here we'd bid 3♥ as a transfer to spades. After partner bids 3♠, we'll bid 3NT.

♠	K 10 8 7 3
♥	4 2
♦	K J 7 5
♣	Q 4