**(81) More Notrump: When to Open 1N Off-Shape**

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**General**

Opening 1N is our favorite bid in all of bridge. Partner has excellent tools (Stayman and Transfers) and has a good picture of our general hand (Hand Type and Bucket). We will usually get to the right (best) final contract. But we do not want to “stretch” to open 1N too often or with just any hand. If we do open 1N too often, partner will no longer know (trust) what to expect from us and 1N will lose its effectiveness. Having said that, there will be times when we will need to open 1N “off-shape.” The primary reason that we will make such “off-shape” bids is to avoid a difficult rebid problem or other bidding issues that might arise. We will examine these “problem opening hands” and discuss which problems are best solved by opening 1N.

**Semi-Balanced Hands**

Many semi-balanced hands will be treated as balanced and opened with notrump in order to avoid rebid problems. Let’s consider these specific hands.

***2-4-5/2***

A semi-balanced hand with a 4-card ♥ suit is the most frequent off-shape 1N opening. With 15-17 points and this shape we will have no rebid if the auction goes 1m - 1♠, because 2♥ would be a reverse. The solution to this problem is to open 1N on most of these hands. It is only on hands with all of their points in their long suits (i.e., two small doubletons) that we treat these hands as two-suited instead of balanced. (Two-suited hands can open 1-minor and rebid 2-minor with only 15 points. With 16-17 HCP these two suited hands can open 1-minor and reverse into 2♥.) With such good suits there will be upgrades for length points and no positional values – thus, no reason to want to bid notrump.

***2-2-4/5***

With the same hand as above but with both minors (instead of a 4-card Major,) we have a small advantage. With this shape we have two options. We can open 1♦ and rebid 2♣ OR we can open 1N. When we have both minors we want to focus on notrump – we get to good places when we open 1N. So if we have either Major stopped we will generally open 1N. It is only when we have two small doubletons in both Majors that we will open 1-minor. This will usually be an opening of 1♦ with a rebid of 2♣ (even with 2-2-4-5 shape.)

*Note: With 17 HCP and all our points in the minors we can reverse if we are exactly 2-2-4-5 (open 1♣ ad rebid 2♦.)*

***4-5-2-2***

When we have both Majors we are less excited about opening 1N – showing partner both Major suits will be a better description of our hand. As with our other Semi-Balanced minor suit hands we will open our suits when all of our points are concentrated our long suits:

* 4-5-2-2 with 16-17 HCP we open 1♥ and reverse into 2♠ after the likely 1N response.
* 4-5-2-2 with 15 HCP we open 1♠ and rebid 2♣ after the likely 1N response. (“Lie in a minor.”)

With points in our minors (in our short suits) we have a more difficult bidding problem. These hands are certainly not good enough to reverse, but now a 1N opening becomes somewhat more appealing.

* Generally, with these hands we will still try to show our two-suited type hand by “lying in a minor” when we have a minimum hand: 1♥ - 1N\* - 2♣.
* With better hands (maximum) and good positional minor suit holdings (i.e., Qx or Kx) we will want to be the declarer. These hands are best described by opening 1N.

***4-2-5/2***

Our final 5422 Semi-Balanced hand has a 5-card minor and a 4-card ♠ suit. This is the 4-5 hand we are mostly likely to be able to describe naturally – without having to Reverse. If we open 1-minor partner will frequently bid 1♥ (or 1♦ over a 1♣ opening) and then we will be able to rebid 1♠ without Reversing. This 1♠ bid is natural and shows a two-suited hand (in the extended Walsh style of modern bidding) with up to 17 points.

Thus, with this shape we feel less pressure to open 1N and only do so when driven by positional values – holdings that we want to protect in our doubletons (i.e., Qx or Kx.)

***Short in ♠ (1-4-4-4 or 1-4-3/5) – “Almost Semi-Balanced Hands”***

Further difficult hands in bridge are the ones that are short in ♠. These hands pose the most difficult rebid problems and thus require the most forethought. Though opening 1N with a singleton is generally dangerous (partner may Transfer to that suit), when our singleton is a King or Ace (or even a Queen) we can consider opening 1N if nothing else looks good.

* With a small singleton ♠ and 16+ to 17 HCP, our points are all concentrated in our suits and our hand is generally good enough to Reverse.
* With a small singleton ♠ and 15 to 16- HCP then we either show this as a 1-suited hand or a two suited hand in the minors. If we have a good 5-card suit we can open that suit and rebid it. If we have a weak 5-card minor then we open 1♦ and rebid 2♣ - showing the hand as both minors. We can do this with a 1-4-4-4 hand or even with a 1-4-3/5 hand.

*Example*  
x  
AKxx  
AQx  
Kxxxx  
Yes, with this hand we open 1♦ and rebid 2♣. This is not a good bid – we are not happy about having to distort our hand in this way, but it is the best we can do in case partner responds 1♠.

* If our singleton is an honor then this gives us fewer HCP in our long suits and thus makes our hand not good enough to Reverse. In this case, our only options are 1N or bidding both minors. Though it may seem wrong, experience has shown that opening 1N on these sorts of hands is winning bridge.

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With Semi-balanced hands that have a 6-card minor we have the option of opening 1-minor and rebidding our minor or opening notrump. It will be important on these sorts of hands to re-evaluate (upgrade for length) and to take into account positional values.

* With 14 HCP, a good 6-card minor, and a positional value in one of the Majors it is best to treat the hand as a balanced hand. Opening 1N is an excellent description of our hand.  
  *Example*  
  Qx  
  Kx  
  AKQxxx  
  xxx  
  14 HCP plus two or three length points makes for a hand that evaluates to a 1N opener.
* Another time we may want to vary our suit vs. notrump thinking is based on what partner bids.   
  *Example*  
  Ax  
  Kx  
  AKJ10xx  
  Jxx  
  We have 16 HCP and 2+ length points. We open 1♦ and if partner responds 1♥ (or Kx) then we are in no rush to bid notrump (to become the declarer in 3N), so we are happy to show our 15-17 points with a 6-card ♦ suit by rebidding 3♦. But, if partner responds 1♠ to our 1♦ opening bid then we have a positional value in ♥ (Kx) to protect and thus it is best to rebid 2N (showing a balanced 18-19 total points) instead of showing our long ♦ suit.

**Conclusions**

Auctions that begin with 1N lead to good bidding and relatively easy auctions (e.g., 1N – 3N, the best auction in all of bridge.) And when we are faced with a difficult bidding challenge (finding a rebid seems difficult) it is often best to make a small lie early in the auction (by opening 1N) and thus save ourselves the hassle of dealing with all the complexities than can arise later in the auction if we start with a different opening bid. Keep an eye out for when this style of bidding can be useful. Do it sparingly, but do not forget that this practical solution (opening 1N) is available to you.