

What to play: 1. Notrump openings *by Derrick Browne*

Leading American player-writer-teacher Larry Cohen has granted permission for journalists to use material from his www.larryco.com website. Over the coming weeks we'll pick his brains on "What Should we Play?", starting, as he did, with the notrump opening.

Cohen recommends 15-17 points for 1NT, and says: "Also, I advocate 1NT with a 5-card major and a balanced hand in that range".

What opening should you make with this hand?

S KT5
H A4
D 985
C AQJ84

Cohen suggests: "If you have 14 HCP and a 5-card minor, feel free to upgrade to a 1NT opening. I'd count the fifth card in the suit as an extra point, and would open this '14'-count with 1NT".

What of a 2NT opening? The range for that used to be 22-24 HCP, but by the nineties had dropped to 21-22 HCP. Now a range of 20-21 (or perhaps a bad 22) is common amongst advanced players.

Cover the East-West cards and consider, firstly, the bidding, with dealer South:

	NORTH	
	S 874	
	H J63	
	D AK43	
	C A53	
WEST		EAST
S KJ632		S T9
H T987		H 542
D 92		D T8765
C 96		C QJT
	SOUTH	
	S AQ5	
	H AKQ	
	D QJ	
	C K8742	

The South hand values at 21 or perhaps a bad 22 points; the mediocre 5-card suit hardly justifies adding a point, especially when given that the hand has the minus feature of a bare Q-J in diamonds. Open 2NT.

If playing a 20-21 point 2NT opener, North with 12 HCP is unsure whether there are 33 points between the two hands for a small slam, and invites with 4NT. This asks South to pass if minimum (20) or bid slam with maximum (21). Here, South bids 6NT.

Still keeping the East-West cards concealed, plan the play in 6NT after West leads the ten of hearts.

Declarer has ten top tricks: one spade, three hearts, four diamonds and two clubs. Where can two more be found?

Even if the spade finesse succeeds, a 50% chance, that would not be enough. However, a normal 3-2 club break will allow two long suit tricks to be achieved there, once one trick has been given up. Fortunately, clubs are divided 3-2, as they will be 68% of the time. Could there be any other problems?

Yes – due to the diamond blockage. After winning the heart lead, the Q-J should be unblocked from declarer's hand. What next?

A normal looking play is to cross next to dummy via the CA, then cash the A-K of diamonds before giving up a club. As the cards lie, East would then get in and cash a long diamond.

Instead, after unblocking the Q-J of diamonds, declarer does better by giving up a club trick early, while dummy still has the diamonds stopped and still has the CA as an entry to those diamonds. Thus cash the CK and then duck a club.

Once both opponents follow to the second round of clubs, the contract is safe. Win whatever suit East leads back (there is no need to risk finessing the queen if a spade is returned). Cross to dummy with the CA, cash the two top diamonds discarding spades, and return to hand for the rest of the tricks.