

Escape from 1 NT doubled

The first article was all about using a double to express a way forward in competitive auctions. This time, it is deciding how to deal with minimising the bad times when your side opens 1NT and the opponents seek to penalise you. In the very old-fashioned Acol of 50 years or more ago, players often played a weak no-trump if non-vulnerable and a strong no-trump if vulnerable. That has mostly died away and I suspect the first reason is the memory strain when opening and the second, to my mind, more important factor that, in effect, you are playing two different systems. To give just one example, the sequence (with your side as East West):

West	North	East	South
1♦	Pass	1♠	2♥
Dbl			

The double will likely show a strong no-trump with no heart stop if you are playing a 12-14 no trump opening and, perhaps, a shapely 3-1-5-4 fairly minimum hand if you are playing a strong no-trump opening. Playing two ranges no-trump complicates the bidding quite a lot.

Despite the growing popularity of a strong no-trump in tournaments, the vast majority of players at club level prefer 12-14 as their range.

Assuming you are playing pairs, then on the odd occasion that 1NT doubled goes for a sizeable penalty, you shouldn't worry too much. For sure, -800 won't be a good board, but first of all, you will probably not be alone and secondly, a key thing to understand about pairs is that it does not matter whether your score is 10 points worse than others or 1,000 points worse. Conceding -140 when everyone else concedes -110 is just as much a bottom as conceding -1,400.

If one of the downsides of a weak no-trump is the greater possibility of being penalised, then it pays to have some agreements. The simplest is to play a standard method where basically everything is natural. You would bid with a weak hand and a five-card suit and pass (and hope) if you had a weak hand with no suit of your own. So:

```

♠ 7 6 5
♥ 9 4 3
♦ Q J 7 6 5
♣ 10 4

```

Partner opens a weak no-trump and the next hand doubles. You bid 2♦. If, on the other hand you have a sufficiently good hand that you would like the boot to be on the other foot, then you can redouble to indicate that either you will play 1NT redoubled or you will extract a penalty. An example hand would be:

```

♠ K 5
♥ A Q 10 8
♦ J 9 7 4
♣ J 7 6

```

Once you have redoubled 'for blood', all doubles by you or your partner are for penalties.

The above method is simple but it is not the most flexible if you want to maximise your chances of escaping without too much damage.

A very simple thing players do without much, if any, discussion is to bid 2♣ and then, if and when, this is doubled with a voice of thunder, move it to another contract. Suppose you held:

```

♠ 9 8 6 5
♥ 10 6 4 3
♦ 10 9 8 7
♣ 5

```

Then you might try bidding 2♣ and then if they double you can redouble for rescue with three chances of finding a contract. Similarly if you held:

```

♠ 9 8 6 5
♥ 10 7 5 4 3
♦ 4 3
♣ 3 2

```

You could bid 2♦ and then redouble to show the majors. One difficulty with these methods is that they may, of course, pass you out in 2♣ or 2♦ and, if you are vulnerable, it can go for more than their game, if they are making one. 2♦-7 is rarely a good result. If you are prepared to increase the strain on your memory, you can make it more complicated. What follows is, in my view, only for pairs who play together reasonably regularly and are prepared to have a little discussion. If you don't want to do this, then stick to what is above.

There are many methods that have been adopted to move from 1NT when doubled and try to make it difficult for the other side with the majority of the points. One such method popular in England is to bid immediately if you have two four-card suits, or perhaps a 5-4 hand. An example hand would be:

♠ K 10 7 5
♥ 5 3 2
♦ J 9 7 4
♣ 6 5

You remove 1NT doubled to 2♦ and partner knows that you have diamonds and a higher ranked suit and are at least 4-4 in those two suits. All bids show that suit and a higher ranking suit. If he likes diamonds, he will pass and if he prefers to play in a major, he will bid 2♥, inviting you to pass or bid 2♣. There is no guarantee things will get better but you may find a fit, in which case, it is likely it is better or if you end up in a 4-3 fit they may not always double if opposition trumps are breaking.

If you don't have a weak hand with a couple of suits, you might have a hand with a five-card suit or perhaps a balanced hand with some points. With both of these hands you pass and partner is compelled to redouble. Now, if you have a balanced hand, you pass and if you have a five-card suit, you bid it. So for example:

♠ K J 3
♥ Q 10 7 5
♦ Q 9 5 3
♣ 5 4

You pass and the contract is 1NT redoubled. Now this may make in which case you get a top, but if it goes down you will likely get a complete bottom unless some others share your system. You can't play in 1NT doubled playing these methods, so having a balanced two count is not ideal. If you hold:

♠ 9 7 4
♥ K Q 10 7 5
♦ 3 2
♣ 9 8 4

Then you remove 1NT redoubled to the safer waters of 2♥. You would have played there anyway if you didn't play these methods, but you have made it possible to escape on other hands.

There is also the possible advantage that your opponents won't have discussed what they do over the many sequences that may crop up when there are redoubles and extra rounds of the auction flying around.

Whilst you can choose not to go into the more complicated water, with these methods your opponents have no such choice and will probably have to suffer some misunderstandings or take some time to think about what they do.

Whether you are playing a natural method, this escape mechanism or some other form of escape, there are still some other bids available. Suppose you hold:

♠ K J 10 9 7 4 3
♥ 5 4 3
♦ 3
♣ 7 5

You could indulge in your favourite escape mechanism, but, at any vulnerability, I would prefer to bid some spade naturally immediately. Jumping to game is one possibility and you might do this if you are not vulnerable against a vulnerable, but at other vulnerabilities or if you are of a cautious disposition you might prefer to bid 3♣. Any jump to the three level is a weak hand with a long suit (at least six and usually seven cards).

Finally, there is the problem of having a good hand which is unsuitable to play 1NT doubled or 1NT redoubled. You hold:

♠ K Q 10 9 5
♥ A J 7 6 5
♦ J 10 4
♣ Void

You could try to play in 1NT redoubled. Although you have enough points, you would look foolish if they cashed six clubs and an ace when you could make four of a major. Guessing which suit to bid is a poor idea, so with a two-suiter and game values, bid 2NT. This can't possibly be natural as you would have sought to play in 1NT and is used to show this type of hand.