

LARRY COHEN – THE GREAT BRIDGE TEACHER

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Should I Open 1NT w/ a 5-card Major?

This is the #1 question. If bridge teachers had a dollar for every time this question is asked, they'd be wealthy people.

Let me start by saying, that there is no "right" answer (which is probably why it keeps getting asked). All you can ask for is an opinion.

Well-known teachers such as Zeke Jabbour and Bernie Chazen, prefer to open with the major. Marty Bergen and Roberta Salob will tell you 1NT. No doubt, other famous teachers will weigh in with a strong opinion.

My advice:

With 15-17 balanced, and a 5-card major, open 1NT (*balanced means 5-3-3-2. With 5-4-2-2, open the major*).

The biggest reason I have for opening 1NT is that if you don't open 1NT, you will have a major (pardon the pun) headache when it comes time to rebid. For example, say you hold: Q 10 A Q 10 4 2 K J 2 K J 3

If you open 1Heart, what will you do next? Suppose partner answers with 1 Spade. How do you show this hand? If you rebid 1NT, you are showing less than 15. If you rebid 2NT, you are showing more than 17. That is why I prefer to start with 1NT. You have 16 balanced and if you open 1 Heart, you will never be able to convey that information. Whatever partner responds to 1 Heart, you will have trouble telling partner that you have 16 HCP.

Is there a downside? Of course. By opening with 1NT, you will sometimes miss out on a proper contract in your major. You will miss some 5-3 major-suit fits (and occasionally, even a 5-4 fit). There are conventions (such as Puppet Stayman) to get out of this mess, but those are outside the scope of this article.

I have found (in 30+ years) of experience, that my way is the best way. I have my good and bad moments, but in the long run, the money goes to the 1NT opening. Even when I do miss a 5-3 major-suit fit, I find that notrump plays just as well (and even if it is the same, it is worth a fortune at matchpoints to get the 10 extra points for your contract).

I think it best for less-experienced players to blindly open all balanced 15-17 hands with 1NT. That is because opening with the major ends up creating annoying rebid problems. For example, players that open the hand above with 1 Heart, will have to invent a rebid (typically in a 3-card suit). Bridge is hard enough. Intermediate players need to keep things simple.