

LARRY COHEN – THE GREAT BRIDGE TEACHER

Larry Cohen is a reputed teacher of Bridge game to all levels of players. He has published very many books and articles.

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

1NT with a 5-card Major? (second discussion)

Authors: Larry Cohen & Bernie Chazen Date of publish: 1/7/2002

Level: Intermediate

As bridge teachers, we get asked lots of questions. By far, the most-asked question is: "Should I open 1NT with a 5-card major?" Before answering, let's clarify what the questioner has in mind. You hold a balanced hand with 15-17 HCP. By "balanced" we mean one of the following shapes: 4-3-3-3, 4-4-3-2, or 5-3-3-2. With the first two shapes, it is automatic to open 1NT--even without stoppers in all suits. It is the latter shape (5-3-3-2) that causes all the consternation. Should 1NT or 1Heart be the opening bid with: ♠A J ♥K Q x x x ♦K x x ♣K 10 x?

Are you ready for the final and official answer from Bernie and Larry? Can we put this issue to bed once and for all?

Sorry, the debate will have to rage on. You see, Larry has his opinion while Bernie has a different answer. Larry would open 1NT; Bernie chooses 1Heart. Bernie feels that you will lose the 5-3 heart fit if you open 1NT. Responder would [Stayman](#) with 4 hearts, but not 3. If you open 1♥, you still have a chance to reach notrump later, but not the other way around. Larry would argue for 1NT because if you open 1♥, he feels it will be impossible to accurately describe a balanced 16-count. What would you rebid after 1♥-P-1♠-P? A 1NT rebid shows 12-14 and a 2NT rebid shows 18-19, so you'd have to "lie" by bidding a 3-card minor suit.

There are some secondary issues as well. If you play some sort of special [Stayman](#) (like "Puppet") you can still uncover a 5-3 major-suit fit after 1NT, but Bernie isn't thrilled with the idea of having to cope with that convention. Larry agrees there, but is willing to lose the 5-3 fit and play instead in 3NT when responder has enough for game. With the hand shown at the start of this article, Bernie would point out that if a responder to 1NT has 5 spades and 3 hearts, he will transfer to spades--a 5-2 fit instead of a 5-3 fit. Larry sees the point--and he might be less likely himself to open 1NT with a doubleton in the other major. Larry also would eschew 1NT with some lopsided hands such as:

♠A Q J ♥A K Q 10 9 ♦3 2 ♣4 3 2 or ♠A 10 9 ♥A K 10 9 8 ♦A 3 2 ♣3 2.

However, for intermediate-level players he would choose not to get into exceptions and willingly say to open "all" 5-3-3-2 hands (15-17) 1NT even with a 5-card major. Simplicity is best. For expert students he would go into the finer points and say "sometimes yes, sometimes no".

What's the official final answer? South Florida residents can see Bernie & Larry together at a 2-day seminar in April, 2006* (see below)

Postscript: This article was written in 2006. After our lecture, Bernie moved more towards Larry's camp, and in 2007 he even started to teach to open 1NT with a 5-card major!

*Second Postscript: Bernie passed away in January, 2009—a giant loss to the bridge world.

**For Larry's "own" article on this topic, please [click here](#)