

Charles Goren did his followers a great disservice when he claimed that “his” point count was all you need to bid in bridge. If you rely on point count for all your bidding decisions you will go nowhere. The strength of point count lies in its use in specifying the line between one type of action and another. This, coupled with the bids we hear from partner, and from opponents, provided we think about them, will assist us with what really matters, what important cards partner can hold or cannot hold and where they are likely to be.

Much is given up, simply by opening 1NT, a whole round of bidding is used up and we know little more than partner’s point range. This is compounded by such actions as opening 1NT when holding a five-card major or with other “off-shape” hands. The more we extended its use, the bigger the cost. 1NT as an opening bid to show a balanced hand in a particular point range is best described as a necessary evil. A rarely considered downside to opening 1NT, any range, is that you must play an entirely separate system in reply to it. The multiplicity of systems on offer speaks for itself. With some of the better defensive machinery available, it is very often the side that opens 1NT that fails to find its fit, and loses the part score battle.

What really cost in the Goren credo was his “magic number,” thirteen (points to open) and its associated catch phrase, an opening bid opposite an opening bid equals game. How can this be so when so often there is game on both ways? The real magic number is ten. You must be in the bidding whenever your side holds the balance of power and you must be able to establish when you do. Usually, the hand “belongs” to the side holding the balance of power. Pass ten points as dealer or second in hand and your opponents will often make it impossible for you to find out. To pass a good hand, planning to come in later makes no sense at all. Let the opponents travel in your wake, not you in theirs. To put it another way, do you prefer to give your opponents first use of the bathwater?

The strength, or weakness, of a bidding system depends where we draw the boundary lines between different types of action. Throughout one’s bridge lifetime, one tends to move them back and forth a little based upon experience. The popular range 15-17 points, for a 1NT opening bid, is just about right.

The reasons why are these.

- It, effectively, separates the minimum balanced hands from the strong ones.
- Hands which qualify for a 15-17 point 1NT opening do not occur nearly as frequently as, say, when the range is 12-14 or 13-15 points. A wider range is unthinkable.
- If you play one of those weaker ranges you are effectively barred from opening weaker balanced hands at all because to rebid 1NT promises a strong hand. To rebid the suit you opened on just five cards is a bidding atrocity of the highest order. Of course you can open it 1NT but the main reason for opening, the good suit, becomes

lost. Precision players will say that their 1D, followed by a 1NT rebid shows 10-12 points, but at what cost? Their 1NT rebid can conceal five cards in either clubs or diamonds.

- A similar problem flows from using the now archaic range of 16-18 points. Because a 1NT rebid now shows a huge strength range, it too renders it impractical to open weak balanced hands.

Experience has suggested to me that these are the ideal “dividing lines” between actions using a standard five-card major strong NT system. Set your own but be ready to move them as experience dictates. Bidding is an ever evolving science, old ideas are not necessarily good ideas.

- Open the bidding, overcall or make a take-out double with 10+ points. The possession of prime cards, two aces, an ace, a king and a queen or three kings elevates lesser hands to this level. The range of your pass, when you could have opened or overcalled, is thus limited to 0-9 points. (Devalue honours held in the suit opened when you are an intervener.)
- Do not make a one-bid or a simple overcall with less, it makes partner’s evaluation task impossible.
- Use the take-out double to show, only, balanced hands unsuited to a 1NT overcall with 10 points or more outside the suit opened or a three-suiter, short in that suit. This means that simple suit overcalls may be very strong (but not very weak). There is no defensive-bidding equivalent to a 2C opening bid (assuming you play Michaels or something similar). The simplicity following this restricted use of the take-out double is more than adequate compensation for any apparent downside.
- Get into the bidding with weaker hands with a good suit. A weak-two opening bid or jump overcall is limited to 9 points, through failure to make the stronger, cheaper, action. A five-card suit with one of the top three and two of the top five honours, qualifies. Relax suit quality requirements, but only slightly, holding six.
- Seven-card or longer suits are not weak-two material. Open one, if you can, otherwise three or four. With a weak hand and a bad suit, pass.
- A pre-emptive jump opening, response, or overcall denies the strength of a cheaper, stronger, bid. Considerations change following a pass from partner.
- Despite occasional successes by balancers holding weaker hands a similar philosophy applies to balancing after a first position opening. Partner’s task is made simple if the 10 point minimum for double or a suit bid and 15-17 points for a 1NT bid are retained.
- The upper limit for an opening one-bid is 19 points. Not only does opening one with more lead to missed games, it makes partnership judgement impossible. Partner will not even try to visualise that type of hand and there is no rebid to show it.

- To open 2NT on 19 is a completely futile exercise. You need 6 points from partner to be even a reasonable chance for game and if he has it he will bid.
- 2C will thus show all hands of 20+ points, except 20-22 points, balanced.
- 2NT as 20-22 points and 2C-2D; 2NT as 23+ points is recommended. The latter auction is game-forcing. The partnership must develop means of establishing combined point count. (Accurate bidding after a 3NT rebid is impossible.)
- While 15-17 points is the range for 1NT it should be appreciated that partner will always assume you to be in the middle of that range. It follows that a very good 14 points should be opened 1NT and a very good 17 points should not. The criteria for upgrading are controls. Five controls and a queen or a five-card suit headed by an ace or a king qualifies for upgrading 14 points to 15 points. Use similar considerations to upgrade 17 counts.
- Do not make a forward move opposite 1NT with any balanced 8 points, or most balanced 9 points.
- The classical 6 point requirement to respond to a suit bid should be modified too. Any 6 points qualifies, but so also does any hand containing an ace, an extra point should be added for honours in partner's suit. Devalue jacks unsupported by a ten or a higher honour.
- Responding to 1C, particularly if it might be made on a doubleton, is a separate problem. as is responding to 1D for better minor players. I profess no expertise in the latter area as I abandoned it years ago. In reply to 1C the problem range is 3-5 points, with fewer, pass, with more bid. Rescue holding two clubs, or fewer, and 3-5 points.
- Holding a flat 10-11 points, it is best to sign-off following any minimum rebid by opener. It is winning policy not to push for game with balanced hands. A raise of partner's second suit with four, or jump preference to the first with three, to complete your description, must be made, however, as partner's strength range is wide. Those actions are not forcing. A raise of partner's rebid minor, showing 6+cards, with a high honour, doubleton even, may be all partner needs to hear to bid 3NT.
- Inviting a limited hand to bid game has at least as much downside as upside. It is a far better policy to abandon "invitational" bids altogether and harness them more productively. They are all forcing so they can be used both to investigate a better game contract, and to make a slam try below game. Partner's game bid is always the sign-off action.
- Following a two over one response, it is absolutely vital that a suit rebid shows six or more cards. Accordingly a 2NT rebid must be made on the entire gamut of opening bid strengths, 10-19 points. The partnership must establish means of establishing the range. 3C as a range-ask is a simple solution. The jump to 3NT is best reserved for a hand with no fit and a very good long suit.

To round out this discussion of the very basics of bidding, it is important to consider the matter of which suit to bid. Just as knowing partner's point range makes the assessment of the bidding target straight forward, so also does knowing that the suit partner bids is his longest or equal longest. The policy, to bid any suit, denies five cards in a higher ranking one hugely simplifies bidding generally. For many players the practice is to show a four-card major at the one-level at any cost. Some show it regardless of strength, some with hands in the 6-9 point range only, some without game going values, up to 11 points. The suggestion here is never to bid a four-card major ahead of a five-card or longer unbid minor. This way, whenever partner shows a suit, then a lower ranking new suit, the first suit will never be shorter than the second. Good bidding involves trying to picture the hand opposite, to bid a short suit ahead of a longer one makes this impossible. Doing it this way makes it more likely that when partner responds in a major to a minor it is a five-card suit. With a five-card minor which can only be bid at the two-level and a four-card major biddable at the one-level, bid 1NT. To accommodate this possibility, with values in reserve, 15+ points, opener must show a higher ranking four-card major, forcing but not to game. This last suggestion is, I believe, an original one. It works extremely well for me. Comments from readers who care to put it to the test are welcome. When responding, as a passed hand, your new suit bid is not forcing, so avoid introducing a four-card suit holding big support for partner. Instead raise, with the values for game, partner can introduce a higher ranking four-card suit.