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This Week in Bridge

(224) Responding After a Penalty Double of a 1NT Opening

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Level: 2, 5, 6

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General

When we open the bidding with 1NT, showing 15-17 points, we have a well-constructed system that allows Responder to describe their hand. Responder can correct the part-score contract, invite game, or force to game, all while also searching for our side's best fit. But when an opponent makes a penalty double of partner's 1NT opening bid, we are less likely to be looking to invite or bid game. After this penalty double from our RHO we are usually looking to escape from a 1NT contract and attempt to find some safer place to play. This safe place will hopefully be our largest fit or a long suit in the weak hand (in Responder's hand). In order to find this place to play we need to look at how Responder's bidding options change after a penalty double.

"Systems On" with Redouble Runouts

Level 2

After the auction begins with a 1NT opening from partner and a penalty double by our RHO (usually showing about 15+ points), then we want to make use of every action available to see if we can land in our best or safest contract. In this situation, Responder will often have a weak hand and be worried about 1NT being doubled and going down many tricks, which is why it is important for us to have good tools for finding the best contract. The most common approach to this situation is to leave "Systems On" and add a special use for Responder's XX.

- | | | |
|-----|------|---|
| 1NT | X | — |
| • | 2♣ | Stayman |
| • | 2♦* | Transfer to ♥, showing 5+card ♥ |
| • | 2♥* | Transfer to ♠, showing 5+card ♠ |
| • | 2♠* | Transfer to ♣ (if you normally play 4-suited transfers), 6+card ♣ |
| • | 2NT* | Transfer to ♦ (if you normally play 4-suited transfers), 6+card ♦ |

Here we are looking to improve the contract and thus none of these bids, including Stayman, are forward-going or promise values. Stayman is used with hands that have both Majors (at least 4-4), often called *Drop Dead Stayman*, or with hands that are short in C and planning to pass whatever Opener rebids - 2♦, 2♥, or 2♠ (*Garbage Stayman*).

When we as Responder have a long suit (a 5-card Major or a 6-card minor) then we can transfer to our suit and get out of playing 1NT doubled. When we have a weak hand, usually fewer than 6 HCP, and we have a 5-card minor suit, we want to run from 1NT to our suit as well. But in this case, we do not want to transfer to our suit and be forced to play at the 3-level. Instead, we would like to find a way to play in 2♣ or 2♦ when we have a 5-card minor suit and a weak hand.

XX Runout

The idea is to use *redouble* (XX) as a way to get to play in either 2♣ or 2♦. A redouble by Responder after a penalty double of 1NT does not show values, (which is what a XX normally shows), but instead it asks Opener to bid 2♣ and Responder can either pass that or correct to 2♦ - depending on which 5-card minor suit Responder has. This is a *runout* sequence, attempting to improve the contract.

1NT	X	XX*	P
2♣*	P	—	

- Pass — With a 5-card ♣ suit Responder passes, letting Opener play in 2♣.
- 2♦ — With a 5-card ♦ suit Responder corrects to ♦, hoping the auction ends in 2♦.

One other thing to note is that we also have the option of passing. In standard bidding, pass says, "I'm just not sure what to do partner, you decide if we should run somewhere or stay in 1NT." Pass usually implies that Responder has a balanced hand with no 5-card suit.

DONT Runouts

Level 5

If we can adopt a more complicated approach to dealing with the opponent's penalty double of our 1NT opening, then there are many options for even more sophisticated runout or escape approaches.

One of the most common is called DONT runouts. This system is designed to allow Responder to show both 1-suited and 2-suited hands and keep the auction at a low level. To do so, we must turn Systems Off, playing new meanings for all of our bids by Responder in this situation. In this case, XX is used to show a 1-suited hand and bids show 2-suited hands, with Responder bidding the cheaper of their two suits.

1NT X —

- XX — A relay to 2♣ to allow Responder to show a 1-suited hand. Responder passes with ♣ or bids their suit on the second round of the bidding, showing a 5+card suit.
- 2♣ ♣ and a higher suit
- 2♦ ♦ and a higher suit (a Major)
- 2♥ ♥ and ♠
- 2♠ 1-suiter in ♠

These 2-suited bids of 2♣, 2♦, and 2♥ only show at least 4-4 distribution. This system allows Responder to show all possible 1-suited and 2-suited hands while remaining at the 2-level.

213 Runouts

Level 6

An even more sophisticated approach to runouts after a penalty double of partner's 1NT opening bid is *213 Runouts*. This system uses XX to show a 2-suited hand, pass to show a 1-suited hand, and bids to show 3-suited hands. 3-suited hands are commonly 4441 shape, but sometimes can be 4432 or even 4333.

1NT X —

- XX — Some 2-suited hand. Both players bid the cheapest suit they can stand to play in until a reasonable place to play is discovered.
- Pass 1-suited hand. 5+card suit. Opener is asked to bid 2♣ and Responder then passes or corrects to their long suit.
- 2♣ 3-suited hand that includes ♣.
- 2♦ ♦, ♥, and ♠
- 2♥ H and ♠ (usually with better ♠. With better ♥, Responder XX's to show a 2-suiter and then rebids 2♥.)

Even more sophisticated approaches use pass as a special bid that forces Opener to XX and then allows Responder to have even more options for how to describe their hand, even sometimes leaving the XX in when they have a good hand.

Conclusion

When an opponent makes a penalty double of partner's 1NT opening bid (not a conventional double like in DONT or Meckwell), then Responder needs to make certain that the partnership does not have a disastrous result (like playing in 1NTX

-3, for example). Responder tries to find a better partscore to play and this involves running from 1NT. Whatever system you and partner choose to use, the most important thing is for Responder to have set of tools to try to describe their hand, find a fit, and keep the auction at as low a level as possible. You and partner should figure out what system or tools you want to add to your agreements about this “dangerous” situation.