play bridge

*Well-known teacher and player **Jerry Helms** answers your bridge questions. Send your questions to jeryhelms@aol.com.*

Ask Jerry

Dear Jerry: *My question is simple. We play standard bridge with few conventions. When an opponent opens 1NT, how many points do I need to double for penalty?*

> *P. Gerrard*
> *Huston, TX*

Dear P.G.: The answer can be simple, but only if you focus on tricks instead of high-card points. The general idea is to *double 1NT if you expect to take at least seven tricks with no help from partner*.

Consider this hand. Although there are only 10 high-card points, it qualifies for a penalty double

♠ 7
♥ A K Q J 7 4 2
♦ 9 8 5
♣ 10 9

of 1NT using natural methods. I expect to take seven heart tricks because I have the advantage of making the opening lead. The only time I would not succeed is when one of the opponents has five or six hearts, and that's unlikely.

Now consider this hand. There are 16 high-card points and yet

♠ A Q 2
♥ A J 7
♦ Q 7 6 2
♣ K 8 2

I would not double 1NT with this hand. With no help from partner, I can count only two sure tricks, the ♠A and ♥A, and possibly tricks with the ♠Q, ♦Q, and ♣K...on a lucky day! That's still not enough to come to seven tricks. On this hand, even though there are 6 more high-card points than the first hand, there is no source of playing tricks.

But surely the conclusion isn't to double with a few points and to pass with a strong hand! Consider this hand. There are 15 high-card points and only 1 sure trick!

♠ Q J 10
♥ A 9
♦ K 4
♣ K Q J 10 9 5

However, I expect to lead the ♣K and promote five club tricks. There is also a trick coming with the ♥A and in spades after the ♠A-K are played. The ♦K could also be a winner. I would look forward to defending 1NT doubled.

The simple answer to your question is to ask a different question: "How many tricks do I need to double 1NT?" The answer: seven tricks with no help from partner. —*JH*