Ask Jerry

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Hi Jerry,

There is considerable debate at our club over the meaning of the following sequence:

West	*North*	*East*	*South*
1♦	Pass	1♥	1NT

Some insist this is a natural 15- to 17-point overcall, with both opponent's suits stopped, while others insist it is a "sandwich notrump," sort of a weak takeout, suggesting length in both unbid suits. I feel certain you have an opinion.

Henry

I appreciate your confidence in the likelihood of my having an opinion, and I will not let you down.

Proponents of the "sandwich notrump" would use 1NT on this auction to show at least nine cards in spades and clubs with more shape and offensive potential than high-card strength. With similar shape, a takeout double would be used to indicate both offensive and defensive values. A portion of the argument to support this treatment is that it is illogical to enter an ongoing auction with a natural notrump bid showing values in suits bid by the opponents. In my opinion, the "sandwich notrump" is an attempt to muddy waters for the opponents and occasionally steal partscores or set up profitable sacrifices. I have long advocated that bids which help us reach the best games and partscores are superior.

Despite opening 1NT with 15 to 17 points, I strongly believe that a direct 1NT overcall (or the one in the example) should show 15 to 18 points with stoppers or *a* stopper. A fact of current bridge life is the tendency for lighter and lighter openings and often equally light responses. If LHO is going to occasionally open with 11 or 12, and RHO is going to respond with 4 or 5, not only might the deal belong to us, it might belong to us at the level of game. In addition, when your partner is aware of both your values and shape, he is often prepared to compete for a partscore with any long suit despite the absence of substantial values.

To further my argument, when deciding how to define various sequences, it is usually wrong to have more than one way to describe the same type of hand.

West	*North*	*East*	*South*
1♦	Pass	1♥	Dbl

is takeout for spades and clubs.

West	*North*	*East*	*South*
1♦	Pass	1♥	2NT

is takeout for the unbid suits.

Often when I face the feared "sandwich notrump," it simply clues me in to the distribution of my RHO and sometimes makes the play a bit easier than it would have been had someone with little values and little to say simply opted to say nothing at all.

Lately, I have been surveying the methods of experienced partnerships who play at higher levels. The only "sandwich" I see with any regularity is one with two slices of bread. ❐