

When to open 1 NT with 14 HCP

There are many good reasons to upgrade 14 HCP to a 1 NT. (1) We limit our hands to a definite range making it easier for partner to know HOW HIGH the contract should be. (2) Having Stayman and Jacoby Transfers helps to describe our hand and know where the contract should be. (3) It is very likely the NT opener will declare the hand protected K2 or AQ2 or KQ2. (4) This makes it more difficult for the opponents to compete at the 2-level in a new suit.

There are 3 factors to consider when deciding whether to upgrade a hand. Not only points: • Suit Strength • Intermediate cards ("stuffing" - 10's and 9's) • Honor location

Suit Strength

- a) ♠ J107 ♥ A32 ♦ KQJ65 ♣ K4
Add 1 point for the ♦ length, because the suit has trick-taking power.
Open 1 NT as a 15 count, and a NT shape. The K♣ is protected if they lead it.
- b) ♠ AJ ♥ K109 ♦ AQ4 ♣ 87654
This is 14 HCP, but the 5-card suit is awful! Open this one 1 ♣.
- c) ♠ K7 ♥ QJ4 ♦ AQJ ♣ J7653
Another 14 HCP, but the ♣ suit is poor quality. Open 1 ♣.

Intermediate Cards -- Look at the "stuffing," 10's, 9's and sometimes 8's. Best when attached to honors. Add a half a point for every 10 attached to an honor.

- d) ♠ K109 ♥ A6 ♦ KJ2 ♣ K10963
The ♣ suit with the 10+9, along with the ♠ 10+9, make this hand worth more. Open this 1 NT.
- e) ♠ Q2 ♥ AJ4 ♦ Q8765 ♣ KQ2
The 5-card ♦ suit is poor, having no intermediate 10's or 9's. Open this 1 ♦.

Honor Location -- Honors in long suits have more trick-taking potential than honors in short suits. A hand with short suits containing Queens and Jacks downgrade in value.

- f) ♠ J106 ♥ AQ4 ♦ KJ843 ♣ QJ
14 HCP with poor intermediate cards. A reasonable 5-card ♦ suit, but discount the QJ♣.
- g) ♠ K3 ♥ K102 ♦ KJ965 ♣ A75
14 HCP, plus 1 length in lovely ♦ suit. The honors are fairly good in the long suit.
No wasted Q's and J's in short suits. More positives than negatives. Open 1 NT.

Applying Judgment -- (on borderline hands of minor suit openings)

- h) ♠ Q104 ♥ A2 ♦ K10765 ♣ KQ10
14 HCP, plus 1 length in the ♦ suit, plus "stuffing!" 1/2 a point for each 10 attached to an honor improves this hand to more than its 14 HCP. No wasted Q's and J's in short suits.
Open 1 NT.
- i) ♠ Q3 ♥ K86 ♦ KJ2 ♣ KQ654
14 HCP, but a wasted Q♠ doubleton - no intermediate cards, no extra positives. 1 ♣ seems best.
- j) ♠ J3 ♥ A107 ♦ AQ1092 ♣ K64
Bad J♠ doubleton, but the ♦ suit is strong, good intermediate cards, + 1 for length. Open 1 NT.

You were taught to add length points, but the location of HCP is better in the same suits. And intermediate cards (stuffing) are of greater importance than length points. **Please mark on your convention card 14+ - 17 HCP.**

The HCP scale (A=4,K=3,Q=2,J=1) is a convenient and useful measure of the value of a hand, particularly when balanced, but it should only be a starting point. It is not infallible so we need to keep our eyes open. Consider that the scale does not add any value for intermediate cards (7,8,9,10) which are often critical assets. It also does not take into account the location of our honors. Honors in long suits, especially when accompanied by additional honors and intermediates are much more valuable than short suit honors. Aces and kings are more valuable than queens and jacks, particularly when unaccompanied by supporting honors/intermediates. Most initial actions have a prescribed HCP range, some are quite narrow (1NT), some much wider (1C) but tricks, not HCP, ultimately win the day. Let's look at a few examples where we might consider "upgrading" into a 15-17 NT opener and the reasons behind the decisions. Some examples are clearer than others.

BOARD #2

Dealer: E Vul: None

<p>S Q 8 3 2 H J 4 3 2 D J 3 2 C K 2</p> <p>S K 7 H A 8 7 6 D Q 9 6 C J T 9 8</p> <p>S 6 5 4 H Q 5 D K 5 4 C A 6 5 4 3</p>	<p>S A J T 9 H K T 9 D A T 8 7 C Q 7</p>
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The East hand has 14 HCP, and looking no further than that would open 1D after which EW will likely land in 1NT. Keeping our eyes open however, we can see several positive factors. East has no card lower than a 7. That may not seem like much but consider that is EIGHT cards in the East hand that are not being accounted for by the HCP scale. Some of those are bound to take tricks. Is that not worth at least one point? East's spade holding is powerful, possibly worth three tricks even opposite three small cards. Two four card suits also add additional trick potential. The club holding is the one negative element about the hand (an unsupported short queen). While we should not open 1NT just because we have 14 HCP, this hand is clearly worth a boost. Compare the actual East hand to one with the same high cards but much less trick potential. AJ32 K32 A43 Q72. Removing the spots and the fourth diamond greatly weaken the hand. Pairing that hand with the West hand makes 3NT a long shot while on the given layout, 3NT has excellent chances, and would be routinely reached after a 1NT opening.

Here are some benefits to opening 1NT here:

- Conveys hand potential
The exceptional intermediates and honor structure worth more
- Narrow hand description.
Balanced, specific HCP range makes responder job easier
- Lead benefit
We would prefer the lead come to us
- Takes pressure off partner
The West hand is also worth a bit more than its HCP total. Knowing that opener is capable of "upgrading" lessens the need for responder to stretch to invite which could land EW in a poor game or even result in a minus score in 2NT.

Board 2

East Deals
N-S Vul

	♠ Q 8 3 2		
	♥ J 4 3 2		
	♦ J 3 2		
	♣ K 2		
♠ K 7		♠ A J 10 9	
♥ A 8 7 6		♥ K 10 9	
♦ Q 9 6		♦ A 10 8 7	
♣ J 10 9 8		♣ Q 7	
	♠ 6 5 4		
	♥ Q 5		
	♦ K 5 4		
	♣ A 6 5 4 3		
<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
		1 NT	Pass
2 ♣	Pass	2 ♠	Pass
3 NT	All pass		

Auction Commentary:

Adding 1/2 point for each 10 attached to an honor, this is worthy of a 1 NT opener. Stayman didn't find a fit, but the West hand does the math and goes to game. If you open 1 ♦, and responder bids 1 ♥, opener will say 1 ♠ and responder will rebid 1 NT. That's where this will play.

Opening Lead: 4 ♣ (4th best against NT)

Planning the Play:

Counting sure tricks, there are 2 ♠'s, and 2 ♥'s, plus 1 ♦ trick and 2 ♣'s. The ♠ suit has great quality, and you can count on 3 tricks there. The ♦s will bring in an extra trick if the K♦ is "one side" in the South, or the ♥s could bring in that 9th trick, with split honors, if they break either 4/2 or 3/3. Holding all the intermediate ♣ cards, 10-9-8 and an honor doubleton, will bring in extra tricks as well since they opened the suit for you. Lots of ways to get 9 tricks!

BOARD #5

Dealer: N Vul: None

S	K 5		
H	A J		
D	Q 8 7 6 5 4		
C	A 9 5		
S	J 8 2	S	A T 6 4 3
H	Q 5 4 3 2	H	T 8 6
D	K	D	J T
C	Q T 3 2	C	J 6 4
	S	Q 9 7	
	H	K 9 7	
	D	A 9 3 2	
	C	K 8 7	

Another 14 HCP hand, is the North hand worth an upgrade? Consider some of the positive factors from the previous hand. This North hand has a couple intermediates, though not nearly as many as with Board 2. The honor structure is fair with two aces and one king, but more than half our HCP are in our short suits – a negative. Having a long suit is generally a plus offensively but our suit is of poor quality, only one honor and sparse spots. Overall not enough to recommend an upgrade.

Reasons not to open 1 NT here:

- Our offensive potential will likely depend on how partner fits diamonds with us --- something that we are not going to learn about if we open 1 NT. Responder should love their diamond holding on this deal but with something like A643 K972 32 K87 would be less excited.
- 1 NT distorts our distribution. Stoppers in all unbid suits but concealing six card suits can backfire. If we constantly skew our shape/strength, responder will be hard-pressed to judge accurately, particularly if the opponents interfere.
- 1 NT overstates our potential and can land us overboard or in the wrong strain.

Reasons to open 1 NT:

- The major suit holdings do suggest declaring from the North side, opening 1D does not preclude that.
- There is a potential preemptive benefit to opening 1 NT, preventing LHO from overcalling one of a major.

Board 5
 North Deals
 N-S Vul

	♠ K 5		
	♥ A J		
	♦ Q 8 7 6 5 4		
	♣ A 9 5		
♠ J 8 2	<div style="display: inline-block; background-color: #008000; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center;"> N W E S </div>	♠ A 10 6 4 3	
♥ Q 5 4 3 2		♥ 10 8 6	
♦ K		♦ J 10	
♣ Q 10 3 2		♣ J 6 4	
	♠ Q 9 7		
	♥ K 9 7		
	♦ A 9 3 2		
	♣ K 8 7		
<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
	1 NT	Pass	3 NT
All pass			

Auction Commentary:

When your long suit has no suit quality and your values are in the outside doubletons, re-evaluate your hand and open 1 NT treating the hand as balanced 15 -17 HCP. Always say to yourself before opening any hand, "what's my rebid?" If you open 1 ♦, and partner bids 1 ♥ or 1 ♠ (or 1 NT), what is my rebid? And do I want to be dummy with the two honor doubletons? No. No!

Opening Lead: 4 ♠ (4th best against NT)

Planning the Play:

On the spade lead you hope to have 2 tricks if they lead from an honor. Since we expect 3rd hand high, when we see the J♠ appear in the West we expect the A♠ to be with East. So winning the first trick with the K♠ will allow you to later finesse up toward the Q♠.

Missing the K♦, your only line of play is to play the A♦ and up toward the Queen. But when the K♦ falls, you are rewarded with 6 ♦ tricks, 2 ♣ tricks, 2 ♠ tricks and 2 ♥ tricks -- you will make a small slam (which, with your combined 26 HCP, was certainly not biddable!).

- Trick 1, win the K♠.
- Tricks 2 - 7, run the ♦s, discarding a ♣ and a ♥ on the 2 extra ♦s.
- Trick 8, you are safe to play a ♠ towards the dummy. If they take their A♠, the rest are yours. If they do not, win the Q♠, and be sure to take the rest of your winners now!

BOARD #12

Dealer: W Vul: Both

S	A 4 3		
H	Q 5 3 2		
D	6 4 2		
C	K Q 4		
S	K 8	S	Q J T 7 6 5
H	A K T	H	9 8
D	A T 9 7	D	K Q 8
C	T 8 7 5	C	9 6
	S 9 2		
	H J 7 6 4		
	D J 5 3		
	C A J 3 2		

Another 14 point hand. Our HCP consist entirely of aces and kings and again we see those juicy intermediates. They don't necessarily come into play given the full deal, but West should be encouraged by them. The club suit is not overly exciting but that ten could come in handy as a stopper. Lots of positives and only one mild negative (the club suit). That suggests the hand is worth an upgrade. 4S should be reached routinely after a 1 NT opening, East would need to take an optimistic view otherwise. The hands fit well together, on a bad day, East might have three little clubs and there would be four top losers. Of course the opponents don't always find the killing lead either. As the saying goes, "it's a bidder's game".

Reasons to open 1 NT

- Better reflection of hand strength given the intermediates and high honors.
- Describes the relative strength and shape in one bid.
- Takes pressure off responder who might have a close decision whether to invite or not.

The results of any one deal should not dissuade or persuade you. The goal is to encourage advancing players to avoid being solely dependent on HCP and to learn when to make those adjustments.

Board 12
 West Deals
 N-S Vul

♠ K 8	♠ A 4 3	♠ Q J 10 7 6 5
♥ A K 10	♥ Q 5 3 2	♥ 9 8
♦ A 10 9 7	♦ 6 4 2	♦ K Q 8
♣ 10 8 7 5	♣ K Q 4	♣ 9 6

♠ 9 2	♠ 9 2
♥ J 7 6 4	♥ J 7 6 4
♦ J 5 3	♦ J 5 3
♣ A J 3 2	♣ A J 3 2

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
1 NT	Pass	2 ♥	Pass
2 ♠	Pass	4 ♠	All pass

Auction Commentary:

Opener should upgrade the hand to 15 HCP, counting 1/2 point each for the 2 tens attached to honors. (And leads that come toward the West hand will protect the doubleton K♠.) Consider what would happen if you opened 1♦ and responder bids 1NT. You would pass, and play there. Should responder bid 1♠ over 1♦, and you rebid 1NT, responder will then rebid 2♠, and that is where you will play. But with your 1NT opening bid, responder knows there is an 8-card major suit fit. So the transfer come first to set the strain, and the re-evaluation after the fit counts 2 points for the doubletons. (Or, if you prefer, count the extra length in the spades as 2 points. BUT DO NOT COUNT BOTH!) Responder adds what they know as your 15 points to their 10 points, and 25 points says to bid game.

Opening Lead: K♣ promises the card below the Q♣ (and denies holding the A♣)

Planning the Play:

When you're in a trump contract, the "master hand" is the one with the long trumps, and the one you need to use to evaluate how many losers you have. If that's the dummy, this is called a "Dummy Reversal," setting up dummy. The losers are the A♠, plus 2 small ♣ losers.

Remember, we do not always look at HCP. Some hands have great shape for games. And this one has just 22 HCP combined, but game is biddable!