

“What Does *Empirical Bridge Research* Say About Which Is the Best 1NT Point Range to Use?: ‘Kamikaze’ vs ‘Mini’ vs ‘Strong’ NT”

Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen¹

To return to the “Esther Bridge Lessons,” CLICK:

<https://esther-bridge.com/index.html>

One of the fundamental choices Partners must make is what **HCP range** they wish to agree that they are showing if a Partner makes the first non-PASSing bid and opens 1NT. Many bridge players today play a **15-17** HCP range for 1NT opening bids. But it was not always so, and there are *many* choices.

However, while different Partnerships may play 1NT as showing different point counts, virtually all players open 1NT as showing a very “tight” range of exactly **3** HCPs. Players bid a “narrow” point range because successful bridge players wish to communicate *precise* information about (1) HCPs and (2) card counts or Hand distribution shape. Good bids “limit” that the bidder’s Hand so *specifically* that the player holding a “limited” Hand will not bid again unless the Responder, who becomes “The Captain” once Partner “limits” his Hand, asks a question *requiring* a subsequent bid by the Partner who opened the Partnerships’ bidding.

At the extreme some Partners play the “Kamikaze 1NT”² convention invented by John Kierein which shows the 1NT Opener

© Copyright, Bruce Thompson, 2024. All rights reserved.

¹ As noted in an article in the Winter/Spring, 2024 article in The American Bridge Teachers’ Association (ABTA) Journal, https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/ABTA_1_24.pdf, Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen in fact is a hypothetical, and not a real person! So this article was really, really written by Bruce Thompson.

² On Jeff Tang’s “BridgeBum” website see:

https://www.bridgebum.com/kamikaze_1nt.php

Some players who play 1NT as showing **10-12** HCPs in turn us a “Strong 1C” opening as “artificial” and showing 16+ HCPs, and nothing else, and requiring Responder to bid 1D, at which time Opener provides more information.

holding a "balanced" Hand but only **10-12** HCPs. "Balanced" is usually defined as (1) possibly holding a 5-card Major, (2) no void, (3) no singleton, and (4) no more than 1 doubleton. Or some Partners play a "Mini **1NT**" or "Weak **1NT**" as showing **12-14** HCPs and a "balanced" Hand.³ A few bridge books have even been published in which authors have argued for using lower HCP ranges to open with a **1NT** bid.⁴

Various bridge players have divergent views on the optimal HCP ranges to use when opening **1NT**. For example, in the February, 2008 issue of the English Bridge journal in "The Debate" section of the issue Chris Jagger debated Tom Townsend on the cases for and against opening "Weak" **NT** versus "Strong" **NT**.⁵

The present "Esther Bridge Conventions Lesson" has two purposes. **First**, the lesson presents some of the reasons *why* Partners may wish to play a "weaker" **1NT** HCP range. **Second**, some *empirical research* regarding which HCP range for opening **1NT** may be optimal is presented.

Some readers may not realize that various forms of *empirical research* can and have been used to *empirically* determine what may be best bridge practices. Some bridge research studies involve computer simulation research that models various bridge situations and variations in bidding or play. For example, in her lesson, "(1) Does the 'Law of Total Tricks' ('LOTT') Really Work, and (2) Is the 'LOTT' Magic?",⁶ Esther summarizes a computer bridge simulation study by Matthew Ginsberg addressing exactly those questions. As another example, in "Esther Bridge 'Pop' Quiz" #67: "Responding to Partner's **1NT** Opening Bid When You Hold an *Extremely* Weak Hand, Including the

³ See Neil Timm's web posting, "Weak and Mini Notrump":

<https://www.bridgewebs.com/ocala/Weak%20Notrump.pdf>

⁴ See Eric V.D. Luft's (2006) How I Became a Life Master Playing the Weak No Trump, Andy Stark's (2014) The Weak NoTrump: How to Play It, How to Play Against It, and Jonathan Febland's (2017) The Genius of the Weak No Trump: The First Choice of GB, Ireland, UK & the English.

⁵ See:

http://www.clairebridge.com/textes/conventions_reserve/Debate_weeknotrump.pdf

⁶ Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons" go to: https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/LOTT_bad.pdf.

Importance of 'Playing the Room'”⁷ Esther summarizes a 2011 computer simulation by Ted Mueller on the importance of executing a Jacoby transfer to a Major when Partner opens 1NT and you as responder hold few or even 0 HCPs.

One *super important* **CARDINAL BRIDGE PRINCIPLE** *must* be followed *regardless* of what HCP range you and Partner ultimately select for opening 1NT: **Never lie to Partner that you meet your Partnership's requirement to open 1NT when your Hand indeed does not meet those requirements, and never lie to Partner by failing to open 1NT when your Hand indeed does meet the requirements to open 1NT!**⁸ Howard Schutzman in his “Hondo Bridge” website article, “Introduction to the Weak 1NT Opener—Part 1 of 3”, put the matter quite succinctly:

“...it is **imperative** that if you have a [H]and that meets the requirements for opening 1NT, you **must** open that hand 1NT. If you do not, you will be forced to **lie** on your subsequent bids. Also, ...your partner will make certain assumptions about your hand that are **incorrect.**” (emphases added)

Some Arguments for Using Lower HCP Ranges to Open 1NT

Some Reasons for Favoring Lower 1NT Opening HCP Ranges

Various arguments have been offered regarding optimal HCP requirements for opening 1NT. Howard Schutzman⁹ offers 3 of the several reasons *why* some bridge players prefer to use a lower HCP range when opening 1NT:

“--Opening the weak NT results in a much *more natural* system than using strong NT. With the strong NT,

⁷ Within the “Esther Bridge Lessons” go to: https://esther-bridge.com/quiz/q0067_q.pdf

⁸ Esther remembers with some discomfort an occasion on which Partner opened 1D when Partner's Hand met **all** the requirements for opening 1NT, thus *lying* to her by denying the HCPs that Partner actually held. And once Partner takes the bidding train off the bidding rails, the bidding train can *almost never* be righted later!

⁹ See: “Introduction to the Weak 1NT Opener—Part 1 of 3”:
www.bridgesights.com/hondobridge/WeakNTPart1.pdf

when your partner opens one of a minor, he can have a wide variety of hand types, from a weak balanced hand to an unbalanced hand with a long minor. **[But playing the weak NT, when you open one of a minor, you usually have at least 5 cards in that minor, because if you had the weak balanced hand with a 3 card minor, you would have opened [a 'weak'] 1NT.**

--Opening 1NT is somewhat *preemptive*. If the opponents want to compete, they have to bid at the 2 level.

--Your partner is much better equipped to compete, since he has a very good idea of the total partnership assets, whereas the opponents are in the dark" (*italics and bolding added*)

Greater Frequency of 1NT Openings with Lower HCP Ranges

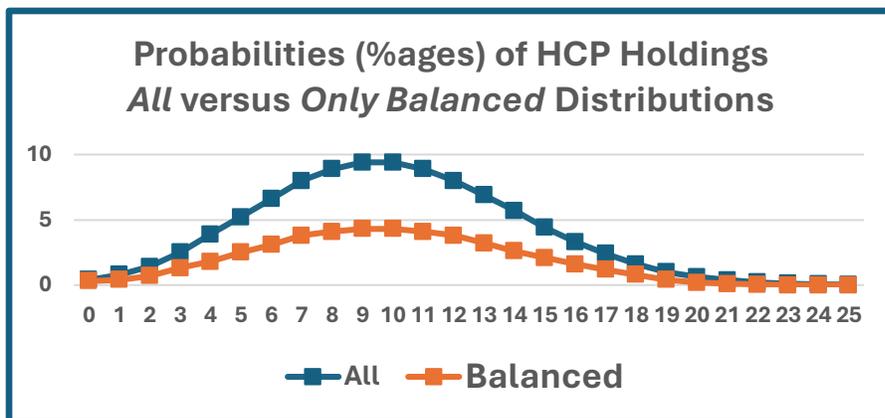
The primary reason why some bridge players prefer to require fewer HCPs to open 1NT is that your Partnership will open 1NT much *more frequently* if use lower HCP requirements. The chart below¹⁰ presents the probabilities of Hands holding various HCPs for (1) all possible bridge Hands and (2) only Hands that are "balanced". As you doubtless expected, among all bridge Hands the most likely HCP count for a bridge Hand holding 1/4th of the 52 randomly-dealt bridge cards is holding 1/4th of the 41 possible HCPs (0-41), or **~10 HCPs**, which occurs roughly **9.4%** of the time. When limited to the smaller universe of "balanced" bridge Hands **10 HCPs** is the most frequent Hand holding, and occurs instead in a little over **4%** of all possible bridge Hands.

¹⁰The probabilities for all possible Hands are drawn from the website posting, "Relevant Percentages for Bridge Players":

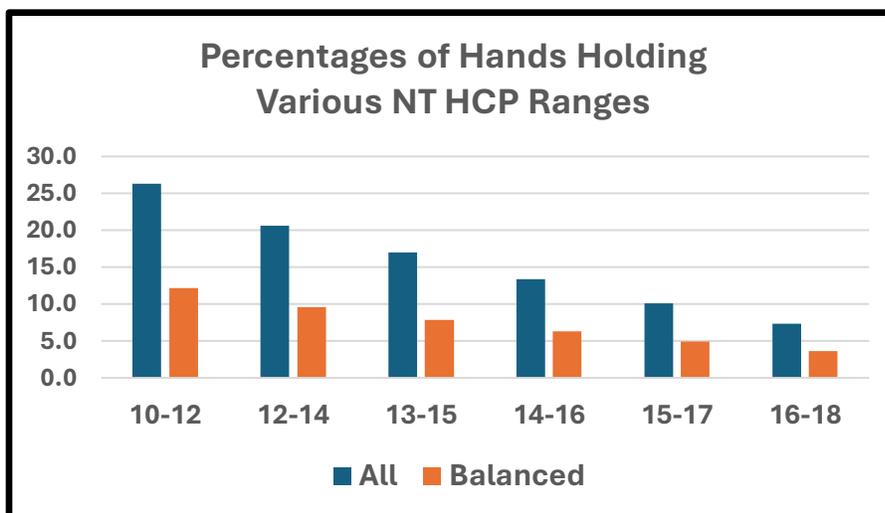
<https://www.bridgewebs.com/taverham/Probabilities.pdf>

and the probabilities for "balanced" Hands are drawn from Neil H. Timm's web article, "Weak and Mini Notrump":

<https://www.bridgewebs.com/ocala/Weak%20Notrump.pdf>



Obviously bridge players will *more frequently* meet the requirements to open 1NT when Partners are using *lower* 3-point ranges as the opening HCP requirement. The next chart quantifies the exact frequency of meeting 1NT opening bid HCP requirements when the HCP ranges are 10-12, 12-14, 13-15, 14-16, 15-17, or 16-18.



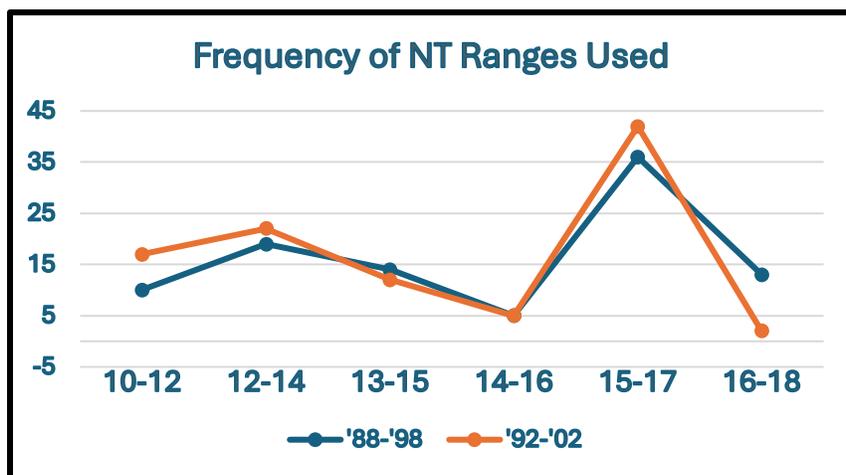
Empirical Research on *Optimal* Required HCP Counts for Opening 1NT

One way to conduct *empirical research* on best bridge practices is through computer simulation studies in which thousands or tens of thousands are dealt and optimally played by computers. Of course, the bridge results from computers playing Boards may not transfer perfectly to results for more fallible people playing the same Boards!

Another way to conduct *empirical bridge research* is to investigate results for Boards played by real people across a very large number of both Boards and players. Pietro Campanile reported just such a study in a web article, “Which No Trump Range Is Best?”¹¹ Pietro studied a population of 7,842 Boards involving all the Boards played in all 1988-1998 and 1992-2002 world and European championships Team competitions. How did he select a subset of Boards suitable for his study?

“What is suitable? Easy, the analysis has been carried out taking into account the [B]oards where a 1NT opening at one table was not replicated at the other, a clear indication of a systematic NY range difference and/or, very seldom, of bidding style.”

Bear in mind that these were the premier bridge experts from a large swath of the bridge world. One question Pietro asked was, “What is the experts’ most favorite **NT** range?” The chart below¹² presents the frequencies of HCP ranges used over the 2 decades studied. Bear in mind that the 2-decade time periods both have *in common* the years 1992-1998. Nevertheless, it appears the preferred **NT** ranges used were relatively stable over time, although the use of the 16-18 HCP range diminished somewhat over time and the use of the 10-12 HCP range increased somewhat over time.

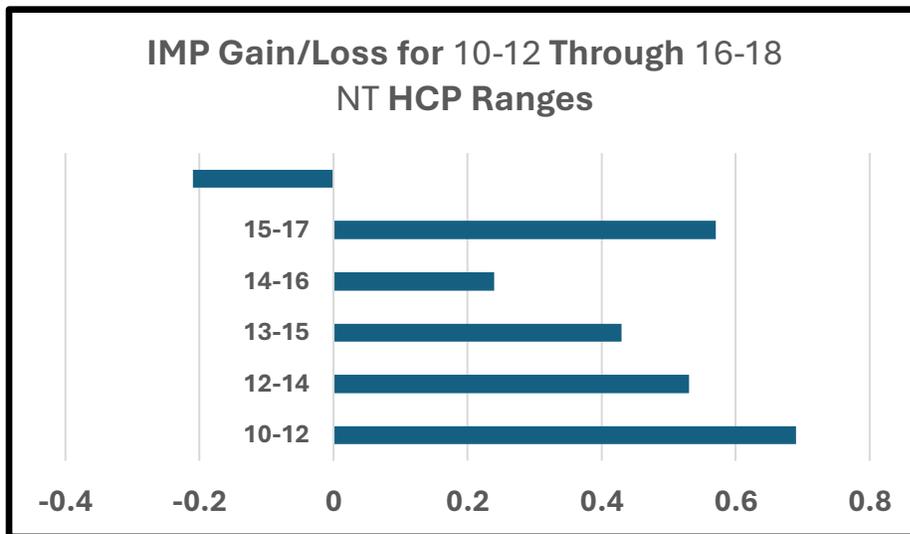


¹¹ Pietro Campanile’s article “Which No Trump Range Is Best?” is posted in the “Articles and Other Tidbits” Section of Migry Zur Campanile’s bridge website: https://www.migry.com/07_articles.htm

¹² The chart here was created by Esther using data summarized by Pietro in his article, and so was the remaining chart in the present “**Esther Bridge Conventions Lesson**”.

Pietro Campanile next turned his attention to comparing the bridge scores of players bidding the Boards in different ways by either opening or not opening **1NT**. Of course, because the Boards were played in Team events, rather than in duplicate Pair events, the competitions Pietro studied were scored in IMPs (International Match Points) rather than in Match Points.

Pietro Campanile found that players opening **1NT** versus some other bid averaged **+0.52** higher IMP scores. The chart below is based on his analyses and shows that *only* opening **1NT** for the 16-18 HCP range resulted in IMPs averaging lower, and this was by an average of **-0.21**. For *all* other HCP **1NT** opening ranges the benefits of opening **1NT** versus not doing so were uniformly positive.



Pietro Campanile also examined how players fared when they bid **1NT** with fewer HCPs than their agreed-upon HCP range for doing so. Campanile found that bidding **1NT** when you had insufficient HCPs had negative IMP score impacts for all HCP ranges except the 10-12 HCP **1NT** "kamikaze" opening range. He suggested that "Crime does not pay," and that "it pays to stick to the system agreements and not to open **1NT** with insufficient values."

Final Considerations

Some final comments are warranted about how playing less conventional HCP ranges for opening **1NT** affects *other bidding systems* that you use in conjunction with **1NT** opening bids. These systems (e.g., Jacoby transfers) are generally unaltered when you play less typical HCP ranges.

The exception is Stayman. Most Partners playing more typical HCP ranges to open **1NT** require the Responder bidding Stayman to hold (1) an "unbalanced" Hand and not a 4-3-3-3, 3-4-3-3, 3-3-4-3, or 3-3-3-4 distribution and (2) **8-10** HCPs. Of course, some Partners will only bid **2C** Stayman if they hold **9-10** HCPs if they hold only a single 4-card Major, because they worry that if they end up playing **2NT** or **3NT** that extra point could make a big difference. These players worry less about that extra point if they hold 2 4-card Majors because then the Partnership is much more likely to find a Major Suit fit when Responder holds both Majors.

Obviously, when you and Partner are playing atypical HCP ranges to open **1NT** you as Responder must accordingly adjust your HCP requirements to bid Stayman. For example, if you and Partner are playing "Kamikaze **1NT**" **10-12** HCPs, rather than **15-17** HCPs, you as Responder must hold **13-15** HCPs rather than **8-10** or **9-10** HCPs in order to bid **2C** Stayman.