

57. Bidding notrumps without a stopper in the opponents' suit

A "stopper" is a way of preventing the opponents from running through their suit. Say the opponents have bid hearts: ♥QJ5 is a stopper but ♥J106 is not. In any auction, a bid of notrumps shows a stopper in the opponents' suit.

Take the lowly INT bid after partner has opened 1♥ and right-hand opponent (RHO) has overcalled 1♠. To bid INT, you are showing similar strength (perhaps 7-10 points not 6-9) to what you'd be showing if RHO had passed. However, you must now have a heart stopper (and a genuine desire to play in notrumps — unlike 1♥-P-INT which is more of a "dustbin" bid to keep the bidding open).

Exercise: Partner opened 1♥, and RHO overcalled 1♠. What do you bid with these?

♠ 852	♠ 632	♠ J962
♥ 32	♥ 1042	♥ 42
♦ J76	♦ A532	♦ AJ752
♣ AQ863	♣ QJ2	♣ Q4

With the first, pass. You cannot bid INT for the lack of a spade stopper, and lack the strength for 2♣. Partner is still there. With the second, scrape up a raise to 2♥, although you'd probably have bid INT after 1♥-P. With the third, bid INT. Your spades constitute a stopper (90 per cent of the time — that's good enough) and don't worry about being slightly unbalanced.

What Happened

East led ♠J (partner's suit, top of two). Declarer tried ♠K (perhaps East held ♠J10 and he could block the suit) but West won ♠A, and cashed ♠Q1074. One down.

Dealer: South, Vulnerability: Neither

		♠ 852	
		♥ 32	
		♦ J76	
		♣ AQ863	
♠ AQ1074			♠ J6
♥ J87			♥ Q1054
♦ K94			♦ 10852
♣ 109			♣ J75
		♠ K93	
		♥ AK96	
		♦ AQ3	
		♣ K42	

What Happened

S	W	N	E
1♥	1♠	1NT(1)	Pass
3NT	end		

(1) Mistake — lacking a stopper in West's spades.

Contract: 3NT (by N), Opening Lead: ♠ J

What Should Have Happened

S	W	N	E
1♥	1♠	Pass(1)	Pass
1NT(2)	Pass	3NT(3)	end

(1) Yes — lacking a spade stopper or the values for a 2♣ bid.

(2) Not 15-16 (as after 1♥-P-1♠-P), rather 17-19 (you'd pass with 15-16, as partner could have nothing).

(3) Loving the trick source in clubs.

Contract: 3NT (by S), Opening Lead: ♠ 7

What Should Have Happened

With South declaring 3NT, ♠K is protected. There is nothing the defence can do. Declarer has eight top tricks (including five clubs, given the 3-2 split). On ♠7 lead, ♠K is promoted. On, say ♣10 lead, declarer can win ♣Q and lead to ♦Q, losing the finesse into the safe hand and promoting ♦J. Nine tricks. andrew.robson@thetimes.co.uk