Which No Trump range is best?

By Pietro Campanile

One of the endless arguments among the bridge playing community is centered on which no trump range is most effective. Do a 12-14 and a 10-12 range truly offset the occasional penalties incurred thanks to their pre-emptive value and the obstacles they pose to the opponents' constructive bidding sequences? Is 15-17 really a winner despite the times their supporters are stranded in 1NT when an easy two level part score in a major is the best contract?

Until now there was no authoritative source which would enable either side to buttress up their case with hard evidence. The recent publication, however, of a thorough analysis of all reported world and European championship boards played between 1992 and 2002 may well provide a very useful tool to settle the argument once and for all.

How was the study compiled? Simply by sifting through all the deals listed in the bridge press: thus it included the late stages of Olympics and World Championships with comparisons from all tables in play, from semifinals onwards, as well as some action from the round robin and the quarter finals; a sizeable amount of boards from European championships, though analyzed on a match by match basis and not across the field. All in all a total of 7842 boards and 20560 sequences, since quite a few boards are replicated up to eight times across the field (for instance when played in the semifinals of the Bermuda Bowl and Venice Cup), from which to select deals suitable for the study.
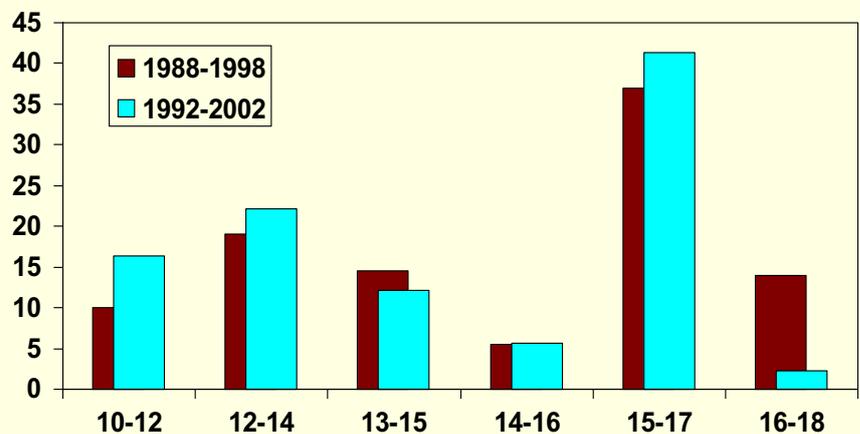
What is suitable? Easy, the analysis has been carried out taking into account the boards where a 1NT opening at one table was not replicated at the other, a clear indication of a systemic NT range difference and/or, very seldom, of bidding style. This usually produced many different outcomes: the same contract was reached but played from a different side or

a bidding sequence was interrupted by an overcall to help/damage the defensive prospect of defeating the contract, a partscore was played instead of a game and so on. The net IMP gain/loss on the boards in the sample is then assessed and computed according to the respective NT ranges of the pairs involved.

The first interesting question to be

Frequency of NT ranges

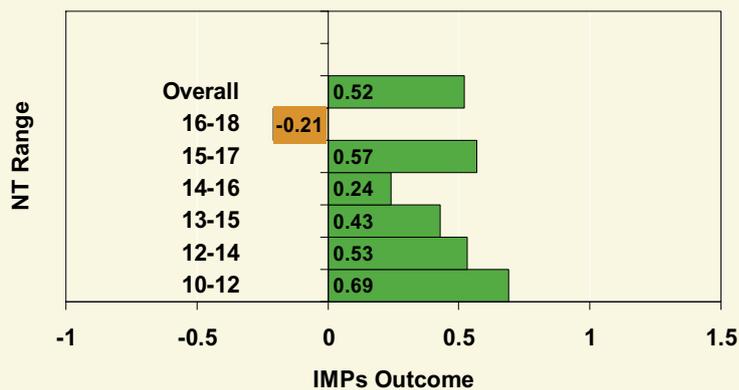answered is: "What is the experts' most favorite NT range?"

A very important question which will help us to understand what is perceived as the most effective NT range in top level bridge.

While keeping in mind the relative narrowness of the sample compared to the enormous amount of boards played every day across the world, it is still possible to elaborate on the relative popularity trends of each range by taking into account a comparison with an earlier study published in 1998 by Giuliano de Angelis. It is interesting to note the virtual disappearance from high level bridge of the once popular 16-18 range, probably because most top players have come to realize not just its lower frequency because of the higher point requirements but also the vastly insufficient trade-off between the less accurate 12-15 1NT rebid and the better defined 2NT rebid

(pinpointed to 19 HCP) that comes with it. The fastest rising star in the sample is the so-called mini-NT, 10-12, which has been enthusiastically adopted in the attempt to jam the opponents' auction with a high frequency opening, although generally used under specific conditions of seating and/or vulnerability. The typical Precision players' 13-15 range seems to be holding steady, while the frequency of the 14-16 openers can be mostly attributed to Meckstroth-Rodwell and their followers. Finally the 15-17 range has gained a large slice of players who previously played the 16-18 range.

We move now to a detailed look at the gain and loss in IMPs for each point range and here it is important to remember that while the large number of hands included in the sample should reduce the effect of random actions, both in bidding and play, there are sometimes boards where gains and losses are generated by causes which have nothing to do with the range of NT used. On the other hand it is impossible to analyze only boards where there is an immediate correlation between the range of the NT opening and the final result as that would mean entering into a detailed analysis of play records, an immense undertaking which is clearly beyond the scope of the study.
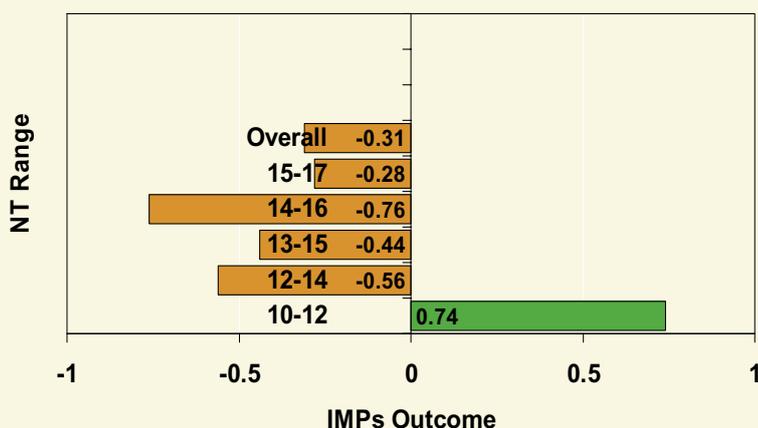
NT Ranges: The Comparison

IMP Gain/Loss analysis on suitable
championship boards from 1992 to 2002

As we can see the 1NT opening is generally a big winner with an average gain per board of around 0.5 IMP and while most ranges seem to perform adequately well, with the notable exception of 16-18, the greatest gains are achieved by the Mini NT, on a range of 10-12, and the two "classical" ranges of 15-17 and 12-14.

So it looks like we should all aim to open 1NT as often as we can, shouldn't we? Well, not really: the last graph of this article shows what happens when, stealing a point here and there, we open an out of range NT:

Finally, which conclusions can we draw? The 1NT opening is a powerful weapon which works best in the classical ranges of 12-14 and 15-17 and can be made even sharper if combined with a non vulnerable 10-12 opening range.

However its effectiveness is nullified when the 1NT opening is abused. Once again it pays to stick to the system agreements and not to open 1NT with insufficient values.

Crime does not pay

IMP Gain/Loss Analysis when opening 1NT
with incorrect values

As we can see, opening 1NT with insufficient values is a surprising flop with an expected loss of -0.3 IMPs per board, the only exception being the successful outcome of light openings of the 10-12 NTers.

Many thanks to Andrew Dyson, Francois Colin and Giuliano de Angelis for the data used in the article.

The Shaufel Cup

Yigal Schneider now was confronted with a difficult choice; let us follow his own reasoning:

"*I started thinking hard at this point, since declarer's distribution was clear by now and I could see that throwing a diamond would not have helped. My first impulse was to ruff the ♣A with the ♥9 but as I thought a bit longer I realized that declarer would overruff my ♥9 and play ♦A and ruff a diamond. Then he would run the ♠K throwing a diamond from hand and no matter what I did he would be able to ruff another diamond, take the ♠Q and make 10 tricks. Maybe throwing a spade might work? No, declarer could now make the hand on a simple crossruff line.*

Finally I realized that the only way to get the contract to fail was to ruff the ♣A with the ♥A in order to lead another heart!"

Yigal was absolutely right, faced with such an unexpected development Grinberg had to resign himself to make only 9 tricks and note a minus score on his column in a hand where he had had the chance to mark a sizeable plus in 3♠ doubled.

♠♥♦♣