



Buchanan Defense to 1 No Trump

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In 1980 I was at that stage in my bridge development when I was avidly devouring bridge books and magazines by the dozen in the quest for answers to all my problems. In January of that year an article appeared in *Bridge Magazine* by one David F. Buchanan titled *A new defence to the Weak No Trump*. I had tried some of the common no-trump defences - Sharples, Cansino, ASPRO and the like, but all seemed to have flaws. Did Mr Buchanan have an answer? The scheme was based on a range of two suited (4-4 or better) overcalls holding 10-14 high card points. A suit bid at the 2-level, showed that suit plus another higher ranked suit, as follows:

2 ♣: Clubs plus any other suit(s)

2 ♦: Diamonds and a Major

2 ♥: Both Majors

2 ♠: Natural 6+card suit; (10-14)

2 NT: Single suited hand

Example:

Holding:

♠ KQ87

♥ 763

♦ AQ74

♣ 42

you would overcall 1NT with 2♦ (diamonds + a major). Not for the faint hearted, but based on some sound theory as I will explain later. Bids at the 3-level were similar with more extreme distribution (5-5 or longer). 2NT covered the single suited hands. Experience soon made me modify the system such that a distribution of 5-4 or longer was a requirement (4-4s and 4-4-4-1s could be used judiciously when non-vulnerable if in the upper range). I also merged the two and

three bids so 5-5 and longer suited distributions were now bid at the two level, three bids being natural single suiters. Thus:

- ♠ 32
- ♥ AJ765
- ♦ 83
- ♣ KQ96

became a respectable non-vulnerable overcall of two clubs (showing clubs + another suit having 4-5, 5-4 or better distribution).

When vulnerable:

- ♠ KJ1064
- ♥ QJ862
- ♦ A2
- ♣ 9

would be my idea of the minimum requirement for a bid of 2H (both majors). So that is the overcall, what about responses?

W	N	E	S
	1 NT	2 ♣	Pass
?			

With shortage in the anchor suit, bid the next suit up (relay). Opener then passes if that is his second suit, or bids his second suit thus:

- | | |
|----------|---------|
| ♠ KJ1064 | ♠ 32 |
| ♥ QJ862 | ♥ KJ854 |
| ♦ A2 | ♦ 54 |
| ♣ 9 | ♣ AQ86 |

West knows that there is a better fit than 2♣. So West relays with 2♦ and East converts to 2♥ and the pairing find their 8-card fit. What happens, I hear you ask, when you are unsure? For example, same auction but West holds say: ♠ Q532 ♥ 102 ♦ K864 ♣ 752. On this hand it will be very probable that East's other suit is hearts, so pass. Is it so bad that you are only certain of at least a 7-card fit at the 2-level. Perhaps the opposition has missed a very good contract if they leave you there. But if you hold ♠ Q532 ♥ Q10 ♦ K8642 ♣ 75 you might as well bid 2♦. You will be surprised how often you find a playable fit.

The golden rule to remember if you have not found an immediate fit is not to miss out the relay bid **unless** you have a long and self-supporting suit of your own. For example:

W	N	E	S
	1 NT	2 ♦ ¹	Pass

2 ♠

¹ Diamonds and a Major

West would typically hold:

♠ KQJ987

♥ 3

♦ 87

♣ Q1042

But if West held:

♠ Q86543

♥ Q42

♦ 4

♣ J98

clearly 2 ♥ is best.

Obviously not all hands will be as clear cut as this one, but if in doubt, bid the relay. Why should your suit be better than partner's? That is the basic system. As you gain experience, you can expand your horizons. Thus I play a raise of the anchor suit:

W	N	E	S
	1 NT	2 ♦	Pass

3 ♦

as **forcing**, requesting partner to bid his unknown suit. You are naturally looking for game with this bid. For example, ♠ KJ96 ♥ AJ106 ♦ J9 ♣ A32 would qualify for 3♦ in the above auction, raising partner's major to game when he identifies it. In a contested auction it is better to play the raises as merely competitive. I play a 2NT response to partner's Buchanan overcall as constructive but not forcing, say a balanced 12-14 high card points hand.

So does the system work? Having played it for 13 years, I can honestly say, YES. I have lost count of the number of tops gained, at pairs, using Buchanan. Often you find that 1NT will make with an overtrick when you can make a 2-level contract. Even if you go down, one or two down

(non-vulnerable) will produce a good score. It is generally right to compete against a weak no-trump opener, and Buchanan allows you to compete on a very high proportion of hands. What other system would allow you to play in 2♣ over 1NT with:

♠ 9	♠ K1054
♥ A103	♥ Q73
♦ KJ842	♦ Q6
♣ QJ103	♣ 8754

The main disadvantage of Buchanan is its imprecision. When partner overcalls 2♥, showing both majors, you don't know whether he is 4-4, 4-5, 5-4 or 5-5. However, playing in the occasional second best fit is more than compensated by the ability to compete so often. Another bonus is the uncertainty created for the 1NT opener's partner by not usually knowing the other suit held by the overcaller. This makes it difficult to know whether or not to compete, double or raise no-trumps.

Why is Buchanan such a good system? The theoretical justification that I referred to earlier is the statistical certainty that you and partner have that vital 8-card fit on 85% of all deals. Buchanan allows you to locate that fit more often than any other defence to a weak no trump that I am aware of.

I was highly amused to read in a recent book by Larry Cohen (To Bid or Not to Bid) his recommended defence to a weak or strong no-trump. Called DONT (Disturb Opener's No Trump), the system is identical to Buchanan! No doubt this system will gain popularity. Like Stayman, a Brit got there 10 years earlier (Jack Marx had invented Stayman; but it was Stayman, an American, who popularised it).

So thank you Mr Buchanan. I know that you got there first!

Most defences to 1NT are organised around major suits. How many allow you to play in the minors? If you take away the opponent's tool of finding a major fit, you are on your way to obtaining good match point scores. And if the opponents have a major part score, your side have probably got a minor suit part score! Get in there first, find your minor fit and stop the opponents having an easy ride to their major fit or playing in a good 1NT contract.