

The Dull Club System

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Contents

1.	History of the system.....	1
2.	General description	2
3.	The 1 Club opening	3
4.	The 2 Club opening	7
5.	The 1NT opening	7
6.	The 2NT opening	9
7.	Strong hand in the 2D opening (multi).....	10
8.	Consequences of the 1D opening for the system	11
9.	Problematic hands	11

1. History of the system

In June 1989 a member of our club, APIH was to be married. For this happy occasion and because the inventor of the system would be playing with the groom in the second league of the Dutch national competition, he devised a new system, to be presented in a special edition of our club magazine.

The term ‘a dull hand’ was frequently used by the groom when commenting on a game of bridge or an after-bridge fun game of ‘bonken’. Of course, these hands would turn out to be the most spectacular ones of the evening, but that is of no concern here.

From that moment on, several members of our club played the system at all levels and at all sort of occasions. An introduction of 15 minutes sufficed for a pair of our club to attain fifth place (out of 200) in a two-day pairs event in Zwolle (The Netherlands). As more and more people played the system it became important to define the system more narrowly to prevent the proliferation of variations which deviate too much from the original system. Players and opponents need to know what is meant by bidders playing the ‘Dull Club’.

In this description the newest and most complete version is given. Users of the ‘Dull Club’ well as newcomers, are hereby invited to send in any comments on or improvements to the system.

This English version was made as part of a project to present our club on the Web.

General description

At the heart of the system is the 1 Club opening. It denotes a dull hand. The definition of a dull hand is an opening with 12 to 18 HCP and a no-trump distribution (i.e. 4333, 4432 or a 5332 with a five-card minor). As these hands are so common, it is practical to keep as much bidding space as possible. While the natural 1 Club opening is taken up, the 1 NT opening is freed. The logical consequence is to open all hands with clubs by 1NT (unbalanced hands only, of course, as balanced hands are opened with 1 Club). The same principle applies to opening bids at the Two level. The 2 Club opening denotes a no-trump hand in the 19 to 22 HCP range and the 2 NT bid is freed. A clubs-diamonds two-suiter fills in this bid.

The aim of all this is to make the bidding of balanced hands more interesting. These hands crop up very often and a 1 NT opening bid as in ACOL eats up a lot of bidding space. A second advantage of the system is that you know what you are up to after a 1 Club opening. In a natural system a 1 Club opening can mean anything from a small [?] doubleton to AKQJxxx in clubs. This doesn't make the subsequent bidding easier. The 'Dull Club' system wasn't devised to harass the opponents. Instead, it offers the opponents more room to enter the bidding!

The shift in meaning of the club and no-trump opening bids leaves other opening bids unaffected, in principle. Only the 1 Diamond opening changes a little because it becomes unbalanced by definition (a big advantage over natural systems!). The 1 Heart and 1 Spade opening bids promise five-card suits or longer. You do have to give up the strong opening bid of 2 Clubs. All strong hands are opened with 2 Diamonds.

The description now branches into three parts:

- the Club opening bids
- the No-Trump opening bids
- strong hands

The consequences of the 1 Diamond opening are explained separately.

The system doesn't prescribe 1 Heart, 1 Spade, 2 Hearts or 2 Spades openings. Bidding progresses as in any natural system. The only provision is that the 1 Heart opening has to be played as a five-card (a four-card doesn't make sense). The 2 Hearts and 2 Spades opening bids can be filled in at will by the partnership.

2. The 1 Club opening

The requirements for a 1 Club opening are:

12 – 18 HCP,

A no-trump pattern (4333, 4432, 5332 with a five-card minor, or possibly a 5422 with good doubletons).

Many specific treatments are possible after the 1 Club opening.

The responding hand has the following options:

- a. Escaping to a low-level contract (Weakness take-out)
- b. Light invitation based on a long suit
- c. Invitation for 3 NT/ final contract of 3 NT
- d. Showing a major (constructive)
- e. Special calls
- f. Showing a minor (constructive with no interest in a major)

Further subjects:

- g. Treatments after contested auctions
- h. 3 Spades as a transfer to 3NT.

a. Escaping to a low-level contract.

After a 1 Club opening, all weak hands (0 – 6 HCP) are handled by a conventional 1 Spade bid. The 1 Club opener ALWAYS responds by bidding 1NT, after which the 1 Spade bidder makes the final bid. These can be: pass, 2 Diamonds, 2 Hearts or 2 Spades. Of course, with a weak hand with clubs you will pass after a 1 Club opening. A 2 Club bid in this sequence can (and will!) be utilized for other hands.

b. Light invitation based on a long suit.

A weak hand on which it might just be game (fit in a long suit) is also bid by 1 Spade. After the obligatory 1NT answer one doesn't settle on the two-level, but makes a (very) light invitation on the three-level, based on a long suit.

With e.g. xx,xx,AJxxxx,xx after 1C – 1S – 1NT you bid 3D. A slightly stronger invitation based on a long suit is made directly on the three-level. With, for example, xx,xx,AQJxxxx,xx you bid 3D in response to a 1C opening.

This principle of an obligatory response of 1NT to 1S gives us even more possibilities. It gives the responder 25 different bids up to and including the three-level, after a 1 Club opening:

Pass, 1D, 1H = 3

1NT up and to including 3 NT = 11

after 1S – 1NT: pass, 2C up and to including 3NT = 11

Total: 25.

All 25 possibilities are utilized in the Dull Club system.

c. Response to 1C: invitation for 3NT / final contract of 3NT

There are two exceptions to the rule that 1S following 1C is only bid with a weak hand. A 3NT contract can be reached in two ways: 1C – 3NT or 1C – 1S – 1NT – 3NT. So you can choose which hand plays the contract! The same applies for the 2NT invitation: 1C – 2NT or

d. Response to 1C: showing a major (constructive)

In most cases the responding hand will be interested in one or both majors after a 1 Club opening. We use 1D and 1H as transfer bids for these hands. Through these bids one can get quite an accurate picture of the distribution and strength of the 1 Club hand.

1D is a 4+card in Hearts showing interest in game at the least (otherwise one would have escaped by means of a 1S bid). Similarly, 1H is a 4+ card in Spades showing interest in game. In this description we only pay attention to the 1C – 1D sequence. After 1C – 1H the method is the same.

The bidding agreements after 1C – 1D are based on only a few principles (therefore the agreements can easily be remembered).

These principles are:

- The 1C opener describes his hand, the 1D responder relays,
- The 1C hand describes his strength, in any of the following ranges: minimum (12 - 14), medium (14⁺ - 16⁻) or a maximum (16⁺ - 18),
- The 1C opener indicates whether there is trump support.

These principles lead to the following scheme:

- 1H no support (in hearts), minimum.
- 1S no support, medium or maximum, 4 spades.
- 1NT no support, medium, < 4 spades.
- 2C no support, maximum, 4 or 5 clubs.
- 2D no support, maximum, 5 diamonds.
- 2H support, minimum (compare ACOL 1C – 1H – 2H).
- 2S see below.
- 2NT no support, maximum, any 4333.

These are all the possibilities without trump support.

Trump support with a medium or maximum hand is shown through a jump in a new suit. This principle (a jump in a new suit by the 1C opener showing trump support and a maximum) is also used after 1C – 2C and 1C – 2D.

- 2S trump support, medium, values in spades (fair 4-card).
- 3C trump support, medium, values in clubs (fair 4-card).
- 3D trump support, medium, values in diamonds (fair 4-card).
- 3H trump support, medium, no good side suit.

A double jump follows the same lines but shows a maximum:

- 3S trump support, maximum, values in spades (fair 4-card).
- 4C trump support, maximum, values in clubs (fair 4-card).
- 4D trump support, maximum, values in diamonds (fair 4-card).
- 4H trump support, maximum, no good side suit.

Summarizing:

Responses after 1C – 1D:	No trump support	Trump support
Minimum (12 - 14 ⁻)	1H	2H
Medium (14 ⁺ -16 ⁻)	1S, 1NT	single jump
Maximum (16 ⁺ -18)	1S, 2C, 2D, 2NT	double jump

After a 1H, 1S or 1NT bid, 2C is a relay, inquiring after three-card trump support. (This 2C bid can be compared to the Crowhurst convention in ACOL.)

Responses after 1C – 1D – 1H – 2C (1C – 1D – 1S – 2C and 1C – 1D – 1NT – 2C in the same way):

- 2D 2 hearts, minimum (within the range indicated above).
- 2H 2 hearts, minimum.
- 2S 2 hearts, maximum.
- 2NT 4333, maximum.

In subsequent bidding the standard principle applies again: a jump in a new suit shows trump support and a maximum:

- 3C trump support (3-card), maximum, values in clubs (fair 4-card).
- 3D trump support (3-card), maximum, values in diamonds (fair 4-card).
- 3H trump support (3-card), maximum, no values for a 3C or 3D bid.

These are all the conventional bids. Every other bid by the 1D responder is natural, in principle. However, the next higher bid (e.g. 1C – 1D – 2C – 2D) must be alerted since it asks for more information.

(Of course this doesn't apply for 1S in the bidding sequence 1C – 1D – 1H - 1S, because in this case we use the 2C bid for asking for more information).

All these agreements have their consequences; see the following examples:

- After 1C – 1D – 1H, 2H is a pre-emptive raise. Any interest in game is shown through the 2C asking bid.

g. Treatments after a contested auction

After 1C – (Double), it is practical to agree playing the same system played after 1C – (pass). After intervention all conventions are dropped, whatever the position, and bidding continues naturally. Thenceforward, jumps are based on distribution, not strength.

With e.g. QJxxx,xx,Axxx,xx one can conveniently bid 2S after 1C – (1H). The fact that the opener minimally has a doubleton in each suit is a distinct advantage compared to ACOL. After interventions on the 2-level or higher, the Dull Club system employs negative doubles.

h. 3S as a transfer to 3NT

In EVERY undisturbed auction following 1C, a 3S bid by the responding hand is a transfer to 3NT. This can be convenient with e.g. Axxx,Axx,AKx,xxx. After 1C – 1H – 1S you want 3NT to be played by the opposite hand. In this system you can bid 3S.

A 3S bid can also be the introduction of a special form of key card asking: after the 3NT response by the 1C opener, every bid on the 4-level is a key card asking bid, with the king in the suit bid counting as an ace. Responses: 0/3, 1/4, 2. The following bid is an asking bid for kings, with the queen of the relevant suit counting as a king (etc).

Although it is fun rather than efficient, it is nice to be able to bid 1C – 1H – 1S – 3S – 3NT – 4K with e.g. AKQxxxx,AK,x,Qxx.

3. The 2 Club opening

The 2C opening is the same as the 1C opening, but in a different range of strength: 19-22 HCP instead of 12-18. To keep it simple: all principles and treatments applying after 1C apply also after 2C. The only difference is that the minimum-medium-maximum distinction is replaced by a minimum (19-20) and maximum (21-22) distinction.

A nice example from the ‘Kuipers tournament 1992’:

With AQJ,AKxx,AKxx,xx against 98xx,xx,x,KJT9xx the bidding went:
2C – 3S – 4S for a 95% score.

4. The 1NT opening

Opening 1NT shows an unbalanced hand with clubs. The strength is from 10 HCP upwards, unlimited! The 1NT opening is 100% forcing.

First, two remarks:

Unbalanced with clubs means: 5+ clubs or a 4414 (singleton D). This distribution forms a specific problem for the Dull Club system, because it doesn't fit in anywhere. We even tried playing the 2NT opening as denoting exactly a 4414 for a while but, of course, it never came up. Depending on the placement of the points, one could try opening a 4414 with 1C or 1H.

Experience has taught us that bidding can be tricky after a 1NT opening, because of the limited bidding space (as against this, the pre-emptive nature of the opening is an advantage). To relieve the burden on the 1NT opening, two-suited hands with clubs as the main suit and diamonds as the second suit are shown by way of the 2NT opening.

The following classification can be made for responses to a 1NT opening:

- a. No interest.
- b. Distribution inquiry (for the majors).
- c. Showing a major.
- d. Weak with club support.
- e. Strong with club support.
- f. Weak with an own suit.

a. *2C shows a weak hand* (or a jump in a suit of his own, see section f.)

We have made the agreement that the 1NT opener will act after 1 NT – 2C if he or she has 16 HCP or more. (The bidding is natural from this point onwards). In this way we can deduce the maximum strength on which you can bid 2C after 1NT, without the risk of missing game. This is about 8 HCP. But the problem is that you can do no better than bid 2C after 1NT with e.g. Qxxxx, Qxxxx, xxx, -, hoping that something will happen. In practice you will often get away with it. An example from the Twente tournament: 1NT – (pass) – 2C – (2D), end of auction, after which dummy displayed AKJxxxx of clubs ...

As mentioned before, the strength of the 1NT opening is unlimited (so, evidently, 1NT is 100% forcing). It can be a (semi) game-forcing hand. How do you show this type of hand after 1NT – 2C? We have agreed upon the following treatments:

- 2D, 2H, 2S show four-cards and are not forcing (albeit you will seldom pass).
- 2NT shows a hand looking like a balanced hand with 16-20 HCP, e.g. 6322 (a 'real' balanced hand has already been denied by the 1NT opening!).
- 3C shows extra strength with good clubs (non-forcing).
- Jumps are real and forcing to game.

b. *Distribution inquiry with 2D*

After 2D: 2H and 2S show four-cards in hearts or spades respectively, with 11-15 HCP. 2NT shows extra values (16+), but gives no further information. After the sequence 1NT – 2D – 2NT you can make a second relay with 3C. A direct 3C means weak with clubs. A jump in a new suit is strong and, in particular, promises a good six-card (or even longer) in clubs. The suit bid is a good 3-card. Further bidding proceeds as naturally as possible.

c. *2H and 2S are forcing, 5+ card.* No further agreements.

d. *1NT – 2NT is strong and shows a fit in clubs.* No further agreements.

e. *1NT – 3C is weak with a club fit (barrage).* No further agreements.

f. 1NT – 3D/3H/3S shows a good own suit, invitational.

This boils down to a hand with which you would pre-empt on the three-level in first position.

This agreement was incorporated in the system to cope with hands like: xx,JTx,AQxxxxx,x. Without the foregoing agreement, and with A,AKxx,JTx,Axxxx in the opposite hand, the bidding goes:

1NT – 2C (no fun, but without the weak 3D treatment there is no alternative)
2H – 3D (still an underbid)
4D – 4NT (the first opportunity to show extra values)
6D – pass

Bidding develops much simpler playing the weak jump agreement:

1NT – 3D
6D – pass

5. The 2NT opening

This opening shows exactly four diamonds and five or more clubs, 11-15 HCP. It was introduced into the system later. Its purpose is to lessen the burden on the 1NT opening.

With the same distribution and 16 HCP or over, you open 1NT. By bidding diamonds later it becomes clear immediately that the strength is 16+.

Examples:

1NT – 2C – 2D or
1NT – 2D – 2NT(!) – 3C – 3D

After a 2NT opening bidding continues naturally (of course 3C and 3D are final bids). There is not much bidding space, of course, and so you can't inquire whether the 2NT opener has a maximum or minimum without committing yourself to game level. The advantage of the bid is that it is pre-emptive.

6. Strong hands in the 2D opening (multi)

Because the 2C opening is reserved for balanced hands, there is little room left for strong (semi-game forcing and game forcing) hands in the Dull Club system. This could be an advantage, because the ratio between a Dull Club 2C opening bid and a (semi) game-force 2C is estimated as being at least 5:1. In this version of the Dull Club system all (semi) game-forcing hand are opened with a (multi) 2D bid. Exceptions are one-suiters and two-suiters with clubs as the main suit, because those hands are opened with 1NT.

A 2D opening shows either:

- 2H a weak Two in hearts.
- 2S a weak Two in spades.
- 2NT a 23-25 HCP balanced hand.
- 3C a game-force one-suiter (diamonds, hearts or spades).
- 3D a game-force two-suiter with diamonds.
- 3H a game-force two-suiter with hearts.
- 3S a game-force two-suiter with spades.
- 3NT 26-28 HCP balanced hands.
- 4C a game-force three-suiter with short clubs.
- 4D a game-force three-suiter with short diamonds.
- 4H a game-force three-suiter with short hearts.
- 4S a game-force three-suiter with short spades.

The following agreements exist concerning subsequent bidding:

2NT is a relay

After 2D – 2NT:

- 3C maximum weak two in hearts.
- 3D maximum weak two in spades.
- 3H minimum weak two in hearts.
- 3S minimum weak two in spades.

After 2D – 2H – 2NT:

Puppet-Stayman and transfers (also known as Niemeyer in the Netherlands)

After 2D – 2H – 3C:

3D is a relay. Responses:

- 3H game force in hearts
- 3S game force in spades
- 3NT game force in diamonds
- 4C game force in clubs

After 2D – 2H - 4C/4D/4H/4S:

4NT control-asking (A or void = 2, K or singleton = 1), responses:

- 5C 7 controls or less.
- 5D 8 controls.
- 5H 9 controls.
- 5S 10 controls.
- 5NT 11 controls (this is the maximum).

7. Consequences of the 1D opening for the system

In the Dull Club system, the 1D opening bid is unbalanced by definition. Therefore, the opening bid is less common than in ACOL, but in the Dull Club system the 1D opening bid conveys more information! The fact that the hand of the 1D opener is unbalanced has some interesting consequences for the bidding.

For example, consider 1D – 1S – 1NT. It is a nice way to employ ‘Active Ethics’ by alerting this bid and explaining that it promises a four-card heart suit. Why?

- no six-card diamonds (otherwise partner would have bid 2D).
- no four-card clubs (2C).
- no three- or four-card spade suit (2S, because with 3 spades there has to be a singleton!).
- not a balanced hand.

Conclusion: a four-card heart suit.

The following auction occurred at the Hoechst tournament 1992. My partner opened 1D and I held xxx,xx,AKxxxx,Qx. If you bid along ACOL lines you may land up in 3NT, but that's impossible in the Dull Club system because at least one suit is unattended. Partner must have a singleton in a suit other than diamonds. I bid 5D, after which partner pushed on to 6D (just made).

8. Problematic hands

Suppose your partner opens 1C and you have a 3145 distribution and 8 HCP?