



Astro is Better Than Landy

Or write to the Editor, English Bridge, 23 Erleigh Road, Reading RG1 5LR. Short comments for publication are welcome.

FOR BOTH pairs and teams players the need to compete over the opponents' opening bid of 1NT is well known.

Left to their own devices, the opponents will either score well if they judge 1NT to be their optimum spot, or they will develop the auction nicely to part-score, game or even slam with their well tested and trusted methods. The need to throw a spanner in the works therefore is paramount – particularly for the pairs players (the majority of our readership, I am sure).

Having asserted the need to bid, we can move on to the need for artificial systems like Astro vs natural methods.

Bidding completely naturally is wonderful when you are dealt a robust six-card suit, e.g.

♠ K 5
♥ 7 6
♦ A K J 10 7 3
♣ Q 9 4

The problem is that invariably this quality of suit is lacking when you are faced with the problem of whether to actually bid or not.

Two-suited overcalls have been played for many years to give you 'two-bites at the cherry' rather than simply putting all your eggs into one basket by hazarding an overcall into a dubious suit.

In past times many bridge conventions took the name of their inventors, e.g. Stayman and Blackwood. Astro is no exception, though it in fact combines the names of its three authors: Allinger, Stern and Rosler.

It is played as follows; after the opponents' 1NT (weak or strong):

2♣ = Hearts + a minor

2♦ = Spades + another suit

It should be noted in passing that there are other variations; Aspro and my personal favourite, Asptro (basically a hybrid of the first two) spring to mind which have varying degrees of complexity. The main principle, however, is that we can show *all* two-suited hands as well as retaining 2♥

and 2♠ as *natural bids* (vital in my experience).

With Astro we can show these pairs of suits: spades and hearts, spades and diamonds, spades and clubs, hearts and diamonds, and hearts and clubs – whereas with Landy we can only show the majors. Thus Astro is *five times* more likely to be used.

I am sure Chris will argue for Landy's accuracy – but it is *frequency* of gain that is much more important. I do not suggest for one minute that Landy is not a lovely system when it comes up – it is just that it does not come up anywhere nearly as much as Astro, and as we have seen, defending against a 1NT opening it is all about frequency of disruption.

Consider the following hand:

♠ Q 8 7 4 2
♥ 7 6
♦ A K J 3
♣ Q 4

I am sure we would all agree that after 1NT from the opponents we would want to bid. Using Astro, no problem: just bid 2♦ showing spades

and another. Using Landy we would be compelled to either bid 2♣ (ugh!) or cravenly pass.

Playing Astro is Easy

The main requirement is a 4-5 or 5-4 minimum shape, thus at least nine cards between the two suits, and 10-15 high-card points (though this can be shaded down with more distribution). However, try to avoid using Astro when holding a decent six-card major – just overcall it directly instead. Also, if using Astro with only four cards in the major, I strongly recommend using it only when the major is of good quality. Remember also that with 16+ HCPs it is still normally right to make a penalty double rather than bidding Astro, unless your hand is very distributional.

Consider this layout:

♠ A K J 9	♠ Q 8 7 5 2
♥ 7 4	♥ A 8 5 3
♦ K J 8 6 2	♦ A 9 5
♣ 4 2	♣ 3

Playing standard methods or Landy there is no sensible way into the auction after South opens 1NT but, playing Astro, West has a decent 2♦ bid (spades and another). East might even take a pot at game, and make it!

It pays for a partnership to put in the time to discuss how to develop the auction after an Astro overcall. A simple scheme is:

- with no interest in game, responder bids two of the major with three-card support, or the next suit up without (this is called a *relay*);
- if stronger, responder can jump to three or four of the major with four-card support, jump in a new suit or use a stronger relay (2NT) to ask for more information about the Astro bidder's hand on the way to game.

Additional Benefit

A fringe benefit of overcalling quite often in an artificial suit is that sometimes you hit responder's six- or even seven-card suit. If he has no fit for the anchored major, he can elect to pass – racking up many good boards as a result.

Conclusion

In summary the beauty of playing Astro is that it gets you involved with *loads* more hands, and is thus more fun to play than Landy – which limits you to competing only when holding the majors. Why wait three months or so for Landy to be used when Astro will occur at most duplicate sessions? The more it arises, the more you can gain experience as to when to use it or not, and also how far to respond or compete etc. Give it a try and good luck! □



Landy is Better Than Astro

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OPONENTS OPEN 1NT, and you bid 2♣ to show the majors. Partner can pick a major, or bid 2♦ to get you to bid your better major. Great – it's just like playing Stayman over opponents' 1NT opening, but we call it Landy. Why do we play Stayman over our no-trump? Because majors are really important when bidding constructively. Why should we play Landy over the opponents' no-trump? Because majors are still pretty damn important when competing! And whenever you have bid 2♣, partner is in a hugely powerful position: he knows both your suits in one fell swoop – now that must be worth something.

Sounds hard to believe that anyone would play anything else, doesn't it? But you know, some people have come up with other dastardly conventions – in fact thinking up defences to 1NT is almost a national pastime. When I was a lad, people were playing all sorts of defences against pre-empts, while nowadays pretty much everyone just plays the simplest thing – take-out doubles – which also happens to be best. I suspect in years to come the same will be true of defending against a 1NT opening.

So what's wrong with Astro? Roughly 69 things, of which my esteemed editor has confined me to mentioning just a few.

The Loss of the Natural 2♦ Bid

Catastrophe! Particularly as when you come in with 2♦ over 1NT the opponents have two possible major-suit fits to find, which is so much harder than dealing with a two-of-a-major overcall, where there is only one.

You Never Play in Two-of-a-minor

Great bit of kit Astro may be, but you rarely get to play in a minor at the two level – it is all very well with spades and clubs to venture in with 2♦, but sadly you have bypassed 2♣. And if you are aiming to

come in on the sort of filth I come in on, the last thing you want to do is push partner to the three level.

It is Easier to Be Doubled

If you overcall 2♥, opponents have a simple choice: they either double you or they don't. True, you may be in a grotty fit – in fact you may be in the opponents' fit, but they haven't doubled you yet. With Astro there is much more chance for opponents to get their act together: they can consult each other, by passing then doubling, doubling then doubling, doubling then passing – about three times as many options as over a direct overcall.

How Do you Find Your Fit?

This is one that even Astro enthusiasts lose sleep over: it is great when partner wades in and you have four card support, but for those realists among us, we know that just ain't going to happen!

You hold a 4-5-2-2 shape hand, and I have a 4-2-3-4 shape. You bid 2♣ to show hearts and another suit. I bid 2♦. Now what? Do you bid 2♣ and hope I don't have a 2-2-4-5 shape? Or bid 2♥ and miss the spade fit? If you choose 2♥, am I meant to go on in the hope of finding a fit? Will I get into deeper trouble by bidding, or miss a fit by passing? This is a boring, everyday hand type, but I have no idea what to do!

Suppose instead I have a 4-2-2-5 shape. Is partner meant to pass 2♦ with five hearts and four diamonds, leaving me in a 4-2 fit (and look who's going to end up playing this delightful contract!). Or does he bid 2♥, and finds I actually had a 4-2-4-3 shape, and 2♦ was much better?

Anchoring to the Shorter Major

Some people sneakily play the methods the other way round. With a 4-5-2-2 shape they bid 2♦ to show spades, and then pass a 2♥

response if partner bids it. Works much better, doesn't it?

Well, what happens if opponents compete? Are you going to volunteer 3♥ and hope there is a fit somewhere, or keep quiet and miss a potentially huge fit as you have never shown your longest suit?

What happens if they don't compete? This is even worse! Imagine responder has a 3-1-4-5 hand. If he bids 2♥, then partner may well pass and play in a gruesome fit, while if he bids 2♣ partner may actually have four spades and a longer minor. There seems to be a lot of guesswork – I thought that was what we wanted opponents to be doing?

Conclusion

I don't have answers to all these questions – but fortunately I don't need them! Keep it simple, have as many natural bids as you can, but make sure you have a way to show both majors. A hand to prove the point makes sense.

N/S Game. Dealer South.

♠ 5 4			
♥ 10 4			
♦ A K Q 10 3			
♣ Q 10 9 7			
♠ K Q 8 3		♠ J 10 9 6 2	
♥ Q J 9 5 2		♥ A K 7	
♦ 6		♦ 8 7 5 2	
♣ 6 4 3		♣ 8	
		♠ A 7	
		♥ 8 6 3	
		♦ J 9 4	
		♣ A K J 5 2	

Both tables started 1NT – (2♣) – 3NT. At one table 2♣ was Landy, and West heard 4♣ from East, which was doubled and made. At the other, 2♦ was selected to show spades and another; East passed and West led a spade – eleven tricks made! □