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Responding to Overcalls

As with many things in bridge, there is more than one system for responding to overcalls that will work if you and your partner are in agreement and follow the system. What I outline below is a very straightforward, easy to remember system that has worked well for us in the past. As always, you must discuss this with partner!

The first, and absolutely crucial thing to remember, is that an overcall by partner is completely different from when partner opens the bidding. When partner opens, you know that he/she has 12 points or better. When the opponents open and partner overcalls, partner may have as few as 5 points, and you know the opponents have at least 13. When partner overcalls, all the various conventional bids that would apply if partner had opened (Jacoby 2NT, Bergen, etc) are not available. Forget this at your peril!

The following general rules apply to responding to overcalls. These assume that the opener's partner (your RHO) has passed. If RHO bids a new suit at the two level, you will almost never have the values for any bid other than a raise of partner's overcall.

- If you have support for partner's suit (three small or better) and at least a 6 count, raise partner's suit if you can do so at the two level. This continues the interference, and will help partner know how to defend if the opponents buy the contract.
- A raise of partner's overcall is simply competitive, and does not show a good hand
- With a limit raise or better, cue-bid the opponent's suit (provided it does not force partner to the four level). If partner simply rebids his suit, he has less than an opening hand and is not interested in game. Any other bid by partner shows values.
- A new suit by you is not forcing, and is simply an attempt to find a better contract. Do not bid a new suit if you have support for partner! You need a good suit for this – remember that partner may be void in your suit!
- With no fit for partner and without a good suit of your own, pass. Do not bid NT just because you do not like partner suit!

Examples when Opener's partner passes:

1S – 2H – P - ? S-xx H-AJx D-AQxx C-Kxxx Cuebid 2 spades. If partner has 12 or more, game is likely. If partner just rebids 2H, pass.

1C– 1H – P - ? S-KQJxxx H- x D-xx C-xxxx Bid 1 spade. Partner should pass unless they have a good hand with at least a partial spade fit.

1C– 1H – P - ? S-KQxxxx H-xxx D-x C-Qxx Bid 2 hearts! Don't bid a new suit when you have support for partner's suit. This continues the interference and makes it much harder for the opponents to find their diamond fit.

1C– 1H – P - ? S-KQxx H- x D-Axxx C-Qxxx Pass! And await developments. Don't try to rescue partner. The opponents probably have the spade suit (if partner was 4-5 in spades and hearts with a good hand maybe he/she would have doubled?). Also your Q of clubs in front of declarer is a dubious value. If you pass, about 95% of the time opener or their partner will take another call. This hand looks like a misfit that we would like to defend, not declare.

1C– 1H – P - ? S-KQxx H- xx D-Axxx C-AQx Cuebid 2C. If partner shows a good hand by bidding something other than 2H, bid 3NT.

Examples when Opener's Partner Raises:

For most partnerships, a single raise of opener's suit will be made by responder even with very limited values. Therefore, game could still be on when partner overcalls and you have a good hand, but a little more caution is called for. Opener's partner could have a ratty five count, but may also have a nice 9 count.

1S – 2H – 2S - ? S-xx H- AJx D- AQxx C-Kxxx Bid 3H. Now the cuebid is unavailable because you would have to bid 3S, forcing to game. In this situation, a spade cuebid should show at least 2nd round spade control and slam interest. After RHO's your 3H bid should show values in addition to a fit.

But when you have the boss suit:

1H – 1S – 2H - ? S-AJx H-xx D-AQxx C-Kxxx Cuebid 3H, inviting game if partner has an opener.

1H – 1S – 2H - ? S-Ax H-xx D-AQJxx C-Kxxx This is a hard hand! Anything you do here could be wrong. It's a 14 count, but your minor suit honors are sitting in front of opener. 2S could work, but partner will assume you have 3 spades. 3D could work too, but will be bloody if partner doesn't have diamonds. Pass may be best at matchpoints, and would be mandatory at IMP's.

1C– 1H – 2C - ? S-KQJxxx H- x D-xx C-xxxx Bid 2S. This suit is playable against a singleton, and partner should pass unless they have a spade tolerance and a good hand.

1H – 1S – 2H - ? S-QJxx H- xx D-xxx C-Qxxx Bid 2S. Strictly competitive, partner should not assume more. They have a fit, we have a fit and we have the boss suit. Force them to the 3 level or make them sell out to 2S.

When Opener's Partner bids a new suit at the 2 level:

This one's really pretty simple. Unless you have at least a 4-card fit for partner's overcall, and want to take preemptive action, PASS! The reason for this is when opener's partner bids a new suit at the 2 level, the opponents have combined values of at least 23 points (13 for opener and at least 10 for responder). It is also true that the other side has not yet shown a fit – left to their own devices they may get themselves in trouble. You will never have a game under these circumstances unless you have superb distribution, and bidding on in this situation is far too dangerous unless you are sure a 4 level sacrifice will be a good idea.

If opener's partner bids a new suit at the two level and you make a bid without super distribution, you will find that the opponents will simply ignore you when it is right for them to bid on, and double you for penalties when that is right. So basically heads they win, tails they break even. Not the kind of bet you want to be making!

So after:

1H – 1S – 2D - ? S-QJxxx H-xx D- xxx C-Qxx OK to bid 4S at matchpoints as you do have a combined trump holding of at least 10 spades. Probably nothing terrible will happen, and you make them guess at the 5 level. But if they don't have a heart fit you may be down a couple doubled when they do not have a game. I personally would not do this vulnerable, and never at IMPs.

But with S-QJx H- Qxx D-xxx C-Kxxx PASS! Even though this is an 8 count, your distribution is poor for offense, and your heart Q is worse than useless because it is in front of opener (so opener will have compensating values in other suits). Remember that the maximum combined HCP for you and partner is 17 (40-23), so at best partner

has a 9 count. 2 Spades is very likely to go down, and it is not even clear that the opponents have a fit, let alone a game.