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Why Overcall?

By definition, when you make an overcall the opponents have already opened the bidding. When the opponents open the bidding, the chances that your side has a game are much lower than if the opponent had passed. With 40 points in the deck, if an opponent has opened the bidding there are only ~27 points left for the other players. If an opponent opens the bidding with a strong NT, your side will almost never have a game.

Given that game is unlikely after the opponents open, why take the risk of making an overcall?

The reasons for making an overcall will be some combination of the following factors:

1. Suggesting a suit in which our side can contest the auction.

The opponents do not necessarily have a game just because they opened. It might be a part score hand, and our side has to compete for the contract. We may be able to buy the contract at a makeable level, or perhaps we can drive the opponents to a level where they go down, generating a plus score for our side. This element is particularly in play where we own the higher-ranking suits.

2. Suggesting a lead to partner if we defend the hand.

This is self-explanatory. Opening leads are hard – wouldn't it be nice to have some guidance from partner?

3. Interfering with the opponent's auction.

If we passively sit by on hands where the opponents have the better cards, they will get to their optimum contract most of the time. When the opponents get to their optimum contract, you get a poor score for the hand. If you get in the way of their auction by overcalling, the opponents may well be pushed into an inferior contract, or have to make a guess. When you can push the opponents into a guess or a bad contract, you are more likely to get a good score for the hand.

When you are considering an overcall, you should evaluate your action based on to what extent the overcall would accomplish one or more of these three objectives. **You should not overcall just because you have an opening hand!** Overcalls are

primarily about suit length, suit quality, and the shape of your hand, not points. If RHO opponent opens and you have a balanced 13 count, pass (unless you have the right shape for a takeout double). Note that overcalling 1NT shows a strong balanced hand (16+) with stoppers in the opponent's suit. This is different from overcalling in a suit.

When overcalling, you must also take into account the risks. If you are vulnerable, you should be a little more cautious, particularly if the overcall will be at the two level. In practice, you will almost never be doubled for penalty at the one level, and in the rare case where you are, the opponents have probably traded a game their way for a small penalty. So, at the one level you can take great liberties with your overcalls. Even at the one-level, you should have at least five cards in your suit.

When making a two-level overcall you need a good six card suit (particularly in a minor) or a very good five card suit. Overcalling at the two level with a ratty five card suit is bad bridge, as good opponents will penalize your contract when they don't have a fit. Also, partner will lead your suit expecting you to hold the high honors.

Let's look at some examples:

After RHO opens one club:

S-KQxxx H-Kxx D-xxx C-xx

Bid 1S. You own the boss suit, and you would like a spade lead. If partner has a fit and ~8 points, you won't be down much at two spades, and you may be able to drive them to the 3 level. Also this overcall takes away the 1 level from the opponents and is mildly preemptive

S-xxx H-Kxx D- KQxxx C-xx

Probably best to pass. Your 1 D overcall does not inconvenience the opponents at all, and you are unlikely to buy the contract at the two level. If partner gets over excited you may find yourself playing three diamonds down a few for a bad result. But if you hold:

S-xx H-Kxx D- AKQxxx C-xx, go ahead and overcall 1D. You really want a diamond lead, and if partner goes to the three level on three small diamonds you are probably making it.

After RHO opens 1 diamond:

S-xx H-xxx D-xx C-AQJxxx

Bid 2C. You have an excellent 6 card suit, you want the suit led, and in practice the opponents will almost never have a good enough trump stack to take a chance on doubling you. This overcall takes away the entire one-level (including 1NT) and will often cause the opponents a lot of trouble in their auction.

S-98xxx H-AQx D-Kx C-AQx

Consider bidding 1S! Your poor suit is compensated for by the strength of your hand, and the likelihood that RHO has most of the opposing cards, and your finesses will work. The 1S bid is mildly preemptive, and how else are you going to get to 2S if partner has a fit and a few cards? 4S may even be on if partner has a good fit and a decent hand.

The downside to this overcall is that you don't necessarily want a spade lead (some good players would decline a 1S overcall for this reason). However, if the opponents get to a NT contract, a spade lead may be the killing lead, because you have enough entries to set up your spade suit. Note that when you make an overcall like this, you must have an otherwise strong hand.

After RHO opens 1 spade:

S-xx H-Axx D-AQx C-KJxxx

Pass! Pass! Pass! Don't even consider bidding 2C. Bidding 2C is bad bridge when not vulnerable, and is really asking for a beating when vulnerable. (There is no reason LHO can't have AQ10x in clubs!) You don't even necessarily want a club lead, you don't own a high-ranking suit, and you have good defense. The fact that you have 14 points is not a reason to make an overcall.

S-xx H-AQJxxx D-xx C-Kxx

Bid 2H. The quality of your suit should protect you from a penalty double, and you definitely want a heart lead. It also takes away the 1 level from the opponents. This is what a 2-level overcall in a team game should look like. At matchpoints, I would overcall 2H even without the club king.