



By: Don Rogers

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.



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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.



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Rebids by Overcaller

Unlike the situation when you are the opener, and you are expected to make a rebid when partner responds, when you make an overcall of the opponent's opening bid, and partner responds, you will often pass (at least you should!). Remembering that your partner should start with a cue bid if they have a limit raise or better, let's look at some auctions and hands. Remember that a simple raise by partner is strictly competitive, not an invitation to further action by you.

Also, remember that a new suit by partner is not forcing, and denies a fit for your suit. You should pass partner's suit unless you have a very good hand. Do not rebid your suit just because you do not like partner's suit! They heard you the first time you bid. A new suit by partner does not show a good hand on their part, and is just an attempt to get to a better contract.

Auction I.

You
1H - 1S - P - 2H
P - ?

Partner has at least a limit raise in spades, and could be stronger. Your rebid will show partner if you have anything extra for your overcall.

S-AKxxx H-xx D-Kxxx C-xx Just rebid 2S. You are a K better than minimum, but still not interested in game versus a limit raise. Partner can proceed if they have better than an opening hand.

S-AKxxx H-Kx D-KJxx C-xx Bid 3D. Spades are the agreed suit, so 3D must be a help suit game try. Bidding a new suit shows at least an opening hand, and partner can evaluate their holding. If partner just bids 3S, you should pass.

S-AKxxxx H-Kx D-KJxx C-x Bid 4S. If you opened this hand 1S, and partner made a limit raise you would accept the game. Your sixth trump and fine shape make game a good bet opposite a limit raise.

Auction II.

You
1H - 1S - 2H - 2S
3H - ?

This is a very common matchpoint auction, and getting it wrong here will cost you many more matchpoints than bidding (or not bidding) the occasional slam. The average player tends to bid on blindly here; but some discipline will pay large dividends.

S-AKxxx H-x D-Kxxx C-xxx Pass! Remember that partner gets another bid (and partner can see the front of their cards, while you can only see the backs). As before, you have nothing more than a basic overcall. (It is a very important principle that when you have nothing more than you have already shown by your previous bid, and partner gets another chance to bid, you should pass.) The singleton heart is nice, but you will be immediately tapped on the opening lead, and will probably lose control on a 4-1 spade split. You have no reason to expect a 9-card fit, and the 3 level is risky with an 8-card fit and the opponents holding the balance of power. On this auction partner will not have as good as a limit raise (partner could have cuebid 3H without taking you past 3S).

Some hands partner could have:

A. S-QJxx H-xxxx D-xxx C-Ax With this hand partner knows that your side has a 9 card fit and can bid 3S. Probably down 1, while 3 H makes.

B. S-Qxx H-xxxx D-xxxx C-Ax Partner did the right thing by raising to 2S, but should pass here because of the 8 card fit. Perhaps the opponents will carry on to 4H which may go down.

C. S-xxx H-QJ10x D- Qxx C-Ax Partner did the right thing by raising to 2S. Now that the trap has been sprung, partner will not be amused if you bid 3S. Three spades is likely down, while 3H is almost certainly down at least 1. Note that partner here does not have a limit raise worthy of a cue bid.

Same Auction, and you as overcaller hold:

S-AKxxx H-Kx D- KJxx C-xx Pass! You have excellent defense, and no reason to expect a 9-card fit. Partner will bid 3S when it's right. You have almost no chance of game with this hand when partner could not make a cuebid. 3H is likely to go down, and 4H by the opponents should go down hard.

Same Auction, and you as overcaller hold:

S-AKxxxx H-Kx D-KJxx C-x Bid 3S. If you have developed the discipline to pass with the first two hands, partner can draw the logical conclusion that your direct bid is a game try! After your direct 3S bid, partner should bid 4S with hand A above. With hand C above, partner can happily defend 4H, probably after doubling. With hand B, partner can pass and expect to make 3S

Same Auction, and you as overcaller hold:

S-AKxxxx H- x D- AKxx C-xx Bid 4S. This hand has good play for 4S even opposite partner hand C above. You are bidding here not because of your 14 points, but because of your fantastic shape and the known 9-card spade fit. The sixth trump gives you protection against the initial tap.

Note that for most partnerships this hand is not quite good enough to start with a takeout double of 1H and then bid (standard methods require about a K more for that action.)

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