

Overcalls

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Part 1: The Basics

Introduction

An overcall may be defined as entering the auction after the opponents have opened the bidding by proposing a legal strain and level as the final contract. Overcalls have many forms which have very distinct properties. Simple overcalls at the one level can be considerably weaker than simple overcalls at the two level. Jump overcalls and overcalls after opponents bid 1NT are different beasts altogether. And some overcalls are not natural at all! To begin to sort out all these different overcalls, let's devote our current efforts to simple overcalls. We'll talk about what their parameters are in various situations, reasons for making overcalls, and how to advance the auction after partner has entered the auction with an overcall.

Though it is the most common way of entering an auction, overcalling is also the most dangerous. The opponents have opened the bidding and consequently will have an excellent idea of who has the majority of the high cards. Also, you have named only a single suit to play in, so the opponents will also know if your trump suit is breaking poorly for you and will likely be able to determine if other high cards are onside or offside for the overcaller. Because of these and other reasons, classical theory considers safety as the most important element when choosing to overcall. Classical considerations related to safety are suit quality and hand strength. The classical consideration motivating overcalling is being able to bid and make a game. Therefore, a classical overcall will have both a good suit and a decent hand which combines both the safety element and the reward elements mentioned above. This is especially true regarding overcalls made at the two-level and vulnerable,

While safety and game bidding are both certainly very real considerations, these are far from the entire story and are not sufficient as the sole metrics when deciding whether to overcall. Good things can result for your side from getting partner off to the right lead, competing for a partscore, and taking a profitable sacrifice. All of these are very real reasons to want to get your suit into the auction. The key is to be able to bid for all these reasons and not mislead your partner. So, considering these factors, let's define the parameters for overcalling in various basic situations.

One Level Overcalls

We have many possible incentives for overcalling at the one level; competing successfully, taking a sacrifice, bidding a game, or getting partner off to the right lead against the opponents' final contract. Any one of these reasons would be sufficient to justify an overcall, provided we don't mislead our partner. In order to cater to all these reasons, let's set the lower range for a one level overcall at 8 HCP which will leave us room bid on weak hands with either distributional features or a good lead suggestion and not mislead our partner about our hand strength. For these same reasons, we can lower the requirements for suit quality in order to bid on distributional hands which may take a lot of tricks if a big fit is found with few HCP. Note that one level overcalls are the safest type of overcall for a couple of reasons. First, you are only at the one level and the opponents will have to take a lot of tricks to get a substantial penalty. Second, the opponents have had little time to describe their hands to each other and hence, will be less likely to play for penalties with much of their hands yet to be described. This is why we can afford to set the requirements for a one level overcall so low and cater to all these reasons for overcalling.

But where should we set the upper range for a one level overcall? 15 HCP? 17 HCP? 20 HCP? Perhaps an overcall has no upper limit which would have the nice property that our takeout doubles would always have at least three card support for any unbid majors since we would never have to double and bid our suit to show strength. All of these upper limits are played frequently. However, here is how I think about the situation. There are some hands which are so strong that they may make game opposite a hand which would not normally advance the auction. Given that partner will raise an overcall with a fit and 6 HCP, and will generally be able to find a bid of some kind with 8 HCP and no fit, then we will not miss any games by overcalling with a hand as strong as 18 HCP. So, from a constructive (game bidding) perspective, 18 HCP seems to work out quite well as an upper limit for our overcalls.

Another factor affecting our choice of upper limit is the danger inherent in doubling with the plan of bidding your suit later. There are insoluble competitive decisions that arise when the opponents compete vigorously and you haven't yet named your longest suit. Suppose, for example, that you have a hand such as Ax, AQTxxx, Ax, Qxx while the auction develops: (1D)-DBL-(4D)-P. If you double your partner will never be able to bid 4H with 2 or 3 card support or he may bid a 4 or 5 card spade suit and be very disappointed with your meager support. However, if you guess to bid 4H yourself, you may easily have reached the wrong strain and/or level when he has long spades or clubs. So, we want to pick a rather high value for our upper range which will lead to our usually being able to bid our suit directly which greatly reduces the impact of a hefty preempt by the opponents.

So, for the reasons detailed above, I think setting the strongest hand which should make a simple overcall at 18 HCP is a good compromise between showing hands strong enough that they might otherwise miss a game and the risk of encountering a dangerous preempt. One note about using HCP as a description of general hand strength: HCP are a useful way of expressing the general strength of a bridge hand in aces and kings. However, this is really just an approximation of the number of tricks that a particular hand will take. Though I won't go into advanced hand evaluation at this point, make sure that when you have highly distributional hands that you don't stop your evaluation with your high cards. 6-4, 5-5 and even hands with a simple 6th card in your suit can produce a surprising number of tricks opposite very meager hands. Make sure you add some strength to your evaluation for distribution; don't just stop with HCP.

So, our definition of a one level overcall is:

- **A five card or longer suit (occasionally a very good 4 card suit).**
- **8-18 HCP**
- **Decent suit quality or decent distributional features.**

Assuming the opponents open 1C, here are some examples of good one level overcalls.

- a) AKxxx, Qxx, Ax, xxx: overcall 1S
- b) QTxxx, x, Axx, Qxxx: overcall 1S
- c) Ax, AKJTxx, AJxx, x: overcall 1H
- d) Jxx, xx, AKJT, xxxx: overcall 1D (lead suggestion)

Again, assuming the opponents open 1C, here are some examples of bad one level overcalls.

- a) xx, JTxxx, AQx, Axx (poor suit quality)
- b) AJxx, Kx, KTxx, Qxx (no good action; wait to see how auction develops)
- c) AKQxxxx, Axx, x, Ax (you have game if partner can contribute 1 trick, so bid 4S)
- d) KQxxx, xx, xxx, Jxx (poor suit quality)

One last word on overcalling: if you don't have a bid that fits, it really is okay to pass. If you have scattered values that don't fit one of the reasons for bidding that we mentioned above, then you should pass and await further developments. If it is your hand, one of two things will happen. Either the opponents will stop low giving you or your partner an opportunity to balance or your partner will have good distributional features and be able to take a call. If neither you nor your partner have a call which fits, it is **highly** likely that you should be using your values to defend against the opponents' contract. Lots of good things can happen when you pass. You can avoid getting penalized by a bad break, you can avoid bidding to an impossible contract, and you avoid telling the declarer things about the distribution and location of HCP when the opponents end up playing the hand.

Two Level Overcalls

Decisions about making two level overcalls share the same considerations as one level overcalls, but the weighting on the various factors change. Safety is of greater importance since you are a level higher than a one level overcall. Therefore, poor suit quality and minimal HCP will prevent your overcalling at the two level on some hands that you would venture an overcall at the one level. There is no reason to change the upper HCP limit, however, so it remains the same at 18 HCP. **Therefore, our general expectation for a two level overcall will be a “good” five card or longer suit with 12-18 HCP.** Once again, don't forget that HCP are just an approximation of playing strength and that you should add value for the distributional features of your hand. However, weight suit quality and high card strength more heavily when considering a two level overcall.

Probably the greatest reason that people get in trouble with two (and one) level overcalls is **the misconception that they need to overcall just because they have a hand with which they would have opened the bidding.** They worry about missing a game or not being able to compete in the auction at all. However, I can't emphasize strongly enough how wrong this thinking is! When you have a hand which doesn't fit a direct overcall, rely on balancing and partner's ability to bid if they have distribution. If you have a game, your partner will have to have approximately opening strength to make 26 HCP or a great deal of distribution, so partner is highly likely bid, especially if Opener's partner passes. If you should be competing for a partscore, the opponents will stop low and your side will have a chance to balance. The long and the short of it is, if it is your hand you **will** have another chance to enter the auction. Let me give you an example of a hand played recently which illustrates how this works. You hold Kxx, xx, KQxx, AJxx. They start the bidding on your right (1D)-P-(1H)-P; (1NT)-P-(2D)-2S; (P)-P-(3D)-P; all pass. You may be surprised by several things on this auction. Most obvious is the pass of partner's 2S overcall with 13 HCP and 3 spades! However, partner had a chance to bid over 1H and didn't. Surely, 2S is high enough if partner couldn't bid over 1H when he had the chance. Partner's pass over 1H leads us to the second surprise. What hand might Partner have that can't bid over 1H but will bid over 2D? How about JTxxx, Qxxx, -, Axxx which is partner actually held. Perhaps you would overcall 1S with this hand, but passing surely is reasonable and a better choice. But why would you now bid 2S over 2D? The reason is that you are short in diamonds and it sounds as if the auction is getting ready to die in 2D. The other hand is certainly not going to have a bid, so you need to pre-balance. The end result was that 3D was down two for an excellent score. Notice that no one doubled 3D. We had already done our jobs and gotten them a level higher than anyone else.

Assuming a 1S opening bid, here are some examples of two level overcalls.

- | Good | Bad |
|--|---|
| a) xx, AKJT _x , K _{xx} , Q _{xx} | a) xx, QT _{xxx} , AK _x , KJ _x |
| b) x, A _{xxx} , KT _{xxxx} , K _x | b) xx, xx, AT _{9xx} , KQ _{xx} |
| c) xxx, xx, Q _{xx} , AKQ _{xx} | c) KT _x , A _x , KQ _x , Q _{9xxx} |

Advancing Overcalls

Now that we have nailed down the types of hands that partner will overcall on, let's discuss how to continue the auction after an overcall. The key to these choices are the hand ranges that we chose earlier. The fundamental idea when advancing the auction is to **keep the bidding open when game is possible**. Therefore, we will try to make some call with at least 7 HCP, when there's a fit or when NT is an option. This will not always be possible, but this is what we will strive for.

The simple raise, such as (1C)-1H-(P)-2H is the most basic advance. Since partner can have up to a hefty 18 HCP, it is logical to raise partner's suit with as little as 6 HCP and three or more trumps. Just like when partner has opened the bidding, partner can make a game try with the upper end of their range (15-18 HCP) after our simple raise, so let's assign 9 HCP as the upper end of our single raise. So, a simple raise shows 6-9 HCP and 3+ trumps.

With stronger hands and a fit, we need to do more than make a simple raise. The cuebid raise caters to hands which might produce a game opposite overcaller's 12-15 HCP. However, since a cuebid is forcing, the advancer will get another chance to bid. Therefore, this bid has a minimum HCP requirement, but no upper limit for unpassed hands. Let's define the cuebid, then, as 10+ HCP and three or more trumps.

Since all our "normal" raises (6+ HCP) are covered by either a simple raise or a cuebid, let's use the jump raise of overcaller's suit as a preemptive type of hand. By preemptive, we mean a hand that has a relatively high offensive potential when compared to its relatively meager defensive potential. For instance, you might jump raise a 1H overcall to 3H with xxx, Qxxx, x, Jxxxx. Let's define a jump raise as 2-5 HCP with four or more trumps.

Similarly to when partner has opened the bidding, when you don't have a fit but have some values, 1NT is often the right call. However, 1NT in this situation differs in that we require some semblance of a stopper and a slightly stronger hand than in the case of responding to an opening bid. Also, since the overcaller can be as weak as 8 HCP, jumping to 2NT with just 11 HCP can lead to a fair number of minus scores. Let's define 1NT as 8-11 HCP with a stopper in the opponent's suit.

Last but not least is to define what a new suit means by the Advancer. There are a vast number of ways to play these new suit bids, many of them differing by position and type, but a simple and intuitive method that won't break the memory bank is to play that new suit by Advancer shows constructive, but non-forcing values with at least five cards in the named suit. So let's assign these advances the range of 8-15 HCP with five or more cards in the suit bid. However, without at least xxx or Hx, where H is a Major Honor (A or K) in partner's suit, our recommendation is to pass, unless you have 6+ cards in your suit, which can stand Partner having only a singleton. Note: When you don't have at least xx in partner's suit, bidding 2NT is almost always a bad decision unless you have 12+HCP and a double-stopper in opponents' suit.

In the following examples, assume your LHO opens 1H and partner overcalls 2D, RHO passes and Advancer's recommended call:

- a) Kxxx, Qxx, xxxx, Kx: 3D, simple raise (This hand is not worth 8 HCP as the HQ is likely worthless.)
- b) QTx, x, Qxxx, AQxxx: 2H, a cue-bid raise (Rather than showing the Clubs; generally without a good 5-card Major and support for Partner, you want to show support first)
- c) AKxxx, Qxx, xxx, Ax: 2S (Rather than showing a cue-bid limit raise of Diamonds; if overcaller bids 3D, you could risk 3NT or opt for a positive board by passing.)
- d) xx, x, QTxxx, Kxxxx: 4D, a model preemptive raise.
- e) xxx, xx, QTxxx, Kxx: 3D, downgrade this preemptive hand due to its balanced nature.
- f) xx, AKJxxx, x, AJxx: Pass (Rather than bidding 2NT or a terrible 3C; although you have an opening hand, there's little source of tricks at NT; 3C is likely to get a 3D bid by partner and now, unless Partner has a very strong hand, you've turned a positive board into a negative one.)
- g) AJxx, xx, x, AKJTxx: 3C (Your suit is strong enough to advance and Partner may surprise you by bidding Spades, which should produce game. If Partner persists with 3D, we recommend passing.)
- h) AKQJ, xx, xxxx, Jxx: 2H, a cue-bid raise. Some would venture a 2S bid, but nothing stops Partner from showing Spades after your cue-bid.
- i) JT9xxx, AQx, Ax, xxx: 2S. (Although your Spade suit isn't strong, you'd like to play in the Major if possible. If Partner returns to 3D, then pass.)
- j) AJxx, Kx, Kxx, Qxx: 2NT.
- k) KQxxx, xx, xx, Kxxx: Pass. (Your Spades do not have good suit quality.)

To complete this method we need a way of handling the rare hands where we have a single suited hand with game forcing values without a fit for partner's suit. Let's use advancer's jump shift to cover these hands. For instance, after (1C)-1S-(P) a jump shift to 3H might be made by the advancer on something like xx, AQJxxx, Ax, KQx.

A very important note which may seem quite odd at first is: **Don't jump to game with game values!** This shows a preemptive type of hand with good offense and little defense. Stop off to cuebid first with good hands, and then bid your game. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, it will do many good things for your auctions. First, your partner will know that when you later bid game that you are bidding to make and not bidding on a distributional hand. When you do this and the opponents bid on, both you and your partner will know that you are able to defeat their contract and can then choose from your best plus score, either taking the push to the five level or doubling them and collecting a sure penalty.

Summary

Overcalling is both the most common and the most dangerous way to enter the auction. If you don't overcall, you will miss many games and be run over in the battle of the part score. However, if you overcall too promiscuously you will mislead your partner and possibly be penalized for large numbers. However, by keeping the basic objectives of an overcall in mind, we can balance between the risk and the benefits of an auction which has been opened by the opponents.

- Don't mislead your partner.
- One Level Overcalls: 8-18 HCP, 5+ card suit.
- Two Level Overcalls: 12-18 HCP, "good" 5+ card suit.
- Don't overcall just because you have an opening hand.
- Keep the bidding open when game is possible and there is a likely place to play.
- Don't bid a new suit as Advancer, unless you have a safe place to play.
- Don't bid 2NT as a "rescue" when partner makes a 2-level overcall and you don't have a fit.
- Don't jump to game when holding game values; make a forcing bid instead