



THE BIDDING TOOLKIT

Overcalls — part 1

The term overcall refers to any bid by your side after an opponent has opened the bidding. Overcalls occur frequently, making them an important topic to discuss with your partners. Many new players have misconceptions about overcalls, however. Following are some guidelines on how to approach this topic.

Why overcall?

Overcalling offers several advantages. Bidding your suit interferes with the opponents' exchange of information. Often it locates a fit and partner can continue the obstruction. Even if your suit doesn't fit partner, he is now invited into the bidding to name his suit if he has an appropriate hand. Even if partner can't respond after you overcall, he has a better idea of what to lead if your side defends.

Factors to consider

Some points to consider before making an overcall are your: (1) suit length, (2) suit strength, (3) general hand strength, (4) vulnerability and (5) level.

An overcall at the one level is usually based on a five-card (or longer) suit and doesn't promise or deny an opening hand in high-card strength. After a 1♣ opening, most players would overcall 1♠ holding: ♠A Q 10 7 4 ♥8 6 3 ♦K 7 3 ♣5 3.

You only have 9 HCP, but the suit is strong enough to qualify.

Suppose your suit is not as strong. With

♠J 7 6 5 4 ♥8 6 ♦A K 3 ♣6 5 3, most players would pass. Your suit is weak and you only have 8 HCP.

What about this hand:

♠J 7 5 ♥K J 9 5 4 ♦K J 4 3 ♣7?

Most players would overcall 1♥ at the one level. With the ♥9, your suit is strong enough. You have support for spades or diamonds if partner introduces either of those suits. If you defend, partner will be better placed. This is an example of a suit that is safe to overcall at the one level, but would be dangerous to bid at the two level after, for example, a 1♠ bid by RHO.

A myth

Many players have the mistaken idea that an overcall always shows less than an opening bid. These same players thus double with an opening hand, even if they do not have support for all three unbid suits. Most good players do not subscribe to this thinking, however, and overcall with fairly good hands as well as those that are less than opening strength.

Suppose you hold:

♠A K J 6 3 ♥K 2 ♦K 10 3 ♣5 3

and hear your right-hand opponent open 1♣. You should overcall 1♠. Yes, you have an opening hand, but 1♠ does not deny that. If you double and partner responds 1♥, you will now bid 1♠ and that shows a stronger hand. Doubling and bidding your own suit typically shows 18 or more HCP.

Questions and answers

Suppose your right-hand opponent opens 1♣ and you hold these hands. Would you overcall?

Example #1

♠Q 7 3 ♥K Q 6 5 3 ♦7 6 3 ♣K 2

Answer: Bid 1♥. You have a fairly good five-card suit and a smattering of values. If partner

can't raise you, at least he will have a better idea of what to do on defense. Beside guiding the opening lead, he is more likely to figure out your distribution if you overcall.

Example #2

♠K Q 3 ♥10 7 6 5 3 ♦A 6 3 ♣5 2

Answer: You should pass. You have a bad suit and only 9 HCP. If you pass, perhaps partner can act and then you'll have a better idea how to proceed.

Example #3

♠K Q 3 ♥J 7 6 5 3 ♦A 6 3 ♣K 2

Answer: This one is a toss-up. Some players would overcall 1♥, even with a bad suit. You have 12 HCP and a well-placed ♣K. Purists would pass, however, because of the suit quality. You and your partner should decide which camp you are in. Are the advantages of getting in the bidding worth the downside of bidding a bad suit? The most important thing is that the two of you are on the same wavelength.

Example #4

♠K Q 3 ♥A K 7 6 5 ♦A 6 3 ♣4 2

Answer: Bid 1♥. Yes, you have a good hand. Yes, you have secondary support for spades and diamonds. If you double, however, and partner bids 1♠, you will want to bid 2♥, and that shows a stronger hand than this one. Doubling and bidding your own suit should be reserved for a powerhouse.

Example #5

♠K 4 3 ♥A 4 ♦K Q J 9 6 ♣7 4 2

Answer: Bid 1♦ — this is a classic overcall. Even though you have 13 HCP, do not double. Remember the myth discussed above. You have only two cards in the heart suit and a double promises better support than that. Your diamond suit is strong. Go ahead and bid it.

Overcalling at the two level and how to respond to overcalls will be covered next month. Stay tuned. □