

In 2017, will you overcall or double?

Questioning the dogma

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By the time this column is published, it will be 2017. I hope your year gets off to an excellent start, and then gets even better ...

I didn't play in a single Congress during December, but I've spent some time thinking about bidding issues in relation to a couple of interesting hands from the Pennant Hills Teams in October – not that I played in that event either, but my friend Kevin Davies drew my attention to questions that they raised.

Specifically, these were hands where one had the option of overcalling or doubling after RHO had opened. Here's the first, which illustrates the issues arising when you hold 5-4 in the majors and RHO opens 1-of-a-minor.

Board 28

Dealer W | Vul N-S

12
9 11
8

♠ A95
♥ KQ94
♦ K9632
♣ 8

♠ K4
♥ 632
♦ J74
♣ AJT92

N
W — E
S

♠ J632
♥ 5
♦ AT85
♣ K653

♠ QT87
♥ AJT87
♦ Q
♣ Q74

W	N	E	S
	1D	?	

would you prefer to overcall 1H or double?

	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
N	—	3	—	—	—
S	—	3	—	—	—
E	3	—	3	—	—
W	3	—	3	—	—

After North opens 1♦, would you prefer to overcall 1♥ or to double? What about if the singleton diamond was a low card and the spade honour was the ace or king? In fact what's best is not clear-cut. In one match, at the first table East doubled, South passed (whether you would do so might depend on how many diamonds North had promised) and West bid 2♣. Now when North passed, East bid 2♦ as a good raise, but West of course settled for 3♣. At this point South backed in with 3♦, which made. At the other table, East bid 1♥, South doubled to show a 4-card spade suit, West bid 2♥ and EW eventually bought the contract in 3♥, which also made – although given North's holding, it's important that trumps are led towards the ♥AJT twice.

So that suggests that maybe overcalling is a better idea, but of course one hand proves precisely nothing. How do we get a better answer? One can try a bit of simulation – I used the wonderful PlayBridge hand generator (<http://playbridge.com/>) to yield 16 hands in which the dealer had a 1D opening bid and next hand had 11-17 hcp with 5-4 in the majors, then attempted to bid these sensibly for both North-South and East-West.

When second hand held 5 hearts and 4 spades, it turned out that this was the distribution of outcomes:

- 1) Better to overcall 1♥ – 8
- 2) Better to double – 6
- 3) No difference, final contract in notrumps – 2

However, with respect to whether doubling is better, finding the spade fit (important, but not the only reason why a double might be a good idea – on one hand partner had long clubs) may depend on whether a bid of 1♠ by advancer is forcing or non-forcing (with a weak hand including spades, after a 1♥ overcall advancer may not bid at all if you play that a bid of a new suit is forcing).

With second hand holding 5 spades and 4 hearts, one might wonder if things would be different, as a bid of 2♥ over 1♠ would usually promise more high card points or better distribution, even if non-forcing. This was the distribution of outcomes:

- 1) Better to overcall 1♠ – 8
- 2) Better to double – 7
- 3) No difference – 1

In other words, it's not decisive, but there seems to be some benefit in overcalling when holding a 5-card major suit, even with 4-card support for the other major.

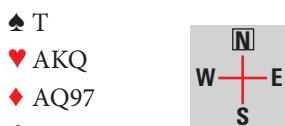
With hands of 18+ hcp, the dogma is to first double and then overcall, even if not holding the requisite number of cards in an unbid major. But look at what happened with this second hand from the Pennant Hills event. South opened 1♠ in third seat (yes, it's a bit brave when vulnerable at Teams, but at least it's lead-directing). If West doubles, North is likely to (should) make a pre-emptive raise to 3♠. Once that happens, there is little chance that East-West will reach their optimum contract of 5♣. Instead, East will probably bid 4♥, which has no play.

Board 29

Dealer N | Vul All

4
18 8
10

♠ T
♥ AKQ
♦ AQ97
♣ QJT43



♠ 8432
♥ 9642
♦ KJT8
♣ 7

♠ A65
♥ 8753
♦ 62
♣ A965

♠ KQJ97
♥ JT
♦ 543
♣ K82

W	N	E	S
	P	P	1S

Overcall 2C or double?

	♠	♦	♥	♠	NT
N	–	–	–	1	–
S	–	–	–	1	–
E	5	1	2	–	2
W	5	1	2	–	2

If West instead overcalls 2♣, intending to reopen with a double later if needed, the auction will proceed much more smoothly. But of course, it's still the case that one hand proves nothing. So I resorted to the hand generator once more, giving the dealer a 1♠ opening and next hand an 18-20 hcp hand with a singleton spade, 3 hearts and no more than a 5-card minor suit.

This time the answer was a bit further in favour of the overcall, and while it's again not clear-cut, the result certainly challenges the dogma:

- 1) Better to overcall 2m – 9
- 2) Better to double – 6
- 3) No difference – 1

So I think that in future, I'm going to overcall every time I have an excuse. And if all I have is an ordinary 5-card minor suit that I have to bid at the 2-level, I'll do so if I have enough high card points to spare. If you decide to do the same, I take no responsibility for the outcome!

May all your finesses succeed in 2017 ... ♠