

Defense Against Two-suited Overcalls

Part 1-- Unusual vs. Unusual

One of your toughest competitive bidding problems comes when the opponents make a two-suited overcall. Unusual 2NT overcalls and Michaels cuebids can work like preempts because they use up bidding space you may need to find your contract. They can also cause problems because there's no "Standard American" way for responder to show many types of hands.

The old-fashioned approach to dealing with these overcalls was to use cuebids of the opponent's suits to show stoppers or controls. After 1H by partner, 2NT by RHO (clubs and diamonds), your 3D cuebid would show a diamond stopper and ask partner to bid 3NT with a club stopper.

Much more valuable, though, are systems that describe your holdings in suits the overcaller *doesn't* have. Today, many partnerships play the Unusual vs. Unusual convention, which uses the cuebids to show length in your two potential trump suits. The name refers to the "unusual" meaning of responder's cuebids after an opponent's unusual 2NT overcall, but the treatment can be used over some Michaels cuebids, too.

Actually, this convention isn't so unusual. You'll see it listed in the lower right-hand corner of many pairs' convention cards, and you may even have it on yours. But because there are different ways to play Unusual vs. Unusual, just adding it to your card doesn't constitute a clear agreement. You and your partner need to discuss which form of the convention you'll use and agree on the exact meanings of responder's bids.

One form of Unusual vs. Unusual uses the lower-ranking cuebid to promise support for partner's suit and the higher-ranking cuebid to show length in the unbid suit. A slightly different treatment -- and the one that's probably most popular among expert players -- follows the same principle, but ties the cuebids to the rank of the suits. This easy-to-remember system, often called "Lower-Lower", works like this:

"Lower-Lower" responses over the opponents' Unusual 2NT

When an opponent overcalls 2NT, you assume that the two suits he showed are "theirs" and the other two suits (the suit partner opened and the unbid suit) are "yours". As responder, you have two cuebids available in their suits to describe your length in your suits. The meanings of your cuebids are:

- **Cuebid of the overcaller's LOWER-ranking suit (1H-2NT-3C)** = Length in *our* lower-ranking suit. In this auction, the 3C cuebid would show heart support and at least invitational strength.
- **Cuebid of the overcaller's HIGHER-ranking suit (1H-2NT-3D)** = Length in *our* higher-ranking suit. In this auction, the higher-ranking suit is the "unbid" suit, so your cuebid shows 5+ spades and game values.

Using this system, if partner opens a major and the opponent overcalls 2NT, your 3C cuebid always shows hearts; a 3D cuebid always shows spades.

The length and strength you need for these cuebids depend on whether you're raising partner or showing the unbid suit. The cuebid in support of partner's suit (1H-2NT-3C or 1S-2NT-3D) shows limit-raise or better strength and enough length to make his suit trumps (3+-cards). The cuebid for the unbid suit (1H-2NT-3D or 1S-2NT-3C) promises game-forcing strength and enough length to suggest that suit as trumps (5+ cards).

Cuebids operate the same way when partner opens a minor. After 1C by partner, 2NT by LHO (diamonds and hearts), your bid of 3D (the lower cuebid) shows club support; 3H (the higher cuebid) shows spades.

The only variation occurs when partner opens a minor and the opponent's 2NT overcall shows both minors. In this rare case, use 3C and 3D as cuebids to describe 4+-card length in the majors. After 1D by partner, 2NT on your right (clubs and diamonds), your 3C cuebid shows hearts, 3D shows spades. (Since the opponent has 5 diamonds, you won't want to use 3D as a natural raise.)

Other responses

Because these cuebids handle several types of hands, they allow you to better define your other bids. After an opening bid by partner and a 2NT overcall, the meanings of your other responses are:

- **Double** = 9-10+ pts. with length in one or both of the opponent's suits. Partner should usually pass to give you the option of doubling for penalty.
- **Simple raise of partner's suit (1S-2NT-3S)** = Trump support and about 7-10 playing pts.
- **Raise to game in partner's suit (1S-2NT-4S)** = Long trumps and good playing strength, with less than limit-raise high-card values.
- **Freebid of the fourth suit (1S-2NT-3H)** = 6+-card suit and about 7-10 pts. This is constructive but non-forcing, showing a hand like a Weak Two-Bid.

- **Jump cuebid (1S-2NT-4C/4D)** = Splinter, showing a singleton and slam-try in partner's suit.
- **3NT** = To play, showing game values and stoppers in both of overcaller's suits.

Try the Unusual vs. Unusual system with the following hands:

| Partner | RHO | You | |
|---------|------|-----|-----------------------------------|
| 1H | 2NT* | ? | * (Unusual -- clubs and diamonds) |

- 1) ♠A873 ♥J1093 ♦10732 ♣2
Bid 3H. This is competitive only; even though you're bidding at the 3-level, you are *not* showing a limit raise. Partner will know you may be stretching to show support.
- 2) ♠J864 ♥3 ♦AJ92 ♣KJ103
Double. You're planning to double whatever suit the opponents run out to.
- 3) ♠AQ85 ♥KJ97 ♦106 ♣543
Bid 3C, the lower-ranking cuebid, to show a limit raise or better in hearts. If partner has the strength to accept a limit raise, he'll jump to 4H or cuebid. If he bids only 3H, you'll pass.
- 4) ♠AQ1053 ♥94 ♦AJ ♣K942
Bid 3D, the higher-ranking cuebid, to show spades and a forcing-to-game hand. If partner has spade support, he'll bid 3S, 4S or cuebid. If not, he may have to "retreat" to 3H with only a 5-card suit. Over his 3H, you'll bid 3NT and let him decide.
- 5) ♠KQ10854 ♥64 ♦K3 ♣765
Bid 3S. This is non-forcing and shows a 6+-card suit. Partner can pass with a minimum or bid game with extra values or good spade support.
- 6) ♠AJ10 ♥K10743 ♦5 ♣A753
Bid 4D. You could also bid 3C (showing a limit-raise or better), then follow with a cuebid to show the forcing raise. The immediate splinter bid, though, is more descriptive and will help partner better evaluate his hand for a possible slam.

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Part 2 -- Unusual Vs. Michaels

The Unusual vs. Unusual convention is popular because it offers an accurate, flexible way for responder to describe his hand after an unusual 2NT overcall by an opponent. Although that use is the origin of the

convention's name, Unusual vs. Unusual can also be valuable over other two-suited overcalls. These include Michaels cuebids over minor openings, top-and-bottom cuebids and other overcalls that show two specific suits.

"Lower-Lower" cuebids over Michaels overcalls that identify both suits

In the most popular form of Unusual vs. Unusual, often called "Lower-Lower", responder cuebids the overcaller's lower-ranking suit to show length or support in the lower-ranking of the other two suits; the higher-ranking cuebid shows the higher-ranking suit. If partner opens a major and the opponent bids 2NT, a 3C cuebid shows heart length or support; 3D shows spades. (See the [MONTH] *Bulletin* for details on using this convention over 2NT overcalls.)

The same approach can be used when an opponent makes a Michaels cuebid showing two known suits. If the overcall shows both majors (1C-2C or 1D-2D), responder's cuebids describe his length in the minors. The meanings of the cuebids are:

- **Cuebid of the opponent's LOWER-ranking suit (1C-2C-2H) =** Length in *our* lower-ranking suit. In this auction, the 2H cuebid would show club support and at least invitational strength.
- **Cuebid of the opponent's HIGHER-ranking suit (1C-2C-2S) =** Length in *our* higher-ranking suit. In this auction, the higher-ranking suit is the unbid suit, so your cuebid shows 5+ diamonds and game values.

As with cuebids over an Unusual 2NT, the length and strength you promise depend on whether you're raising partner or showing the unbid suit. The cuebid in support of partner's suit (1C-2C-2H or 1D-2D-2S) shows 4+-card length and limit-raise or better strength. The cuebid for the unbid suit (1C-2C-2S or 1D-2D-2H) promises a game-forcing hand and a 5+-card suit.

"Lower-Lower" cuebids over other overcalls showing two known suits

The "Lower-Lower" approach can be used effectively against any overcall that specifies two suits. Against most of these overcalls, the cheaper available cuebid will be in the opponent's lower-ranking suit. For the rare cases when it isn't, always use the **cheaper** cuebid to show length or support in your lower-ranking suit, even if that cuebid is in the opponent's higher-ranking suit.

About the only time you'll face this situation is when partner opens 1D or 1H and the opponent makes a top-and-bottom cuebid showing spades and clubs. To save bidding room, use the cheaper cuebid (2S) to show length or

support in diamonds, your lower-ranking suit; use the higher cuebid (3C) to describe the hand with a heart suit.

Other responses

Over Michaels overcalls, responder's other bids follow the same structure as those used over an unusual 2NT. After an opening bid by partner and a Michaels overcall, the meanings of your non-cuebid responses are:

- **Double** = Penalty-oriented, showing 9-10+ pts., usually without good support for partner's suit. With most hands, partner should pass to give you the option of doubling the opponents' contract.
- **Simple raise of partner's suit (1D-2D-3D)** = Trump support and about 7-10 playing pts.
- **Freebid of the fourth suit (1C-2C-2D or 1D-2D-3C)** = 6+-card suit and about 7-10 pts. (a hand like a Weak Two-Bid).
- **2NT** = Balanced, invitational strength (10-11 pts.) with stoppers in the opponent's suits.
- **3NT** = To play, promising game values and stoppers in the opponent's suits.
- **Jump cuebid (1C-2C-3H/3S)** = Splinter, showing a singleton and slam-try in partner's suit.

Try bidding the following hands after this Michaels auction:

| Partner | RHO | You | |
|---------|-----|-----|---------------------------|
| 1C | 2C* | ? | * (Michaels -- hearts and |

spades)

1) ♠AJ97 ♥K10 ♦J862 ♣Q82

Double. You plan to double 2S if that's what the opponents bid (or perhaps partner can double if LHO bids 2H). If not, you'll follow with 2NT to show invitational values.

2) ♠KJ103 ♥5 ♦864 ♣K10754

Bid 3C. With so many clubs and so few defensive tricks, show your support right away. You know the opponents have a decent heart fit, so there's little point in hoping they'll bid spades.

3) ♠AQ ♥AJ6 ♦J107 ♣A9843

Bid 2H, the lower-ranking cuebid, to show a limit-raise or better in clubs. This may help you get to slam. If partner shows a minimum by rebidding 3C, you'll settle for 3NT.

4) ♠A73 ♥4 ♦AKJ107 ♣A1085

Bid 2S, the higher-ranking cuebid, to show a forcing hand with diamonds. This should help you find the right slam -- if partner doesn't show diamond support, you'll raise clubs. Since you've set up a forcing auction, you won't have to jump later.

5) ♠AQ6 ♥KJ4 ♦103 ♣J8752

Bid 2NT, natural and invitational. Resist the temptation to double (your club length makes it unlikely you'll extract a big penalty) or to bid 2H to show a club raise. Partner, who rates to be broke in the majors, won't be able to bid notrump. If you cuebid 2H now and he rebids 3C, you'll still be guessing.

6) ♠4 ♥8752 ♦KJ10985 ♣K2

Bid 2D, non-forcing. Many pairs "shade down" their freebids if they can be made at the 2-level. Even with hands that don't qualify as a game invitation, it's important to compete if you have a good suit. Since you're only at the 2-level, you shouldn't get too high -- if partner bids 2NT, you can rebid 3D to show a minimum.

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Part 3 -- Vs. Michaels Cuebids over Majors (1H-2H, 1S-2S)

In the last two articles, we discussed the use of Unusual vs. Unusual cuebids over an opponent's unusual 2NT or Michaels overcall that shows two known suits. But what if the opponent makes a two-suited overcall that identifies only one suit?

If partner opens a major, the opponent's Michaels cuebid shows the other major but doesn't specify which minor he has. In this case, only one cuebid is available and should be used to show invitational or better support for partner's major.

Since Unusual vs. Unusual cuebids work only if both suits are known, you have to find another way to describe good hands without trump support. Artificial systems have been developed to handle this problem, but most partnerships find they can get by with a simplified method. Over "ambiguous" Michaels (1H-2H or 1S-2S), you'll be able to describe most responding hands by following these bidding guidelines:

- **A cuebid of the overcaller's known suit** always shows limit-raise or better support for partner's major. Opener's rebid will tell you if he would have accepted a limit raise.
- **A jump cuebid** (or a jump to 4C or 4D) shows a singleton and a slam try in partner's suit.
- **A double or notrump response** is used to describe all non-supporting hands of 10+ pts.
- **All other bids** -- raises of partner's suit and freebids of new suits -- are non-forcing.

The trickiest auctions are those where you have forcing-to-game strength without a fit for partner's major and without sure stoppers in all unbid suits. In these cases, your most likely game is usually 3NT, but with one of the overcaller's suits unknown, your search for stoppers can't always be an exact science.

The best strategy with these hands is to start with a double and let the opponents tell you where they have their best fit. If LHO prefers partner's major, he'll usually bid it directly; if not, he'll pass or bid 2NT to ask for partner's minor. With this information, you can then choose a rebid to further describe your hand.

Partner's action will also give you some clues. With most semi-balanced hands, he'll pass your first double and let you make the decision. But if he has a hand unsuitable for defense -- a near-solid 6+-card trump suit or a strong two-suiter, for example -- he may show it before the auction gets back to you. Or, with a good trump holding in the suit your LHO bids, partner can make a penalty double.

Assuming partner passes, the meanings of your rebids after an initial double are:

- **Double** = Penalty. If opener passed over your first double, he should usually pass again.
- **Pass** (over RHO's suit rebid) = Forcing, usually suggesting a tolerance for defending if partner has a good enough trump holding to double.
- **New suit** = 5+-card suit, forcing to game.
- **3NT** = Game strength with a stopper in the suit the opponents have chosen. This doesn't necessarily guarantee a stopper in overcaller's second suit.
- **Delayed cuebid of overcaller's major** = Forcing to game. This *denies* a stopper in the suit the opponents have chosen and asks partner to bid 3NT if he holds one.

Using your judgment

With these agreements, you'll be able to handle most bidding problems over a two-suited overcall. The most important element in your success, however, will be your good bidding judgment. When deciding whether to declare or defend after an opponent makes a two-suited overcall -- whether it identifies one or two known suits -- keep these guidelines in mind:

1. The overcall has warned you that wild distributions are likely, so don't be too optimistic. Close games, especially those where you have only an 8-card trump fit, may be doomed by bad breaks.
2. The best time to compete for the contract is when you have a fit for partner's major. **The main factor in your evaluation should be your trump length, not your high-card points.** Stretch to compete if you have 4-card or longer support. Stay on the conservative side if you have only 3-card support.
3. If you're considering a cuebid or double as your first response, try to plan your rebid in advance. Think about how the auction might progress and what bids will be available for you to further describe your hand.
4. If you have scattered values without a fit for partner, give full consideration to defending. Even with a modest trump holding, you may collect a big penalty if you also have strength in the overcaller's second suit.
5. Pay attention to the vulnerability. If the opponents are vulnerable and you're not, think long and hard before you let them off the hook. Even at equal vulnerability, if you aren't certain about making your game, doubling and taking the "sure" plus score may be a good insurance policy.
6. If you double the opponent's contract, lead a trump (or expect partner to lead one).

Try bidding the following hands after this Michaels auction:

| Partner | RHO | You | |
|---------|-----|-----|----------------------------------|
| 1H | 2H* | ? | * (Michaels -- spades & a minor) |

1) ♠5 ♥10973 ♦8654 ♣A1082

Bid 3H. Even though you have to go to the three-level, you should show your support with most hands that would have raised partner's suit to two. Your extra trump and singleton spade make this 4-point hand worth a full raise.

2) ♠Q54 ♥J92 ♦K532 ♣KJ6

Bid 3H. Ten high-card points, but this hand has less playing strength than Hand #1. The flat distribution, soft honors in the opponent's suit(s) and only 3-card trump support should cause you to devalue your hand.

3) ♠42 ♥KJ104 ♦A8732 ♣J5

Bid 2S, the cuebid of the known suit, to show a limit raise or better in hearts. If partner bids 3H, denying the values to accept a limit raise, you'll pass.

4) ♠A108 ♥J6 ♦Q1072 ♣KJ74

Bid 2NT or Double, depending on the vulnerability. If you're red and they're not, +600 in 3NT is such a good possibility that you should

make your best try for it with an invitational 2NT. At any other vulnerability, your best strategy may be to double the opponents. You may beat their contract more than your game is worth, but even if you collect only a small set, the double wins on those hands where your game (or part score) wasn't making.

5) ♠AJ92 ♥Q3 ♦AQ732 ♣63

Double. You'd be happy to double 2S if the opponents end up there. More likely, however, is that the auction will go 2NT by LHO (showing a preference for overcaller's minor), pass by partner, 3C by RHO. You can now make a delayed 3S cuebid to ask partner to bid 3NT if he has a stopper in the suit the opponents have chosen -- in this case, clubs. If you had a club stopper and wanted to play in game, you'd bid 3NT.

6) ♠A10 ♥75 ♦J43 ♣AKQ1074

Bid 3NT. Not very scientific, but this action rates to work on most layouts. With no desire to defend -- and, barring something unusual in partner's hand, no desire to play anything but 3NT -- you may improve your chances by getting to it quickly. You could conduct a more accurate search by doubling first, then asking for a stopper if the opponents bid diamonds. But think about how awkward your auction will be if partner can't show you one. You'll be forced to scramble to 4C, 5C or 4H in a weak 5-2 fit. I wouldn't expect a good score for any of these contracts.

The jump to 3NT with Hand #6 breaks even when partner has a full diamond stopper. You can come out ahead when he has only a partial stopper, when the suit blocks, or, most important, when LHO doesn't lead diamonds. Remember that you know what RHO's second suit is, but his partner doesn't, and your auction hasn't given him the chance to find out. Even if a diamond lead sets the contract, LHO (who probably has fairly equal length in the minors) will have to guess to lead one.