

All About Overcalling

It is annoying when the opponents open the bidding in front of you, but that doesn't mean to say that you are constrained to pass for ever. In fact there are quite of number of reasons why it would be right and proper for you to enter the bidding and these can be classified as follows:

- 1) Because you have a good hand!
- 2) Because you want to take up bidding space to make things more difficult for the opponents.
- 3) Because you want to indicate a lead to partner should the hand on your left end up as declarer.
- 4) Because you might want to pave the way for a possible sacrifice. Sometimes it is better to concede a penalty than let the opponents end up declaring.

1. You have a good hand

Suppose you hold: S AQ765

H K2

D A87

C 75

and hear the hand on your right open 1H. As you would have opened the bidding if you had been declarer it seems only sensible that you should bid now and a bid of 1S seems a stand out. And so it is, but there is one requirement that is absolutely sacrosanct whatever the reason you have for overcalling and that is that *you must hold at least a five card suit*. We shall see in a moment that the suit must have some quality about it, but that is less important if you have a good hand.

2. You want to be difficult

In the early days of bridge it was almost considered to be bad form to bid when you didn't have much in the way of high cards, but that has all changed. Now the main thrust is to bid at all cost and the more bidding

space you take up the better it must be. So a bid of 1S over 1C is much more worrying for the opponents than a bid of 1D over 1C! So what are the requirements here? Well again you just have to have at least a five card suit and with few points the quality has to be good. Something like QJ976 would be near the bottom end of what partner might expect. As for the number of points, well anything from about six or seven points up is ok if you are both overcalling at the one-level and also taking up a lot of space. If the hand in front of you opened 1C it would surely be all right to overcall 1S holding:

S KQJ76
H J98
D 75
C 976.

(Certainly if you are not vulnerable. Maybe if you are vulnerable you should raise your minimum level by a point or two.)

If your overcall suit takes you to the two-level then you have to be a little more circumspect and would be expected to hold something like an opening bid with a suit of good quality, and preferably with six cards in it. If the hand in front of you opens 1S it would be ok to overcall with 2D holding something like:

S A3
H J98
D KQJ976
C J3.

As you can see the quality of the suit is paramount. Take away a diamond and it would be dubious.

3. You want to indicate a lead

If the opponents outgun you in the bidding and the hand on your left becomes declarer, the very fact that you have overcalled should give partner help when deciding what to lead. Of course it is not written in tablets of stone that he *has* to lead your suit but he should have a very good reason for not doing so. This is why it is so essential to have a measure of quality in the suit in which you overcall.

4. You might want to make a sacrifice bid

Sacrificial bidding is part of the modern game when you bid to a contract with the understanding that not only will you fail in your contract but that you will be doubled as well. Nevertheless such is the clever structure of the scoring system that by doing so you can still show a profit. If the opponents bid to a vulnerable game you can afford to go three down if you are not vulnerable, even if you are doubled. At equal vulnerability you can only afford to go two down, while at adverse vulnerability you can only afford to go one down. For this reason it is very rare to find one side sacrificing when they are vulnerable and their opponents are not.

Because it is only right and proper to consider overcalling for each of the reasons detailed above it can be troublesome when the partner of the overcaller has a good hand himself and would like to know whether he is facing a good hand or just a modest collection. Take the following hand for example:

Love All. Dealer North

		S 76	
		H AQJ98	
		D KJ54	
		C K3	
S K94			S AQJ83
H 73			H 1054
D A1076			D Q2
C AJ54			C 1092
		S 1052	
		H K62	
		D 983	
		C Q876	
North	East	South	West
1H	1S	No	??

No one could disagree with the opening bid and by now I hope you are convinced that it is ok to overcall on the East hand with 1S. South has a clear pass but West would appear to be in a dilemma. While he would like to be in game *if East had an opening bid* it would be foolhardy just to bash 4S in case East has a light overcall. The solution is to bid the opponents' suit – in this case 2H. This carries the following distinct message, 'I have a good hand partner and I know where we are going if you have a good hand. But if you have overcalled on very few values then please just repeat your suit at a minimum level.' Here East would rebid 2S if North passes and West would do likewise. Nine tricks are likely to be made but certainly not game.

This clever device of bidding the opponents' suit to garner more information as to the strength of the overcaller is called an '*Unassuming Cue Bid*' or UCB.

The corollary to all this of course is that direct support of the overcaller's suit is not showing a good hand but is merely an attempt to make life more difficult for the opponents especially when there is the likelihood that the opener has a very strong hand. The following hand shows just what I am talking about:

Love all. Dealer North

	S 7	
	H AKJ98	
	D KQ103	
	C A86	
S K862		S AQJ103
H 43		H 1075
D A9865		D 7 4
C 95		C QJ3
	S 954	
	H Q62	
	D J 2	
	C K10742	

North	East	South	West
1H	1S	No	3S
???			

Left to their own devices North/South would sail into 4H but the barrage bidding has made life more difficult. Note that West is *not* showing a good hand in terms of points when he bids 3S but is just preempting the bidding with a known nine card fit. Generally speaking the partner of the overcaller, with a modest hand, raises to the total number of trumps held between the two hands. Here West knows of nine trumps so he bids to make nine tricks and although 3S would not make it is only one down. Obviously some caution is required when vulnerable and with a very weak hand, but generally speaking the principle is a sound one.

Another source of confusion is as to the meaning of a change of suit by responder to the overcaller. After an opening bid a change of suit is forcing of course because the responder knows that his partner has the strength to open in the first place, but after an overcall that is not the case. As a consequence it is good practice to make a change of suit by the responder to an overcaller as *encouraging but not forcing*. And one absolute requirement is that the suit will have a minimum length of five. Just remember that as far as overcalls are concerned we are in five-card suit territory. An example will make this clear

Love All. Dealer North

	S 73	
	H A3	
	D AQJ976	
	C K53	
S A2		S KQ1086
H KQ1087		H J92
D 52		D K103
C Q1064		C A9
	S J954	
	H 654	
	D 84	
	C J872	

North	East	South	West
1D	1S	No	2H
No	4H	End	

Notice that West's bid of 2H is encouraging but not forcing. However with a good hand and with three card trump support East has an easy raise to game.

So we have learned that: -

- 1) You can overcall for many different reasons *but you will always have at least a five-card suit of decent quality.*
- 2) If the responder to the overcaller has a good hand with trump support he can find out the strength of his partner's hand by bidding the opponents' suit – the so-called *Unassuming Cue Bid.*
- 3) Direct raises of the overcaller's suit by his partner shows the number of trumps held and *not* a good hand, else he would have made an UCB.
- 4) A change of suit by the partner of the overcaller is encouraging *but not forcing* and shows at least a five-card suit.

The 1NT Overcall

It is logical to open 1NT with an average of about 13 points because the expectation is that partner will hold *on average* about 9 points – a third of the missing 27. But all that changes of course when one of the opponents has opened in front of you because now the expectation is that partner will have fewer than 9 points. Indeed if you imagine an opening bid of one in a suit to contain on average about 15 points and you hold 13 then the expectation is that partner will only hold 6 points - a half of the missing 12 and giving you only a total of 19 points, not enough to make more than half the tricks. However if instead of holding 13 points you held about 16 then partner would be expected to hold 4 or 5, making a contract of 1NT in your direction much more likely to succeed. So we come to the conclusion that a direct overcall of 1NT over an opening bid of one should be an essentially balanced hand ranging from a 'good' fifteen points to a 'bad' eighteen points. And it goes

without saying that the hand should contain at least one- and preferably two - stops in the suit the opposition has opened.

What is more all the gadgetry you employ after a weak no-trump – Stayman and transfers – should still apply if third hand passes except you now know partner has a strong no-trump.

Ex.

	S J 3	
	H A Q 10 7 5	
	D K J 10 5	
	C J 2	
S K 9 8 5		S A Q 6 2
H 2		H K J 4 3
D 7 6 2		D Q 3
C A Q 7 6 5		C K 10 4
	S 10 7 4	
	H 9 8 6	
	D A 9 8 4	
	C 9 8 3	

North	East	South	West
1H	1NT	No	2C
No	2S	No	4S
No	No	No	

In fourth position things are different because although the hand on your left has indicated opening values the hand on your right has shown less than about six points, leaving it sensible to make the so-called ‘protective no-trump’ with about 11-14 points. Once again Stayman and transfers would apply.

Jump Overcalls

In traditional Acol a single jump overcall of a right hand opponent was made on a strong hand with a good six-card suit; something like 16-18 points. However the frequency of such a hand arising was very low and these days the accepted approach is to play jump overcalls in one of two ways:-

a) *Weak jump overcalls when not vulnerable.* The requirements are to have a reasonable six-card suit and about 5-9 points. The following hand would qualify for a 2S bid after an opponent opens 1D:-

S A Q 7 6 4 3
H 8 2
D Q 6 5
C 7 2

b) *Intermediate jump overcalls when vulnerable.* The requirements now are to have a reasonable six-card suit and about 11-13 points. The following hand would qualify for a 3C bid after an opponent opens 1S:-

S 6
H K 8 6
D 7 5 3
C A K J 8 3 2

Note that in both cases the jump is a single jump. Any higher barrage could be made on a normal preempt type hand, although if partner has already passed the hand might be quite strong. For example, if partner passes and the next hand opens 1D it would be quite acceptable to bid 4S on:-

S A K 10 8 6 5 3 2
H A 4
D K 2
C 7

If partner has made a single jump overcall the responder to that overcaller can only show a good hand by bidding the opponent's suit. All raises of the overcall suit are defensive in nature. For example, if partner has overcalled 1D with 2S at favourable vulnerability then it would be perfectly in order to raise to 4S on:-

S K 6 5
H K Q 7 3 2
D 6 4 2
C 7 3

And you should bid this whether right hand opponent bids or not. The purpose of this call is not so much an attempt to make game as to make life difficult for the opposition.

	S 9	
	H A J 8	
	D A Q J 10 5 3	
	C K Q 9	
S K 6 5		S A Q 10 8 4 3
H K Q 7 3 2		H 9 5
D 6 4 2		D 8 7
C 7 3		C J 8 2
	S J 7 2	
	H 10 6 4	
	D K 9	
	C A 10 6 5 4	

Here N/S can make 6D but will find it difficult to bid if the opponents barrage to 4S.

Michaels Cue Bid

One of the most popular ways of showing a two-suited hand after the opponents have opened in front of you is by using the exotically sounding ‘Michaels Cue Bid.’ It is very simple and works like this:

1. After the hand on your right opens 1H a bid of 2H by you shows at least 5-5 in spades and a minor.
2. After the hand on your right opens 1S a bid of 2S by you shows at least 5-5 in hearts and a minor.
3. After the hand on your right opens 1D a bid of 2D by you shows at least 5-5 in the majors.
4. After the hand on your right opens 1C a bid of 2C by you shows at least 5-5 in the majors.
5. After the hand on your right opens 1S/H/D/C a bid of 2NT by you shows 5-5 in the lower two suits. (The so-called Unusual No-Trump.)

If the responder in cases 1) and 2) wishes to know which is the minor he asks by bidding 2NT.

Ex.

	S J 7 6		
	H Q 6 5 2		
	D 10 3		
	C J 9 7 4		
S 9 4		S A 8 5 3	
H K J 10 7 3		H 8	
D A Q 6 5 4		D K 9 8 7	
C 8		C Q 10 6 2	
	S K Q 10 2		
	H A 9 4		
	D J 2		
	C A K 5 3		

S	W	N	E
1S	2S	No	2NT
No	3D	All Pass	

You must have an agreement as to the strength of this overcall but popular wisdom has that it should be weak non-vulnerable, say 6-10 points, and intermediate if vulnerable, say 11-14 points.

1.

S Q 6
H A K Q 7 5
D K 8 4 2
C 9 7

S K 8 2
H 4 2
D Q J 10 3
C A Q 5 4

S A J 10 7 5
H J 10 6
D A
C K 10 3 2

S 9 4 3
H 9 8 3
D 9 7 6 5
C J 8 6

South	West	North	East
		1H	1S
No	2H	No	3C
No	4S	End	

West bids 2H – the opponent’s suit – to find out the strength of his partner’s overcall. 3C shows a good hand with spades and clubs enabling West to bid the easy game.

2.

S K 9 8 5
H 2
D 7 6 2
C A Q 7 6 5

S 10 7 4
H 9 8 6
D A 9 8 4
C 9 8 3

S J 3
H A Q 10 7 5
D K J 10 5
C J 2

S A Q 6 2
H K J 4 3
D Q 3
C K 10 4

South	West	North	East
			1H
1NT	No	2C	No
2S	No	4S	End

North bids Stayman after his partner has shown a strong no-trump

enabling the spade game to be reached.

3.

S K Q 10 9 6

H 5

D 10 9 5 4

C A 9 4

S J

H A K J 8

D K Q 8 7 2

C 10 8 5

S 7 4

H Q 10 9 3

D A J 3

C K 6 3 2

S A 8 5 3 2

H 7 6 4 2

D 6

C Q J 7

South

West

North

East

No

1D

1S

Dbl*

4S

End

*Sputnik double showing a hand that would have responded 1H.

North bids to the total number of trumps. 4S makes, as does 5H for E/W except on a diamond lead but the barrage makes life difficult for them.

4.

S Q 10 8

H 10

D A K 8 7 5

C K Q 9 6

S A 6

H K 9 3 2

D Q J 10 2

C 10 8 7

S K J 9 3 2

H A Q 8 7 5

D 3

C J 5

S 7 5 4

H J 6 4

D 9 6 4

C A 4 3 2

South

West

North

East

No

1D

2D

No

4H

End

With his good cards in the majors West is fully justified in bidding 4H

after his partner's Michaels bid showing both majors.

5.

S A 8 5 3	S K Q 10 4 2	S 9
H 8	H A 9 4	H K J 10 7 3
D K 9 8 7	D J 2	D A Q 6 5 4
C Q 10 6 2	C A J 5	C 8 3
	S J 7 6	
	H Q 6 5 2	
	D 10 3	
	C K 9 7 4	

South	West	North	East
		1S	2S
No	2NT	No	3D
End			

2S is Michaels showing hearts and a minor and 2NT enquires.

6.

S K Q 4	S 8 7 5 3	S A 10 9 2
H Q J 8 7 2	H 6 3	H A K 9 5 4
D 3	D A 8 7 5 2	D J 9
C Q J 8 2	C K 6	C 10 5
	S J 6	
	H 10	
	D K Q 10 6 4	
	C A 9 7 4 3	

South	West	North	East
			1H
2NT	4H	5D	End

2NT shows the minors. 4H just makes and 5D is only one down.

7.

	S 7 6	
	H 8 7 5	
	D K Q 8 5	
	C K 9 8 5	
S A Q 10 9 3		S K J 8 2
H K 9 4 2		H 10
D A 9		D 10 7 6 4 3
C 10 2		C Q J 3
	S 5 4	
	H A Q J 6 3	
	D J 2	
	C A 7 6 4	

South	West	North	East
1H	1S	Dbl	3S
End			

North's double shows the minors and 3S is a preemptive raise and NOT strong. With a good hand in support East would bid 2H.

8.

	S K Q 10 7 3	
	H A 2	
	D 9 8 5	
	C 7 3 2	
S A 2		S J 9 8 6
H 9 6 5 4		H 10 8
D K Q J 7 4		D 10 6 3
C K Q		C A 9 5 4
	S 5 4	
	H K Q J 7 3	
	D A 2	
	C J 10 8 6	

South	West	North	East
2H	1D	1S	No
	End		

After an overcall a change of suit is encouraging but NOT forcing because the overcaller might not have an opening hand. (As here.)

