

English Bridge

Useful Conventions

by David Bakhshi





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THIS convention was the brainchild of an American, Mike Michaels, and it lends itself to being played in a fairly simple way.

Why is it useful to make two-suited overcalls?

When the opponents open the bidding, it is a winning strategy to try to make their lives as difficult as possible, either pushing them higher than they would prefer to be, or just stopping them from declaring. While this can be effective with one-suited hands, there is even greater potential when holding a two-suited hand since there is now a much better chance of finding a fit in at least one of the long suits. It is also helpful to show the two-suited nature of the hand as quickly and efficiently as possible.

How can an overcaller show a two-suited hand after an opening bid of 1♣/1♦/1♥/1♠?

When the opponents open the bidding with one of a suit, an area that requires partnership agreement is the meaning of a cue-bid (i.e. bidding the opponents' suit). When holding length in the opponents' suit, it is usually best to pass, so a cue-bid can be given an artificial meaning. While it used to be popular to play a cue-bid as showing a very strong hand, it has become commonplace to show such hands by starting with a take-out double. This frees up a cue-bid to show a two-suited hand.

How does partner know in which suits the overcaller has length?

When the opening bid is 1♣ or 1♦, a Michaels cue-bid is used to show the two most important (of the three remaining) suits, i.e. hearts and spades. The Michaels bidder should have at least five cards in each

suit, and though partnership styles may vary, it is a good idea to make sure that good suits are held. A useful guideline is for the Michaels overcaller to have at least two honours in each suit (though many like to be more aggressive when non-vulnerable).

When the opening bid is 1♥ or 1♠, a Michaels cue-bid is used to show the most important suit (the other major), and one of the minors. Again, at least five cards should be held in each suit, and each suit should be of reasonable quality.

How strong does one need to be to make a Michaels cue-bid?

Many partnerships play that the overcaller will either have a weak hand or a strong hand, but not one of intermediate strength. Since it is so useful to show a two-suited hand as soon as possible, I would recommend not worrying too much about a point range, but consider overcalling on weaker hands when non-vulnerable. As with all competitive auctions, vulnerability is a major factor. When non-vulnerable, one may have a relatively weak hand, but a vulnerable overcall suggests a better hand (close to opening values is sensible).

How does one respond to a Michaels cue-bid?

Let us first consider the auctions where the overcaller has shown both majors. In this case, the overcaller's partner (called 'advancer') is generally in charge of the decision-making (unless the Michaels bidder has significant extra values).

- With less than opening values, the advancer should give preference at the two level.
- With a minimum opening hand, the advancer can make an invitational bid. He can either bid 2NT (with no fit), or jump to 3♥/3♠ with at least three cards in the suit. Unbalanced hands with four-card support can invite with fewer high cards.

- With the values for game, the advancer can either jump to 4♥/4♠ or, alternatively, he can make a return cue-bid by bidding the opponents' suit at the three level. This sets up a game force, and asks the Michaels bidder to describe his hand further. (A jump to 4♥/4♠ can also be made on a pre-emptive hand with five trumps – opponents are left to guess which type of hand advancer holds!)

Next, what do you bid when the overcaller's second suit is unknown?

The principles are very similar to those detailed above, but the advancer also needs a way of finding out which minor the Michaels bidder holds. When the advancer holds a hand with game interest, this can be achieved by sacrificing a 2NT response as a natural bid, and replacing it with a forcing enquiry. The overcaller is expected to bid his minor at the three level with a minimum hand. With extra values, he can bid 3♥ to show clubs or 3♠ to show diamonds.

In addition, a bid of 3♣ by advancer becomes a 'pass or correct' bid, and says: 'Partner, pass if your second suit is clubs, but correct to 3♦ if that is your second suit.'

Here is Michaels in action:

♠ A Q J 7 4		♠ 6 3
♥ 6		♥ 8 7 4 2
♦ A Q 8 5 2		♦ K J 9 3
♣ 5 4		♣ A K 8

West	North	East	South
			1♥
2♥ ¹	Pass	2NT ²	Pass
3♠ ³	Pass	5♦	All Pass

¹ Spades and a minor

² Enquiry, with game interest

³ Non-minimum, with diamonds

In the next issue: how to defend against the Michaels cue-bid. □