



The Overcaller's Partner

As you move up the bridge ladder, you will find that more and more hands have both sides involved in the bidding. Bearing this in mind, it is very important that you know how to deal with overcalls, whether as the overcaller's partner, or as an opponent. Learning to keep talking over the interruption, instead of jumping to game unnecessarily quickly, is important.

In this article we are going to look at overcalls from the perspective of the overcaller's partner.

Responding to Overcalls

The most important thing to bear in mind when responding to an overcall is: **support** if at all possible – remember you only need *three* cards to support.

Why is supporting so important?

Basically because the number of tricks available to a partnership with a good fit depends on so much more than just points. Once you have located a fit, your partnership can use other forms of evaluation (such as the Losing Trick Count) and you can also contemplate sacrifices, something that is rarely possible unless you know you have a fit.

What do you have to think about when your partner has overcalled?

1. Support.
2. What kind of overcall has your partner made?
3. Bidding the opponents' suit (cue-bid) with strong hands.
4. Your opponents have bid a suit; does that change the value of your cards in that suit?
5. Looking ahead: your next bid may not be your last, and competitive

- auctions are often quite predictable.
6. What does the 1NT response mean?
 7. When should you *change the suit*?

That is a lot to think about!

Support

With three-card support and a little distribution try to raise to the two level even on very weak hands; especially if your side's suit is spades – it makes life so difficult for your opponents. With four-card support you should think of raising higher, but remember that having a little shape is an important factor: 4-3-3-3 hands are not ideal for the purposes of competing.

West	North	East	South
	1♣	1♠	Pass
?			

Here are three hands responding with *support*:

Hand 1	Hand 2
♠ Q J 7	♠ Q J 7 2
♥ 4	♥ 4
♦ J 9 8 7 6	♦ A 9 8 7 6
♣ 9 6 5 3	♣ 9 6 5

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

On *Hand 1* you should bid 2♠: you have

good distribution and good three-card support, and by pushing the bidding up to 2♠ you make life very difficult for North. You are weak but adding points for your singleton takes you past 6 points – enough to respond (with support).

Hand 2 is an excellent supporting hand: four-card support and an outside ace, not worth much in defence, but excellent in spades. Jump to 3♠.

On *Hand 3* you can go further: bid 4♠. It might not make, but surely the opponents must have a heart fit and if you cannot make 4♠ with your ten-card spade fit, then they should have been making game of their own.

In bridge, a big fit always makes for a lot of tricks as long as it is accompanied by a little distribution. These first three hands have each bid to the 'level of their fit', contracting to make the same number of tricks as there are cards in your trump fit. On *Hand 1* you have at least eight cards between you and your partner, hence you bid 2♠; on *Hand 2* you have nine cards, hence 3♠; and on *Hand 3* you have a ten-card fit, hence you bid 4♠.

Stronger responding hands with support will be dealt with later.

The Type of Overcall

There is a big difference between a two-level vulnerable overcall in a minor suit and a one-level non-vulnerable overcall in a major. The former is likely to be based on a good opening hand with a strong suit; the latter, however, may just have a strong suit. Before you get too excited, make sure you try to assess the kind of hand your partner might have.

Strong Hands

As you saw in the last issue, I advocate overcalling on some relatively weak hands. Consequently, as responder you need to be a little more circumspect, and especially to remember that you are not responding to an opening bid. Do not just jump straight to 3NT: partner might have perfectly good reasons for his overcall, but not a suitable hand for that contract. Instead, when you have a good strong hand (13+ points) then use a bid of the opponents' suit. A bid in the opponents' suit is a very useful tool in the competitive auction: it shows a strong hand and above all it asks partner to bid again – after all you do not want

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to play in the opponents' suit! You should use the bid to find out more about your partner's hand; it is especially useful after an overcall, when you can discover whether your partner has made a weak overcall, or a full strength one.

Here is an example:

Dealer: North. N/S Vul.

♠ J 3 2			
♥ A K 8 2			
♦ 10			
♣ K Q 10 9 4			
♠ 9 4		♠ A K 8 7 6	
♥ 9 7 6		♥ J 5 4	
♦ A K Q 9		♦ 7 6 5 2	
♣ A J 7 6		♣ 3	
♠ Q 10 5			
♥ Q 10 3			
♦ J 8 4 3			
♣ 8 5 2			

West	North	East	South
?	1♣	1♠	Pass

What should West bid in response to his partner's overcall?

This is the type of hand that you must be careful with: East was quite correct to overcall, asking for a spade lead, showing five spades and interrupting the opponents' auction – a lot of reasons to bid – without having an opening hand.

It would be easy to assume that game is on, but do not jump too high, or you will be punishing your partner. Start by bidding the opponents' suit: 2♣. Now if your partner has a good hand he can show it, by jumping or bidding a new suit; on this deal he would rebid 2♠ – rebidding your suit at the lowest level is always the weakest option. Now West could pass or more likely rebid 2NT. The complete auction would be:

West	North	East	South
	1♣	1♠	Pass
2♣	Pass	2♠	Pass
2NT	End		

This sequence shows a slightly stronger West hand than responding with an immediate 1NT to the overcall (a response that will be dealt with later).

If we now change East's hand a little, as in *Hand 4*:

Hand 4

♠ A K 8 7 6
♥ A J 5 4
♦ 7 6 5
♣ 3

This time East has a full-blooded overcall and thus the auction would proceed:

West	North	East	South
	1♣	1♠	Pass
2♣	Pass	2♥ ¹	Pass
3NT	End		

¹Forcing

A bid of the opponents' suit should always be alerted; it does not show strength or length in the suit bid, it denotes general all round strength. Note that *if you bid the opponents' suit at the three level (or above)* you are taking the auction very high, in which case *the bid would promise support for partner's suit*, as in the sequence below:

West	North	East	South
1♥	1♠	2♥	3♥

Responding to your partner's 1♠ overcall with 3♥ would show a good hand with spade support, as opposed to a competitive 3♠ or pre-emptive 4♠.

After the auction starts (1♥) – 1♠ – (2♥), what should *Hands 5* and *6* bid in response to the overcall?

Hand 5

♠ Q J 7 6 2
♥ 4
♦ A 9 8 7 6
♣ 9 6

Hand 6

♠ A 7 5 3
♥ 7 6
♦ K Q 7 6
♣ A 3 2

At favourable vulnerability (i.e. non-vul. vs vul.) *Hand 5* should raise partner to 4♠ (as discussed on page 9): it is weak and distributional, therefore perfect for a pre-emptive raise.

Hand 6 is a different matter altogether: you may want to finish in 4♠, but you should start by showing your strength and support with a 3♥ bid, saying: "I am strong and have good support, partner." This will allow you to judge more accurately later in the auction (see "Looking Ahead" further on).

Cards in the Opponents' Suit

In any auction you should always be listening and constantly re-assessing the value of your hand. If your Left-Hand Opponent has opened 1♦, then your king of diamonds is perhaps not worth its full three points; bear this in mind when responding to partner's overcall.

Looking Ahead

In highly competitive auctions, when both sides have a good fit, it is easy for the bidding to get out of hand, so try to think ahead. Take this deal, for example:

Dealer: North. N/S Vul.

♠ 5			
♥ A K 9 8 7			
♦ 3 2			
♣ K Q 9 8 4			
♠ A 10 9 4		♠ K Q J 8 7 6	
♥ 6		♥ 5 4 3	
♦ A 9 8 4		♦ 7 6 5	
♣ A 10 7 6		♣ 2	
♠ 3 2			
♥ Q J 10 2			
♦ K Q J 10			
♣ J 5 3			

The auction starts (1♥) – 1♠ – (3♥) and now it is your turn to bid as West:

West	North	East	South
	1♥	1♠	3♥
4♠	5♥	5♠	Dbl
End			

Or:

West	North	East	South
	1♥	1♠	3♥
4♥	5♥	Pass	Pass
Dbl	End		

Most players would choose the lazy 4♠ option and in some ways they would be right: after all, West does want to be in 4♠. What the 4♠ bidders are forgetting, though, is that they have a partner and the auction might not end there: North may well bid 5♥ and East quite reasonably might bid 5♠! He has no defence at all against 5♥ and he has no reason to think that you will have three defensive tricks, so from his point of view 5♠ will surely be a reasonable sacrifice.

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As West, you need to get your strength across to your partner: you do this by bidding the opponents' suit, 4♥, a high-level bid showing strength and support. Predicting that the auction is going to go higher, this bid forewarns partner that you are strong, and suggests that he should consider very carefully before sacrificing since the hand may well belong to your side. Now when North bids 5♥ East will pass, enabling you to double and possibly collect the first five defensive tricks: +800! (Note that had North passed your 4♥ bid, East would have bid 4♠.)

The 1NT Response

Remember that you are not responding to an opening bid: your partner, as we have seen, could have as few as 7 or 8 points, thus you must have a fair number of points yourself to play successfully in no-trumps. In fact, considering that your partner could have about 4 points fewer than an opening bid, your response should show 4 more points.

That means that a 1NT response shows 10-13 points. 13 points is right on the cusp; with a 'good' 13 points or more you can cue-bid the opponents' suit and then rebid in no-trumps as discussed above.

Changing Suit

Lastly, when should you change the suit? If in doubt, trust your partner; you should only change the suit on a weak hand if there is a five-card difference in your holding in the two suits, i.e. if you have a singleton in your partner's suit and a six-card suit of your own – and even then your suit should be strong. If partner is defeated in his contract, then it is all his fault, but once you have

changed the suit the blame shifts to you!

Deal 1
Dealer: South. Game All.

♠ 2 ♥ 8 6 4 ♦ K 8 4 ♣ A K 7 6 5 4	<table style="margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ K 7 6 ♥ Q J 9 7 ♦ 10 3 ♣ Q 10 9 3 ♠ Q J 10 9 4 3 ♥ A 3 2 ♦ 7 6 2 ♣ 8 ♠ A 8 5 ♥ K 10 5 ♦ A Q J 9 5 ♣ J 2	
	N											
W		E										
	S											

West	North	East	South
2♣	Dbl	2♠	1♦ End

Deal 2
Dealer: South. Game All.

♠ 2 ♥ 8 6 4 ♦ K 8 4 ♣ A K 7 6 5 4	<table style="margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ K 7 6 ♥ Q J 9 7 ♦ 10 3 ♣ Q 10 9 3 ♠ Q J 10 4 3 ♥ A 3 2 ♦ 7 6 2 ♣ 8 2 ♠ A 9 8 5 ♥ K 10 5 ♦ A Q J 9 5 ♣ J	
	N											
W		E										
	S											

West	North	East	South
2♣ End	Dbl	2♠	1♦ Dbl

Compare these two deals: both auctions start in the same way, with North making a take-out-style double of your partner's overcall. *On Deal 1* East correctly removes to 2♠ – showing a good strong six-card suit and West is happy to trust him; passing. 2♠ is an excellent contract – the robust 6-card suit allows the contract excellent play and you might just scrape 8 tricks. However, on *Deal 2* East makes a calamitous bid: 2♠ is ill advised and gets the proper punishment. West once again trusts his partner – if he changes the suit then he should have five more cards in spades than in clubs so . . .

On Deal 2, 2♠ doubled is likely to go at least three off for -800; 2♣, meanwhile, would have gone off two, but since North's double was for take-out South was just about to bid 2♠!

Always be careful when running from your partner's suit – as discussed in the last issue, perhaps the most important element of an overcall is the suit. This is especially true at the two-level; West's 2♣ overcall on the hands above is weak-ish, but clear-cut: he has stretched a little to make sure that his partner knows what to lead, but with one fewer club he should certainly not be bidding.

Conclusions

Bidding is great fun, but it is important to use good judgement; aggressive overcalls on good suits are wise, but bad suits tend to lead to trouble. The same fun can be had when responding to overcalls as long as you are aggressive when you have a good fit, but are more staid without support.

By taking your time and using the opponents' suit when strong, you will see that this system of aggressive overcalling can work for both sides of your partnership! ■

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