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This Week in Bridge

(232) Simple Overcalls at the 2-Level

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Level: 1

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General

Simple overcalls at the 2-level are quite different bids than overcalls at the 1-level. A 1-level overcall can be made on a wide range of HCP (7 to 17+) and with a variety of suit lengths (5-card, 6-card, longer, or sometimes even 4-card suits). 2-level overcalls are made only with good hands! A simple overcall at the 2-level shows approximately an opening hand and something that resembles a 6-card suit. Because these bids are a level higher than 1-level overcalls, there is a much greater chance that we play here as the final contract if partner has a misfit. We must be prepared for this in both suit quality and hand strength! Let's take a look at what we should have to make a 2-level overcall.

Simple 2-Level Overcalls

A simple overcall at the 2-level is one of the following bids:

- 1♠ 2♣ or 2♦ or 2♥
- 1♥ 2♣ or 2♦
- 1♦ 2♣

Note: All suits can be simple overcalls over 1NT, but that is a different situation and has a different goal, something to be discussed when focusing on "interfering with the opponent's 1NT opening".

All of these bids show about 12 to 18 HCP and a 6-card suit. Now, just because this is what they "promise" does not mean that we are blessed with having exactly these holdings each time we bid them. See the discussion below on *Borderline Decisions* to focus on some of this in more detail.

We usually classify these hands in "*Buckets*" based on their strength.

- 12 to 14 points Sound Overcall
- 15 to 18 points Maximum-Valued Overcall

If our hand has additional distribution, we can reevaluate our hand's strength. With more values than 18 points, we do not make a simple overcall at the 2-level. Instead we double and bid our suit to show a long suit and a good 18 or more points.



Suit Quality and Suit Length

Overcalling at the 2-level can get us into a lot more trouble than bidding at the 1-level. When we make a simple 1-level overcall we are often rescued from a disastrous contract by either the opponents or partner – they often bid notrump, bid a new suit, or double to compete in the bidding, all of which help save us from a difficult final contract. But when we make a 2-level simple overcall, Responder, Advancer, and Opener all need much better hands in order to compete in the bidding – especially in order to bid notrump (e.g. 2NT showing a good 10 to 12 points by Responder).

Because of this it is important that we have a good suit when making an overcall at the 2-level. The suit should be a decent 6-card suit or look/play like one. Classic suits to overcall at the 2-level are:

Examples of Classic 6-card Suits

AKxxxx
AQJxxx
KQJxxx
KQTxxx
QJTxxx

If our suit is only 5-cards, it should be of good enough quality to play well opposite a potential misfit. We should also have good hands, in terms of HCP and shape, when making 2-level overcalls on only a 5-card suit.

Examples of 5-card Suits

AKJTx
KQJ9x
KQT9x

An important thing to keep in mind that differentiates 2-level overcalls from 1-level overcalls is that with only 3-card support and 7-9 points, partner is going to raise. When we make a 1-level overcall this simple raise only takes us to the 2-level, but when we make a 2-level overcall partner will take us to the 3-level with the same hand. In order to be safe at this level opposite this hand, we either need a good 6-card suit, so that we have a 9-card fit and can be protected by the Law of Total Tricks (LOTT) and/or we need good values, say 13+ HCP. Thus, when partner has only 7 HCP we still have at least half the HCP in the deck and have a chance of making our contract.



Shape of the Hand

Another consideration for making a 2-level overcall is the shape of our hand. Hands with 6- and 7-card suits usually have significantly more playing strength than just their HCP suggest. But hands with only a 5-card suit need to have some additional shape in order to make a 2-level overcall most of the time.

Examples of Slightly Better Shape

5422

5431

Even some small amount of additional distribution can make a hand play better than 5332 shape (a balanced hand with a 5-card suit). As a matter of fact, with some 5332s, we will choose to make another action, like overcall 1NT or make a takeout double, instead of making a 2-level simple overcall.

Borderline Decisions

When it comes to making those difficult choices of whether to stretch to make a 2-level overcall or to stay out of the auction, the primary determining factor is suit quality. With hands that have only 10 or 11 HCP but have an excellent suit, we can get into the auction with a 2-level overcall. But with the same shape and HCP but a poor 6-card suit, we should not.

Examples

After a 1♠ opening bid, overcall 2♦ with the first hand, but not with the second hand.

♠ A64

♥ 95

♦ AQJT74

♣ 32

♠ AT4

♥ A5

♦ J97654

♣ Q3

Another factor that we should use to help us determine whether to overcall is vulnerability.

Example

♠ A64

♥ 95

♦ AQT743

♣ 32

After a 1♠ opening bid by RHO it is dangerous to overcall this hand at the 2-level when vulnerable. But non-vulnerable it is worth getting into the auction and overcalling 2♦.



Tactical Overcalls

There is one particular 2-level simple overcall that we may stretch to make because it has additional destructive values. When our RHO opens the bidding 1♦, an overcall of 2♣ creates a lot of complexity for the opponents. Responder is then forced to start the auction with a negative double with a large variety of different shapes – including hands with a single 4-card Major. From there, the auction can become quite complicated for the opponents, especially if Opener and Responder cannot find a Major suit fit.

Because of the pressure that our bid may put on the opponents, we will often stretch to make this 2♣ overcall of 1♦, especially when non-vulnerable.

Conclusion

2-level simple overcalls are a different animal than 1-level simple overcalls. When you make a 2-level overcall you should have something resembling an opening hand and a 6-card suit. Though we do not always have the perfect hand when we make a 2-level overcall, this is what partner should expect us to have. If we are lacking some HCPs then we should at least have some shape or exceptional suit quality to make up for it. Remember, do not clown around with your 2-level overcalls. Partner should be able to count on you for a good hand and a good suit in case the auction becomes competitive at an even higher level.