

Defensive Bidding: bidding when the opponents have opened

Simple Overcalls

When a player opens the bidding, he has hopes that it will be the start of a dialogue with his partner that will result in them arriving at game or even slam. When a defender, after the opponents open, enters the bidding with an overcall, he may hope to outbid them and buy the final contract. Almost equally important, however, is that he may disrupt the opponents' bidding sequence and make it difficult for them to arrive at the right final contract.

For an overcall, playing strength becomes more important than points or high cards. The single most important factor is the strength of the suit bid. And the weaker you are (in terms of points) the more likely it is that eventually you will be outbid by the opponents and that your side will end up defending. In this situation, it is even more important that your suit is good, because if partner is on lead (which he will be half the time) he is almost certain to start by leading your suit.

Let us look at some examples; in each case the opponent on the right has opened with 1♣.

(i) ♠ K Q 10 9 6
 ♥ 6 5 3
 ♦ 4 2
 ♣ K 6 4

(ii) ♠ K 5 4 3 2
 ♥ K J 5
 ♦ Q 3 2
 ♣ Q J

(iii) ♠ Q 2
 ♥ K J 5
 ♦ K Q 5 3 2
 ♣ J 8 6

Hand (i) represents a perfectly sound overcall of 1♠. The suit is good, and if we end up as defenders we would be happy for partner to start by leading the Spades. In addition, we have made a bid that may well inconvenience the opponents, for the partner of the opening bidder may have been ready to respond with a bid of 1♦ or 1♥, and neither of these bids is now available. So this is a good overcall: the suit is good, and the bid is potentially annoying for the opponents.

Hand (ii) is stronger in terms of points, but is a much poorer overcall. Firstly the suit is weak: if our side ends up defending, we would be worried that partner will get off to a bad start by leading a Spade from, say, J 6 which will probably help declarer more than us. Also, we may deter partner from his natural lead when we can supply assistance in the other suits should he choose to lead, for example, a Heart. In addition, the hand is less strong than it looks: the bare Q J of Clubs is possibly worth nothing if the opener's values include a suit headed by the A K

Hand (iii) is, again, a poor overcall, even though (as dealer) it represents a sound, if minimum, opening bid. The suit is not good (remember that KQxxx is much less attractive than KQ109x) and we would be quite happy for partner, if he ends up on lead against the final contract, to lead his suit and find us with a helpful card or two. And the nuisance value is low; if the opener's partner were planning to respond 1♥ or 1♠ then he may still do so. And if he were going to respond 1♦ we could be in big trouble!

So, when considering an overcall, remember the following points:

- ❑ The hand need not have the values of an opening bid
- ❑ We should be more inclined to overcall if it takes up bidding space (1♠ is more of a nuisance against a 1♣ opening than if the opponents have opened 1♥ as they are deprived of two likely responses at the 1-level)
- ❑ An important factor is the quality of the suit. I would prefer to overcall 1♠ on ♠ KQJ1098 and nothing else than a flat 15 point hand with ♠ J5432 and assorted high cards!

Responding to an overcall

The general method is as follows:

- Raise a major suit overcall with 4+ card support even on minimal values. Raise with 6+ points and 3-card support to an honour
- If the overcall is in a minor suit, look for the possibility of a major suit fit before supporting partner if you have a decent suit. Any suit bid by you should be at least 5+ cards

- Do not respond with fewer than 8 points just because you do not like partner's suit. The auction may continue, and you may get to bid your suit later on
- Responses in no trumps are a bit stronger than the equivalent responses to an opening bid, as the overcall may be weaker than an opening bid. They also should include a stopper in the enemy suit
- A response in a new suit to the overcall is not 100% forcing, but partner (the overcaller) will only pass with a miserable minimum overcall
- After a new suit response to the overcall, responder will rebid his suit at minimum level or give a single raise of your suit to show a limited hand, about 8-11 points (i.e. less than an opening bid)
- Opener shows a better hand, after a response in a new suit, by:
 - A jump raise of your suit
 - Bidding the unbid suit or no trumps
 - Making a cue bid (forcing) in opener's suit, asking for more information.

The unassuming cue bid

It is rarely useful to bid the enemy suit in a natural sense, so, when partner has overcalled, this cue bid is used to show a hand with support for partner based on high card values and an interest in game. It is, of course, forcing.

It is called an unassuming cue bid because partner (who has overcalled) cannot assume anything about your holding in the opponent's suit, unlike an ordinary (control-showing) cue bid when you are looking for a slam after agreeing a trump suit.

Playing these unassuming cue bids, a direct raise of partner's suit when he has overcalled is always based on reasonable distribution and, often, limited high card values. With any hand with values to look for game, start with the UCB.

Splinter bids

A double jump in a new suit in response to partner's overcall shows:

- Values for game
- 4+ card support
- a singleton or void in the suit bid

Often the splinter bid will be in the enemy suit. Make sure that partner understands that a double jump in a new suit would also be a splinter bid.

Fit jumps

There is one additional way of raising partner which is again designed so that you and partner can envisage how well the two hands fit together.

After partner's overcall, a jump shift response used to mean "I have 16+ points with a good suit" and was forcing to game. Unfortunately the opportunity to use such a bid is very rare.

The modern style is to play that a jump shift response to the overcall shows 4+ card support for partner plus a good suit of your own. It is called a fit jump, and is like a trial bid in that it asks partner to bid game if his high cards fit well with your suit, or if he has extra values.

Here is an example:

♠ K J 8 5	West	North	East	South
♥ 4 2				
♦ A K 7 5 4	1♥	1♠	pass	3♦
♣ 6 4				

You show 4-card support and a good diamond suit. Partner will go on to game if your bid has improved his hand.

Partner, with ♠ A Q 10 6 3 will bid just 3♠, as your bid has not improved his hand.
 ♥ Q 5 3
 ♦ 4
 ♣ Q J 9 5

However, with ♠ A Q 10 6 3 he will go to 4♠, as his ♦Q must be a good card.
 ♥ 8 5 3
 ♦ Q 6 2
 ♣ K 7

Summary

- 3-card support is enough to raise partner's major suit overcall. Strain to show support to help partner and to further inconvenience the opponents
- With a limited hand but 4 or 5 card support, try to raise partner immediately, even with very limited high card values. Partner will not overestimate your strength as you have not used the UCB
- A cue bid in the enemy suit shows 10+ points and at least 3-card support for partner. It is always a try for game
- A double jump in opener's suit is a splinter bid, showing 4+ card support and a shortage in their suit. You can agree with partner that this applies to a double jump in a new suit as well
- A jump response in a new suit is best played as a fit jump, showing support for partner and a decent (not solid) suit of your own. It asks partner to reassess his hand, in particular considering if your bid has improved his hand. A fit jump is only a try for game, not a game force

Jump Overcalls

In the "good old days" a jump overcall (e.g. 1♦ by the opener, 2♠ overcall by you) announced to partner that you held a jolly good hand. In one of the standard Acol text books of forty years ago, the following hand was given as an example of this type:

♠ A K J 10 6 5 When opponent on the right opens 1♣
 ♥ A you would overcall 2♠.
 ♦ A Q 8 4
 ♣ 3 2

Unfortunately, it is a sad fact that, when the opponents open the bidding, you will not often hold such a nice hand. Thus, the frequency of this type of strong jump overcall is rather low.

In order to put the bid to more use, some players (particularly in America) began to play jump overcalls as weak, e.g.

♠ Q J 9 8 7 6 Over an opening bid on their right of 1♣
 ♥ K 10 9 they would happily overcall 2♠ (weak).
 ♦ 4 3 2
 ♣ 7

Of course, this bid does have the virtue of taking away almost two whole levels of bidding space from the opponents, and the suit is quite good. However, it is not a method of competing that is to everybody's taste!

A compromise which is more constructive than weak jump overcalls (so that there is a fair chance that we may outbid the opponents on values) but less rare than the old-fashioned strong jump overcalls is to play a jump overcall as intermediate. Our definition of this style of jump overcalls is "an opening hand with a good 6-card suit". Examples (the opponent on your right has opened 1♣):

(i) ♠ A Q 10 9 4 2
 ♥ K J 9 3
 ♦ 3 2
 ♣ 6

(ii) ♠ K J 10 8 6 5
 ♥ A Q 4
 ♦ Q 3
 ♣ 5 4

(iii) ♠ K Q 7 6 5 2
 ♥ A J 10
 ♦ Q J 9
 ♣ 2

Hand (i) is a minimum opening bid, but the suit is good and the other values are concentrated in one suit. Note that, were the Spades weaker (say A Q 5 4 3 2) I would hesitate to make a jump overcall; a simple overcall at the 1-level is better, the sixth Spade partly compensating for the poor quality of the suit.

Hand (ii) is fairly typical: the suit is quite good and the hand has opening strength.

Hand (iii) is also a typical jump overcall of 2♠. The suit is minimum in quality, but otherwise the hand is very suitable for the bid. Note the value of the concentrated honours and supporting intermediary cards in the red suits. Any cards that partner may hold outside the opener's suit will be helpful.

And a final point: if the hand is not quite right for the intermediate jump overcall (perhaps the suit is not very good, or the hand is not of opening strength) it may instead be a perfectly good simple overcall without a jump (e.g 1♣ - 1♠).

The 1 No Trump Overcall

When the opponent has opened the bidding with 1 of a suit, an overcall of 1 No Trump shows:

- 15-18 points
- a balanced hand
- a sure stopper in the suit bid by the enemy

Note that the overcall is stronger than an opening bid of 1NT. With an opponent already promising at least 12 points (and possibly a lot more) you need to have greater strength to justify bidding.

If the opponent has opened and you hold a balanced 12-14 points, then you should pass.

The hand is, in principle, balanced, although it may contain a 5-card (or even, on occasions, a 6-card) suit if an overcall in the long suit would seem inappropriate, e.g.

♠ K J 9
♥ K 3
♦ A 9 8 5 4
♣ A Q 7

If your right hand opponent opens with a bid of 1 of a suit (even diamonds) then an overcall of 1NT seems to best describe the hand.

Responding to a 1NT overcall

Responses are similar to the responses to an opening bid of 1NT, taking into consideration, of course, the stronger hand shown by the overcall:

A bid of a suit at the 2-level is natural and shows no ambition to bid further.

A new suit at the 3-level is natural and forcing to game

Note: 2♣ is Stayman

Transfers are still available if they are part of your normal methods

It is sensible to play that a bid of the enemy suit shows a hand that wishes to be in game (at least) and needs room to explore the various options.

The 1NT overcall in 4th position

When the opponent on your left has opened and this is followed by 2 passes, the situation is rather different. Although he may have a strong hand, his partner is limited to about 5 points at most as he has failed to respond to the opening bid. This suggests that your partner may have most of the remaining strength not held by the opener or you. In particular, as we have seen, your partner should pass with a balanced 12-14 point hand.

Bearing these factors in mind, it is usual for the minimum strength for bids by the player in 4th position to be reduced. Specifically, a 1NT overcall here reverts to the same strength as an opening bid, i.e. 12-14 points. With a stronger balanced hand, you must bid differently, probably starting with a takeout double. So:

West	North	East	South
1♥	1NT (15-18)		

West	North	East	South
1♥	pass	pass	1NT (12)

Responses are as for an opening bid (with due allowance for the strength shown)