

LARRY COHEN SEMINARS

FOUR-CARD OVERCALLS

THE WORLD'S WORST FIX, PLUS

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO MAKE 3NT?

A long time ago. In 1967, Ira Corn, the president of Michigan General company who was infected with a terrible case of bridge, had the idea of forming a team with the intention of defeating the Italian Blue team.

In 1968 he rounded up six experts, who moved to Dallas, Texas, where we spent all of our working hours and most of our free hours developing our methods. After we had been together for a year and a half, Ira Corn took me into his office and said that I was the only Ace who could write. He told me that I should write a book. That scared me and I demurred, but he waved his checkbook at me as if to say that I would like to write a book. He had a way of being persuasive. So I did. A few weeks later, he again took me into his office where he told me I should learn to teach bridge.

This was really scary. In college, I didn't go to classes when I was due to talk. I hated it. I begged Ira not to

insist. Instead he gave me a list of sixteen ladies in the Dallas area and told me they were waiting for me to set up the class. I asked him what I should teach. He told me that I was writing a book, and should teach them something out of that.

I taught them. At least I thought I did. Ira had chosen well. My sixteen ladies were good students. I learned that many of them were teachers. They knew what teaching was all about. Effectively, they were teaching me. They knew I was nervous. They made sure that I was comfortable at all times.

Both of Ira's requests were a turning point in my life. As a result of him, I'm here today talking about bridge.

The primary topic today is overcalling in a four-card suit at the one level.

It's a topic that brings out all kinds of emotions. Some say it's against everything that's right about bridge. This thought made me wonder. We all open 1C with three to the seven. How could overcalling with a good four-card suit not be OK?

I had a few years to think about this and when I included four-card overcalls in *Overcalls*, published in 1979, it met with all kinds of reactions.

One noted bridge author of the time, Fred Karpin, author of many good books on bridge, cornered me during the first day of the Chicago Nationals. He had a copy of *Overcalls* on the table. I thought he was going to say something good about it.

I was wrong.

He opened his talk to me with:

“Michael, I want you to take this book out of print.”

A surprise.

Seems he felt that players would follow my guidance and would end up in ridiculous contracts. I pointed out that there are four rules that apply when overcalling with a four-card suit, but he was not convinced.

We remained friends but he never changed his opinion.

Today, forty years later, I am still seeing articles saying that four-card suit overcalls is a terrible idea. I won't say who is writing about this but he recently authored one of the longest articles ever to be published in *ACBL Bulletin* arguing against four-card overcalls. There are others

who disdain four-card overcalls but occasionally admit that now and then, they do it when no one is looking. Why do they do this? They do it because they have good judgment and recognize when it is the right thing to do.

The main complaint is that it will upset my partner's estimate of how many trumps I have. Well, that works both ways. It should upset the opponents' estimate of how many trumps I have as well. Equal confusion.

Well, I'm as convinced today as I was in '79.

I'm going to share my ideas with you. I hope you will like them enough to try them.

Here's a hand to introduce this idea. As always, I'm showing auctions with no one vulnerable. If I gave examples of all hand on all of the various vulnerabilities, we would be here for a long time.

W N E S
 1D ?

AQJ9

2

K10983

K43

I have three questions for you.

ONE Do you agree that this is a good hand? Y N

TWO Would you double? Y N

THREE Do you feel you should do something? Y N

This is a good hand. What to do with it is less obvious.

This is not a double. Partner will bid hearts, which you are not ready for.

You should want to bid. The question is what to bid.

My solution is to bid 1S. I noted in the start of this discussion that people routinely open 1C or 1D with three small cards. You don't want to play in one of these three-card suits but you are willing to bid them.

I would bid 1S for many reasons. So would some of the doubters who don't approve.

ONE

I have a strong suit. Not KJ43. Not AK43. Not KQ53. These suits are frail.

KQ108 and AJ109 are OK. Good honors plus good spot cards.

My AQJ9 of spades in the hand above is good enough that it could be worth four tricks in the play.

TWO

My overcall may make life hard on the opponents' bidding. You might be surprised how important this is.

THREE

If my partner likes spades, and can invite, my hand is good enough to go to game.

FOUR

My hand is good enough to bid and 1S is the only bid I can think of.

FIVE

If my partner raises to 2S, I will pass but will expect to make it. Might make more.

SIX

I have length in their suit. I expect that LHO will lead it. I may be able to ruff a couple of diamonds in dummy. There may have been a better lead but my LHO will tend to lead his partner's suit, which I will like.

SEVEN

If partner does something other than to raise spades, I have good honors and will not be unhappy with my hand. If partner bids 2H, or 1NT, I'll let him play there. My high cards should be useful in a heart contract or in notrump. If he bids clubs, I will raise.

Some examples of what can happen if you bid 1S.

W N E S
 1D 1S

Hand One

108654

KJ43

J

AJ5

AQJ9

2

K10983

K43

North will raise to 4S. West, not knowing what your side has to work with, will lead a diamond. East will win and likely will return a trump. Even if West has the king, you should be able to take ten tricks.

Here's an example where your partner raises to 2S. You are in a four-three fit.

W	N	E	S
		1D	1S

P	2S	P	P
---	----	---	---

P

Hand Two

K83

108543

76

A75

AQJ9

2

K10983

K43

Partner has modest values. With a diamond lead, you are likely to get four spades, a diamond, two diamond ruffs in dummy, and two clubs. Nine tricks are possible. Eight tricks should be cold. Plus 110 or 140. You can't do better unless your opponents find a way to go down a lot.

W	N	E	S
		1D	1S

Dbf	1NT	P	P
-----	-----	---	---

P

Hand Three

84

QJ763

A74

Q98

AQJ9

2

K10983

K43

You got a bid from your partner. Not the one you wanted, but your hand is so good that your partner ought to bring it home. Partner needs a decent nine-count for his 1NT.

I'd expect on this hand that partner will make at least 1NT. 2NT is likely.

W N E S

1D 1S

Dbl Rdbl P ?

A discussion only. No hand.

This discussion has little to do with your hand. It has everything to do with your partner's hand. I suggest you highlight this page for future discussion with your partner.

Do you know for sure what partner is telling you? Y N

Fact. If your partner has support for your suit, he has many ways to show it. He does not need a redouble to do that. He is trying to give you a different and far more important message.

Partner's redouble is a bid that says he has ten or more points. It says he has two cards in your suit. Not zero or one, not three or more.

What it does is alert you to the fact that partner has a fair hand, news you can use, with two cards in your suit. If the bidding continues, you can choose to bid a new suit. You can choose to rebid your own suit if two-card support is enough for you. You can choose to double the opponents if you like.

Here are my rules for what it takes to overcall in a four-card suit. You do not want to break them. They are all here for a reason.

RULE ONE You *never* overcall in a four-card suit at the two level. If you overcall a four-card suit at the one level, your good suit will give you protection from some of the bad things that can happen.

If you overcall at the two level, you may find that your good suit isn't quite good enough to protect you. Further, if you bid at the two level, the rest of the bidding will be awkward.

RULE TWO When you overcall at the one level in a four-card suit, you have opening bid values. This translates to around twelve to fourteen high-card points that you like.

RULE THREE You have a good suit. (See Point One from the previous list.)

RULE FOUR You do not have a better bid such as a takeout double or a 1NT overcall.

You will see in the following example hands that having a good four-card suit does not mean overcalling is the right thing to do.

IT'S A RATHER RARE BID.

But it's worth it when used in the right way

Eleven hands where you *MIGHT CONSIDER* overcalling in a four card suit.

W	N	E	S
		1C	?

Hand One

KQ98

A3

96

KJ975

Bid 1S. Note that you have length in clubs. It's not a bad thing, as some claim. This spade suit is about minimum for a four-card overcall.

You have opening bid values.

Important: Your 1S bid hinders West's bidding. It brings invisible value to your overcall.

W N E S

1D ?

Hand Two

K76

AQJ8

762

J84

Pass. For many reasons.

One Your heart suit is good enough to bid but the rest of your values are dull.

Two Your bid does not take up any bidding room from West.

Three Your shape is bad.

Four On this hand you expect that West will lead a diamond, and you have a poor diamond holding. This means you may start with three immediate losers.

W N E S

 1S ?

Hand Three

87542

AKQ10

A3

84

Pass. It's tempting to bid 2H but you need a five-card suit to overcall at the two level after an opening one-bid. Remember. A two-level overcall contracts for eight tricks. A one-level overcall contracts for seven. That difference is real.

W N E S

1D ?

Hand Four

Q984

AKJ9

3

Q874

Double. This is a fine takeout double. You have biddable hearts but you also have support for the other two unbid suits.

W N E S

1H ?

Hand Five

QJ83

AKQ9

4

KJ43

East just bid your best suit. You still have enough to bid but what bid might you choose? Your spades are too weak to bid 1S.

Best is to pass.

But don't give up. Sometimes you get a second chance. If you pass 1H, as you should, the bidding could go this way:

W N E S

1H P

1NT P 2D Dbl

This double is takeout. They have bid the two red suits so your double shows the two black suits. Neat. You need a reasonable hand to bid this way.

W N E S
 1C ?

Hand Six

3

AJ43

KJ87

AQ74

This is another good hand. You would like to bid something. In the same way that you passed on Hand Five, you can pass here. Your practical hope is that West will bid 1S. It's almost predictable. The auction may continue this way:

W N E S
 1C P
 1S P 2S DbI

Here, they have bid clubs and spades. They have found a fit. Your double shows hearts and diamonds and a decent hand.

W N E S

1C ?

Hand Seven

QJ4

K32

KQJ8

AJ9

Bid 1NT. Far more descriptive than 1D.

W N E S

1D ?

Hand Eight

AQ108

A64

9876

K3

This hand is not exactly right for a 1S overcall, but it's close enough that bidding 1S rates to be a good choice. You do have a good suit. You can bid it at the one level. You have good values. If partner raises spades, you will be happy. If he bids anything else, your high-card points will be useful.

W	N	E	S
		1D	?

Hand Nine

AK107

3

432

AQ1087

I would bid 1S if opener had bid 1C.

But opener bid 1D.

If you bid 1S, it will be OK if partner can raise. But if he passes and they bid something, you don't dare to bid clubs now. That sequence would promise your spades were as long as or longer than your clubs.

The solution is to overcall 2C. If you have room to bid 2S on the next round, you will do that.

This auction is possible:

W	N	E	S
		1D	2C
2D	P	P	2S

This sequence tells partner you have long clubs and four spades and nice values. Your auction describes your hand exactly. A 1S overcall would put you in a no-win situation. If partner passed, a later club bid by you would promise longer spades. Partner might go back to spades when clubs was a better spot.

Hand Ten is an adventure. It is full of useful ideas. If you aren't sure about what I'm showing here, I remind you that you can later view the video and can go through this discussion again. Or you can refer to the notes. Perhaps while looking at the video.

W N E S

1H P

Hand Ten

AQ107

K32

9764

98

This hand is a bit off topic. You have nice spades. Too bad you aren't strong enough to be in the auction. When you pass, West bids 2H and opener passes. Do you have anything to say?

W N E S

1H P

2H P P ?

This is the next round of bidding. You have a chance to do something. How many here would pass?

What you have here is actually a balancing problem. This is not an overcalling problem.

Your hand was not good enough to overcall. Bidding 2S now is almost mandatory. I'll try to prove it.

First, some questions.

ONE Are the opponents happy to be in 2H?

They are. When the opponents bid and raise a major they are in the contract of their choosing. They couldn't be happier. It's a contract where they are in their best fit. They have the points to justify bidding to 2H.

TWO What kind of score do you expect? If they make it, they are going to get a very good score. If you beat it, you still won't get much. You might have had a making contract your way. In the long run, if you let them bid this way, your result will be around 20%. You can't win with results like these.

RULE

If they bid and raise a suit and try to pass it out, consider balancing. If you agree they are getting a good score if you pass, it means that if you balance and are wrong, you aren't losing much.

What you would like most is to have a hand that can make a balancing takeout double or be able to bid a suit at the two level. Here's a likely layout.

W N E S

1H P

2H P P ?

J83

95

K105

AJ1062

9542 K6

QJ7 A10864

Q8 AJ42

K753 Q4

AQ107

K32

9763

98

If room permits, keep the bidding and hand on the screen. Then add the next three paragraphs one at a time.

If East gets to play in 2H, he will make it. Might make an overtrick. 2H is their best contract. They'll get a good score.

If you bid 2S, the play will be tense but South has fair chances to make it. The queen of hearts lead gives South his king of hearts and now he is able to ruff a heart in dummy.

Predictable. If 2S goes down one, it's only 50 points and that is much better than minus 110 or 140. Even down 100 is a good result against their 2H contract.

You might ask how South can tell to bid 2S. Here's how South can judge it.

Show this frame. South has nine high-card points.

The East-West bidding shows eighteen to twenty-two high-card points.

North will have nine to thirteen high-card points.

East-West bid and raised hearts. North has one or two hearts.

All this gives South hope that North will have some spades. A 2S bid will find North with a decent to goodish hand more often than not.

The odds are in your favor. You have made worse bets when you go to Vegas.

Reminder: Most of your balancing bids will be made at the two level. If they bid and raise spades, it is dangerous to bid since you are a level higher.

IF YOU ARE WRONG, DO YOU ALWAYS GET A BAD RESULT?

No. Your opponents are human. If you bid 2S, they may conclude that you can make it and they may bid on to 3H. When this happens, you have won.

If they make it, they end up with something they always had. But they had to work harder to get it.

And, if they go down, you get something you were not getting had you passed.

One might conclude that a 2S bid is a wonderful thing. I'd agree except for an unexpected danger.

Do you know what that danger might be?

Look across the table. It's your partner. Partner is the one you have to worry about.

He may decide to bid 3S at some time.

He should know you have a lousy hand.

He should remember that you did not bid 1S over 1H.

He should be aware that you might have only four spades.

He should know that you are bidding on wishes, not facts.

The following hand offers more things to think about.

W N E S

1H ?

Hand Eleven

AKJ8

654

K73

QJ4

The spades are good enough to bid. But you should not do that. Better to make a takeout double.

This hand is not found in most books on takeout doubles. It's close to being a secret. Your partner may have five of a minor and only two spades. You may not love doubling with this hand but you do have nice high-card points. Double keeps all three of the unbid suits in play. Passing is giving up. A nice fourteen-point hand should be shown, if possible.

HOW TO RESPOND TO PARTNER'S POSSIBLE FOUR-CARD OVERCALL

You will often be faced with this situation:

W N E S

1C 1H 1S ?

874

J73

K83

A875

Bid 2H. Do not fret that your partner has a four-card heart suit. If he does, he has a sound overcall.

Here's one piece of advice you can trust.

If you have four-card support, you should raise for sure assuming you have normal values.

If you have three-card support, make this change. Do not raise with minimum values if you have three small cards in partner's suit.

Q73

853

KQ87

753

This hand has seven high-card points.

I suggest passing. Your 853 of hearts is a big warning.

873

Q53

KQ87

753

On the previous hand your queen of spades was a wishy-washy value. On this hand, you traded the queen of spades for the queen of hearts.

Bid 2H with this one.

If your partner has overcalled at the two level, you don't have to worry as much about the quality of your trumps. He has five cards and most likely they are pretty good. Here is an introduction to a topic I will discuss on another day.

W N E S
 1S ?

Hand One

872

AQ863

K4

QJ4

Do not overcall 2H. Balanced hands are worse than you want them to be. A two-level overcall should offer more than this.

Hand Two

A74

Q3

KJ543

K43

Players holding hands like this one bid 2D, thinking they have an opening bid. Which they do. They think that an opening bid and a five-card suit is worth a bid at the two level. It isn't if it looks like this one.

Hand Three

542

AKQJ4

Q8

Q94

Most bid 2H with this one but let's face it. If partner raises you to 3H, you are going to need a lot of help from his hand. I suggest passing this one. Be worried about your three small spades, opener's suit. Never a good sign.

Hand Four

43

AKJ43

AJ84

84

Bid 2H. Good suit, good shape, all values are working. And it's still not that safe. If hearts divide 5-1, something that can happen, you will be too high. Still, it's a good bid.

The point of the brief excursion into two level overcalls is to show you what your partner can expect when he is thinking of raising.

THE BIG FIX

Everyone has a sad story about how an opponent bid to a game or slam and made it as a result of some miracle. Perhaps three finesses won and they got a good break in addition. Their contract was 3% likely to succeed and it did. We have all told or heard such stories at the end of a session.

These events are called 'fixes'. You came. You paid your table fees. And you played well. The only reason you did not win is that you experienced some fix, or fixes, that were out of your control.

I have my own personal story. In this case, I was one of the 'fixers'.

Here's what my partner and I did to them. I was South.

East-West vulnerable

W N E S

1D P 4NT

P P P

J1032

AQ52

J109

KJ

KQ97

8654

4

J109863

74

A

1097543

86

A

K7

KQ86532

AQ2

I bid 4NT, hoping we would end in 7NT, but it didn't work out that way. My bid was followed by three passes.

West led the king of spades and I noted that my partner was no longer at the table. I made 5NT rather quickly, and when partner returned, he asked how many I had made. East told him that I had made eleven tricks. My partner wrote down 210 for us on the pick-up slip. East said the score should be 460. My partner looked perplexed. We sorted it out. My partner had thought that I had bid 1NT and as soon as East passed, my partner was gone. This was during the smoking days, which explained his absence.

Did we get a zero?

No, we got a 90% score.

Almost everyone got to 6D played by North. You can see that West has a singleton heart. East led his jack of hearts and when he got in with the ace of diamonds, he was able to give West a heart ruff. This was the most common result so our 460 was close to a top.

I imagine that our opponents enjoyed the hand until they saw the results.

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO BID AND MAKE 3NT?

39

Conventional wisdom says that if your side has balanced hands with twenty-six high-card points, you should be able to take nine tricks.

That was the opinion of experts back in 1960 or so.

By 1980, 3NT was thought to be makable with twenty-five high-card points or so.

As players learned more about techniques such as endplays and squeezes, that number shrank again to about twenty-four high-card points. That was near the end of the century. Blame it on BBO, good bridge books, and the internet.

Further wisdom was that if you bid to 6NT, with balanced hands, you needed about thirty-three high-card points.

You will notice that all of these opinions were based on balanced hands.

There was another item that did not get much press.
It's important.

If you play in 3NT with twenty-two balanced points opposite two jacks, your chance of nine tricks is less than if you play in 3NT with twelve points in one hand and twelve in the other. This allows you to go from one hand to the other as needed.

Toss in some distribution and long suits and tricks can be had with fewer than normal points.

An example:

North-South Vulnerable

W N E S

1S 3C P ? 3C is a preempt.

What should South bid?

J9654

A985

A8

K6

South, if he trusts North to have a sane suit for a vulnerable 3C bid, will bid 3NT. If North has the AQJ9873 of clubs, likely, South will take nine tricks. If North has only seven points, the North-South points add up to nineteen and yet, 3NT rates to be cold.

Here are a number of examples where you can put this information into effect.

No one vulnerable

W N E S

1NT 3S ?

Hand One

J4

87

AQ86432

42

Bid 3NT. East's 3S bid is annoying. Mostly, East will have a bunch of spades and a hand that would open 3S. It's a good tactic by East. If you make 3NT, you get a good score. If you bid 4D and make it, you are likely to get a less good score.

Also, it is possible that 4D will go down.

Come to think about it, is it possible that your partner will think 4D is a transfer to hearts?

Something else to think about: What if neither you nor partner has a spade stopper? That's a real possibility. And I have no answer to this.

Consider that you might try the same ploy if your RHO opens 1NT and you have something like this hand. Bid 3S and see what happens. Your LHO will often have something good and no idea how to show it.

QJ97653

3

3

QJ53

This kind of bidding reminds one of the phrase, "What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander." There's a paraphrase that might apply. "Do unto others before they do unto you."

North-South vulnerable

Hand Two

W N E S

1NT

P 3NT 4H ?

Hand Two

J64

K3

KQ6

AKJ109

More aggravation. You can double them. If you do that, and set then them three tricks, you get 500. That will be the result if East can take seven tricks. You probably can make 600 so 500 won't be a good result.

With a hand that offers a source of tricks, bidding 4NT here is a sane gamble. If partner has the queen of clubs and four or more diamonds to the ace, you have a play for ten tricks.