



Intermediate Jump Overcalls Are Best

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IT WAS a bad board in the final of the European Pairs in Antalya five years ago which got me thinking about jump overcalls. It went something like this:

Pairs. E/W Game. Dealer West.

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

West	North	East	South
Pass	Pass	1♣	1♥
1♣	Pass	4♣	End

North-South were Simon de Wijs and Bauke Muller of the Netherlands, current Bermuda Bowl champions. North led the nine of hearts which I won with the king in hand. Ace and another split out the trumps, South beginning with king-doubleton. I won the ♥Q return with the ace as North followed with the deuce. Now I led the ♥8, covered by South's ten, and I made the knowledgeable play of discarding the ♥2 from hand. South was endplayed into giving a ruff-and-discard or leading towards one of dummy's ace-jack combinations. I claimed the rest. With any justice South had both queens to justify his overcall and we would be scoring an acceptable average-plus. A moment later the Bridgmate informed me that this was not the case. This was the actual layout:

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

♠ K 8	♠ K 10 7 6 5
♥ Q J 10 9 4	♥ 9 5

1♥ on six points! At most tables South made a weak jump overcall of 2♥ and declarer had simply finessed North for both queens and made twelve tricks. My

thoughtful eleven tricks didn't score too well. I felt like the original Unlucky Expert. The real expert was Muller. His choice of 1♥ saved his partner's queens. The weak jump overcallers gave away their partners' queens, and did they make it difficult to reach 4♣? Not at all. As Terence Reese might have said, 2♥ over 1♣ is hardly an atomic bomb.

The US weak jump overcalling style has predominated in world bridge for several decades. The theory is that you want to bid as high as possible with your weak hands. With a better hand you can afford to start at the one-level, guaranteeing more or less an opening bid. Overcaller's partner advances accordingly, often scraping up a 1NT response on a misfitting 8 points or so in case overcaller has a big hand. New suit advances are forcing for one round. The trouble with this is I would like to overcall 1♣ at any vulnerability on the following:

♠ A K 10 9 2 ♥ 5 4 2 ♦ J 7 6 3 ♣ 2
Nothing like an opening bid. In fact non-vulnerable – don't tell anyone – I might like to bid 1♥ on this:

♠ 3 ♥ K J 9 4 2 ♦ J 8 3 2 ♣ 7 6 3
You see that on this occasion I am not campaigning on behalf of the Green Card Party! These disposable light infantry (Reese again) overcalls cause minor disruption in themselves, which can become major disruption if partner can raise. With extra distribution you can re-raise partner's raise to boost the pre-empt further. And they show partner the opening lead. But I don't want partner scraping up an 8-count 1NT response when I make these bids. I don't want to have to find a rebid when he advances in a new suit either! At the two-level one can't afford to be quite so gay but I'd like to slip in a non-vulnerable 2♦ over 1♥ with something like this:

♠ 2 ♥ 7 4 3 ♦ A Q 10 9 3 2 ♣ Q 4 3
without hearing 2NT every time partner's been dealt a scattering of points. On the other hand, I don't want to make the same bid on:

♠ A ♥ J 7 4 ♦ A K J 10 7 6 ♣ K 5 4
and fear that partner will pass and put down:

♠ K 7 5 3 ♥ K 2 ♦ Q 4 ♣ 10 8 6 3 2
when 3NT is cold. Better not start with a double with hands of this strength. Opponents (all three of them) will often bid enough to cause you a problem at your next turn. Starting with a double on a single-suited hand is best reserved for really strong hands.

You've probably guessed that on the hand above I endorse an intermediate jump overcall of 3♦, which partner will convert promptly to 3NT. You may think that my idea of intermediate is somewhat on the strong side, and you'd be right. It shows a hand on which you would open one of your suit and make a jump rebid of three, perhaps a little less at the two-level. Any stronger (17-18+ or so) and then you do start with a double. I advise the intermediate jump overcall at all vulnerabilities, and also in fourth seat after an opening bid and a response of one of a suit, 1NT, or a simple raise.

But what about pre-emption, you ask? True, you give up the pre-emptive value of the weak jump overcall, not that this is guaranteed to have positive effect as we saw in Antalya. On these hands you must choose between pass, a freewheeling-style simple overcall, or an aggressive pre-emptive double jump overcall. If RHO opens 1♣, be a real opponent and bid 3♥ on the following non-vulnerable:

♠ 2 ♥ K Q 10 9 7 6 ♦ J 4 3 2 ♣ 4 3

You will also enjoy some pre-emptive value from your intermediate jumps. If you overcall 3♦ over 1♥, LHO can't bid anything lower than 3♥ over it, whatever your bid shows! Often partner will be able to raise your intermediate jump to game and shut opponents out of their profitable sacrifice or making game.

And there you have it. I recommend intermediate jump overcalls as your stronger option. □



Weak Jump Overcalls Are Best

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WHEN WE first learn about bidding, the whole idea is based upon bidding contracts you can make, and keeping out of auctions when your point count suggests you shouldn't be getting involved. While this is all very civilised and gentle, we soon come to realise, when we step into the world of duplicate, that it is unrealistic and the game is not just about bidding our own hands correctly: we have to make it hard for the opponents to bid theirs to the best spot. This is why over time unwieldy bids such as Strong Twos have given way to much more destructive methods such as Weak Twos and other pre-empts. It is part of the shift towards making life difficult for the opponents, the sacrificing of constructive bidding (that occurs rarely), for destructive tools that enable us to play a better role in the auction. Look at any of the matches between the top players in world (Meckstroth and Rodwell, the Hacketts, all the Italian pairs) and you see not only accurate bidding and cardplay, but also constantly getting in the face of the opponents and putting them under pressure. But it is not only for top players: weak jump overcalls are an easy way to pre-empt and even the best players in your club or county will succumb eventually. To put it simply, pre-empting works.

One of the things that people fail to realise about weak jump overcalls is that they occur far more frequently than intermediate jump overcalls. This is particularly true when your partner has already passed and you can make life hard for the opponents. If you play intermediate jump overcalls you will be waiting until Christmas before you actually make one, as most hands are unsuitable in some way.

Have a look at these hands:

Hand A

♠ K Q 10 9 5 4
♥ 8 7 5
♦ 3
♣ 8 5 3

Hand B

♠ 8
♥ Q J 10 7 4 3
♦ Q 9 3 2
♣ 5 4

Hand C

♠ 5
♥ J 2
♦ 10 3 2
♣ A J 10 6 5 3 2

All are suitable for making a weak jump overcall, and all would be impossible to bid if you were playing intermediate jump overcalls.

The sort of weak jump overcall I am espousing is sound and sensible, with one eye on the vulnerability – nothing is worse than pre-empting for the sake of it and conceding a penalty against nothing when partner is unsuitable. Keep your weak jump overcalls for when you have a good suit with little defence and you will be a feared opponent.

Particularly when you are vulnerable, a good suit backed up with intermediate cards is hard to get at; a good example is comparing Q-J-10-9-8-7 with Q-J-5-4-3-2: the suit with the intermediate cards will play a lot better and is also harder to punish – people are less likely to make penalty passes (and penalty doubles) on A-4-3-2 than they are with A-10-9-8.

One thing about weak jump overcalls that people who don't play them appreciate is that they make the rest of the auction relatively easy to judge: the weak jumper makes his bid and then leaves the rest of the decisions to his partner. Contrast this with other jump auctions where the intermediate jump overcaller often wants to bid again and has to work out whether his partner's response was competitive or invitational.

What about the case for intermediate jump overcalls? Well, frankly, there isn't one. When you hold a good hand there is no need to jump the bidding: all this does is steal the bidding room that rightly belongs to you. Often, if you start a level higher you can't find your way to a better fit; all you do is lock yourself into one suit that might not necessarily be the right

one. Conversely, if you belong in another suit, after a weak jump overcall partner will have enough to change the suit.

Also there is the issue that you are telling the same story twice; let's say 1♥ is opened on your right at Game All:

♠ K 2 ♥ K 4 3 ♦ 4 3 ♣ A Q J 9 6 4

This is a classic intermediate jump overcall, and to make one you will have to bid 3♣. But what sort of hand would you need for a normal two-level vulnerable overcall? Exactly this one! A good six-card suit and close to opening values. What on earth is the point of having two bids that show exactly the same sort of hand? None at all. It is far more useful to follow the modern principle that the more space you consume, the fewer values you have.

Another key problem is knowing exactly what an intermediate jump overcall is. When preparing this debate an email came through from the editor: 'Before you put finger to keyboard, it would be a good idea if you agreed between you what an intermediate jump overcall is!'

The fact that no-one knows is a rather startling indictment of how useless a treatment this is. Every book you read assigns it a different point count, every person you speak to has a different idea. It's a catch-all term for a bid that no-one understands and no-one need use.

(I am always highly amused when fellow players are deciding what exactly an intermediate jump overcall is. I recall that the example hand always given by former team-mates of mine was 'something like A-K-J-10-x-x and an ace'; then an email came from Tom Townsend saying that he would assume an IJO was something like 'A-K-J-10-x-x and a couple of kings' – apparently standards have improved!)

To conclude: weak jump overcalls are an easy method that combines pre-emption with constructiveness; they occur more frequently and, most importantly, they are far more fun. □