

2-SUITED OVERCALLS: GHESTEM / MICHAELS

When the opponents open the bidding in front of you, you will sometimes hold a 2-suited hand (at least 5/5 in the two suits). This hand will, naturally, be of variable strength. How do you express it? One approach might be to Double (for take-out) but that is hardly satisfactory given that you can support two suits but not the third - that of course being the one your partner is most likely to bid. Or you might overcall one of your suits (in which case the higher ranking is to be preferred as it facilitates your rebid). That is certainly better, but you run the risk of 'losing' your second suit - or even if you don't lose it, you may not be able to convince partner of your 5/5 shape.

Far better, if you can find a way, to express your 2-suited hand with a single bid. There are two 'conventions' which enable you to do this - **Ghestem** and **Michaels**. Books are written on both of them, so this can only be a summary.

THE GHESTEM CONVENTION

Ghestem, invented by a Frenchman, Pierre Ghestem, works like this. The requirements are that an opponent has opened with 1 of a suit, and you have (at least) 5/5 distribution in two of the other three suits. You bid:

- 2NT: to show the lower two of the remaining suits
- 2 CUE (bidding the opponent's suit at the 2 level): to show the extremes (highest and lowest of the other suits)
- 3 CLUBS: showing the top two of the other suits (NB - not clubs!)

Points to note:

These bids are artificial and have to be alerted by your partner

They also have to be remembered by your partner, the 3C overcall being particularly troublesome in this regard

They also have to be remembered by you, the person making the bid, 3C again giving rise to most difficulty.

Note that when playing Ghestem you lose your natural jump overcall in clubs. Some players regard this as a significant loss - in which case they had better not play Ghestem. Likewise if you or your partner have trouble remembering artificial methods, don't go anywhere near Ghestem - you'll give Directors an enormous amount of trouble.

It is best to play Ghestem as a WIDE RANGE bid in terms of points. The beauty of the method is that partner knows your distribution precisely and should therefore be able to judge what bid to make in response. In general it is right to bid to the level of the fit. Weak or strong, or somewhere inbetween, bid aggressively with a known fit. Whether you make it is not really the point; if you have a fit, the likelihood is that so do they. Correspondingly, if you have misfitting hands you should be conservative.

Ghestem is in my view the better of the 2-suited overcalls because the two suits held by the person making the bid are immediately identified. The only fly in the ointment is that you lose your jump overcall in clubs (in which case you have to content yourself with 2C; a jump to 4C; or Pass). It's a good system.

THE MICHAELS CONVENTION

The Michaels convention is a bit harder to get your head around. It is of American origin, and to be distrusted for that reason. The parameters for its use are the same - you need at least 5/5 distribution. Some partnerships, for reasons I am not going to go into here, restrict their use of Michaels to hands that are either 'weak' or 'strong' - but not middling. That is because it can be harder to judge how high to compete on middling hands given that the two suits held by the Michaels bidder may not be immediately identified. But I assume for the moment that when you start to play Michaels you will employ it on hands that are wide-ranging in terms of strength.

You bid as follows:

- 2NT: shows the lower two of the other suits (note: this is the same as Ghestem)

Then there is a bifurcation, depending on whether the opponents have opened a major suit (Hs or Ss) or a minor (Cs or Ds).

When they open a MINOR - say 1C, you bid as follows:

- 2N: shows the lower two - so in this case, diamonds and hearts
- 2C: shows the majors - hearts and spades
- And if you hold spades and diamonds? You don't have a bid within the system. You'll probably begin by overcalling a natural 1S.

When they open a MAJOR - say 1H:

- 2NT: shows the minors
- 2H: shows Spades and a minor (at this point partner doesn't know which minor, although he may be able to find out later in the auction).

As you can see, on some auctions the responder to the Michaels bid does not know both her partner's suits. This can inhibit pre-emptive action, which is one reason why I don't like the method.

With other holdings there is no way within the method to convey your 5/5 shape with a single bid - another drawback.

Having a 2-suited overcall in your armoury is very useful on some hands. However - and this is a very big note of caution - you and your partner need to remember it, and you need to fully understand the continuations. You need to agree with partner how she is expected to respond - both with a fit and, less conveniently, with a misfit. Then the world's your oyster (maybe).

GD