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This Week in Bridge

(235) Sandwich Seat Overcalls

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Levels: 1, 2, 3

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General

When our left-hand opponent (LHO) opens the bidding with a suit at the 1-level (1♣, 1♦, 1♥, or 1♠) and right-hand opponent (RHO) responds, then we are in the “*Sandwich Seat*”, sandwiched between two bidders. In this position we need to use good judgement about when to enter the auction and with what call to best describe our hand. Let’s look at our overcalling options and what we should be considering when faced with this decision.

Simple Overcalls in the Sandwich Seat

Level 1

In the sandwich seat we know that our LHO has an opening hand and our RHO has at least enough values to respond. That means that often most of the opponents’ values will usually be located behind us. We should usually have an opening hand with a good suit for making a 2-level overcall. Here, we need to be careful when we have broken suits or a hand with lots of tenaces, because the missing honors are more likely to be located behind us. Having a good suit is an important part of making an overcall in this seat.

Example 1

1♣ P 1♠ __?

♠ A63

♥ KQT873

♦ A53

♣ 4

This is an example of a sound 2♥ overcall in the sandwich seat. It has a quality 6-card suit, a good amount of values (13 HCP), and some shape (it is not 5332 or 6322).

Example 2

1♣ P 1♠ __?
 ♠ Q53
 ♥ KJ762
 ♦ K87
 ♣ K5

In contrast, this 13 HCP with scattered values not appropriate for making a 2-level overcall.

Since partner failed to act after LHO's opening bid they will usually not have a fabulous hand. Knowing this, we might stretch to make an overcall in the sandwich seat with a powerful suit and fewer values than a normal opening bid.

Example 3

1♣ P 1♠ __?
 ♠ 832
 ♥ 52
 ♦ KQJ95
 ♣ A83

With this hand we want to make certain that partner leads a ♦, not a ♥, against most any contract - certainly against 3NT. We stretch to overcall 2♦, even with only 10 HCP, because we have a powerful suit and want to ensure that partner gets off to the best opening lead! This is sometimes called a lead-directing overcall.

All these sandwich seat overcalls that we have discussed so far are made at the 2-level. But it is possible to make a sandwich seat overcall at the 1-level.

Examples

1♣ P 1♦ 1♥/1♠
 or
 1♣/1♦ P 1♥ 1♠

Even though the opponents' honors are more likely to be located behind us (instead of us behind them, like in a direct seat overcall situation), these 1-level overcalls are made aggressively and without too much concern for being in the sandwich seat.

Preemptive Jump Overcalls in the Sandwich Seat

Level 1

Just as in the direct seat, we use jumps to the 3-level or 4-level (or 2-level if it's a jump) as preemptive jump overcalls when we are in the sandwich seat. These bids show long, usually strong, suits and less than opening values – about 5 to 11 HCP. Jumps in the unbid suits at the 3-level are usually 7-card suits (though good 6-card suits are possible), while jumps in the unbid suits at the 4-level usually show an 8-card suit (though a good 7-card suit is possible).

Again, in the sandwich seat, we know that our LHO is likely to have a better hand than our RHO and we must be careful when bidding with a hand with bare honors or lots of tenaces. The best hands for bidding in these situations have long strong suits, with lots of touching honors – AK, KQ, QJ, KJT, etc. We use these subtle hand evaluation techniques to help keep us out of trouble when making simple or preemptive jump overcalls in the sandwich seat!

Example 4

1♦ P 1♥ __?
♠ KJ8743
♥ 872
♦ K4
♣ Q4

With this hand that contains lots of bare honors, it is best to pass.

Example 5

1♦ P 1♥ __?
♠ KQT743
♥ 872
♦ A4
♣ 74

With this hand that has the same number of HCP and the same shape, it is best to bid 2♠ as a preemptive jump overcall. The strong suit with touching honors and the outside Ace (instead of poorly positioned King) make this seemingly similar hand much better for preempting the bidding.

2-Suited Overcalls in the Sandwich Seat

Level 2

When the opponents have bid two different suits, opening the bidding on our left and responding on our right, then we have a variety of options for how to describe our hand. Let's look at some examples to help us understand these bidding options in the sandwich seat.

Example 6

1♦ P 1♠ __?

- 2♣ Natural, a decent 5+card ♣ suit, usually 12+ points.
- 2♥ Natural, a decent 5+card ♥ suit, usually 12+ points
- 2♠ (Suit bid on right) Natural, usually good 6+card ♠ suit and more than opening values.
- 2♦ (Suit bid on left) Other 2 suits, usually 9+cards, either suit could be longer, 8+ points
- 2NT More preemptive bid to show unbid suits (♥ and ♣). At least 5/5 shape, 5-11 HCP.

Other Actions

- X Takeout, at least 4-4 in the unbid suits (♥ and ♣), usually 11+ HCP.
- 1NT Natural, usually 15-18 HCP, balanced hand with stoppers in the other suits.

The meaning of these bids is similar if responder bids 1NT, instead of another suit.

Example 7

1♥ P 1NT __?

- 2♣ Natural, a decent 5+card ♣ suit, usually 12+ points.
- 2♦ Natural, a decent 5+card ♦ suit, usually 12+ points
- 2♠ Natural, a decent 5+card ♠ suit, usually 12+ points.
- 2♥ (Suit bid on left) Michaels style, 5+♠ and 5+card minor, usually 5-11 HCP.
- 2NT Unusual NT style, at least 5/5 minors, usually 5-11 HCP.

Other Actions

- X Takeout for ♥, usually 11+ HCP.

The general idea is that bidding new suits is natural, as is bidding Responder's suit (the suit well-positioned relative to your suit). Bidding 2NT, Opener's suit, or a takeout double all show the other two suits – progressing from more distributional to more value-showing.

Opponents Bid and Raise a Suit (OBAR)

Level: 3

When the opponents find a fit, particularly at a low level, we tend to compete in the bidding much more aggressively. We do so because we do not want to them to buy the contract at a low level when they have a known fit. This is an application of the Law of Total Tricks (LOTT) as a defensive bidder – we know they are will be happy playing at the 2-level if they have an 8+card fit, so we do not want to let them buy the contract there. Traditionally, the player that stretches to compete in the auction after the opponents have bid and raised a suit is the member of our partnership who is short the opponent's suit. But this is primarily effective for competing with 3-suited and 2-suited hands, often allowing us to stretch to make a takeout double or use other conventional competitive bids, like Michaels or Unusual NT. Another time that we may stretch to compete in these auctions is when we have an extremely good suit. In this case, we may overcall at the 2-level, or even 3-level, with fewer values than normal because we want to stretch to compete in the bidding. This approach to competitive bidding aggressively when the opponents have found a fit is often referred to as OBAR bids – “Opponents Bid And Raised” (or it is sometimes called “pre-balancing”).

Conclusion

Bidding in the sandwich seat can be a bit of art form. You should treat this situation like making an overcall in the direct seat, either at the 1-level or the 2-level, but try to incorporate some better judgment about the quality of your hand and the nature (location relative to the opponents) of your honors. Since partner did not bid after RHO's opening bid you know that they likely will not have a large number of values. This allows you to stretch to make tactical overcalls with the appropriate hands, like making an overcall with a very strong suit to help get partner off to the right opening lead. Work on developing your judgement about these sandwich seat overcalls and learn to get in to and out of the auction safely and effectively!