



The Next Level: Week 13

Competing in the Bidding when the opposition open 1-of-a-suit, Part 1

In this lesson I want to focus on the very common situation where opponents have opened the bidding with **1 of a suit**, and you need to decide what to do. It is a different situation when opponents open 1NT – we already dived in at the deep end to discuss that on Week 2 - when we explored the Cappelletti system.

When the opposition open 1 of a suit, very often you'll have to pass, but sometimes your hand is suitable to compete. This lesson is intended to help to decide if you can compete, and if so, how.

A general point is that if you have a suitable hand to compete, **do so at the first opportunity**. Don't hold back and pass, to wait to see what happens: you might find that next time the bidding comes round to you, it's too late – the bidding has got too high – or the hand will be passed round and you won't even get a second chance. Or sometimes your bid would have allowed partner to bid, which he/she wouldn't be able to do opposite a pass, and you and partner miss your chance.

Why compete? Won't you be giving useful information to the opposition? Yes, of course, but you're also giving information to partner. Possibilities are:

- You can find a fit with partner, and win the contract, either to make, or to sacrifice (go down, but give away fewer points than the opposition would get by making their contract)
- You can use up bidding space, making it awkward for the opposition to find their best contract.
- By competing you can push opponents too high, so that they will go down, where they could have made a lower-level contract.
- Helps partner to know what to lead, if you do end up defending the hand.

What sorts of hands should you compete with?

- 1 You hold a hand of at least opening strength, shortage in opponents' suit, and tolerance for the other suits. With this type of hand your bid is **X**. It's called a "**take-out double**" because you're not looking for penalties, but asking partner to take out into his/her best suit. You are trying to find the best fit between yourself and partner, to play. *[Note: some partnerships agree that if opponents open 1 of a major, a take-out double promises at least 4 cards in the other major, or at least 3 good ones: this is a matter for personal choice, but I rather like this arrangement myself]* If the opponent on your left passes after your **X**, the bidding comes round to your partner, and he/she is obligated to bid his/her best suit, even with zero points. The exceptions are
 - i. Partner has a flat hand, with no good suit to bid- for example, partner's longest suit might be the opposition opener's. He/she bids NT, saying to partner "you choose".
 - ii. Partner has a fistful of opponents' opening suit. In this circumstance they can pass, converting your take-out double into a penalty double.

Note that since your partner is forced to bid even with nothing, you as the doubler will not assume any strength in your partner's hand when they respond. Therefore, in response to your take-out double, if your partner has some strength, he/she should respond at one level higher than the lowest possible, to indicate strength and/or a good suit. Generally, 8+ HCP are required, or 7 HCP and a good suit.

- 2 You hold a strong, balanced hand (16-19 high card points) and a stop in opponents' suit. In this case, you should overcall 1NT. This bid describes your hand very well to partner.
- 3 You have a decent suit of your own. This is by far the most common situation. What is important here is the length and strength of your **suit**, not so much the overall strength of your hand. An essential guide is the **Suit Quality Overcall Test (or SQOT)**. Add the number of cards in **your suit**, which is a minimum of 5 for an overcall, to the number of honours (A,K,Q or J) you hold **in that suit**. If the answer comes to the number of tricks you are bidding for, or better, bid it. So, for example, if your suit is ♠, and the opposition have opened 1♦, you can overcall at the 1-level, so your SQOT must come to at least 7. On the other hand, if the opposition open 1♠, and your suit is ♦, then if you overcall in ♦ it needs to be at the 2-level, and your SQOT must come to at least 8. Note: **DON'T OVERCALL IN A SUIT WITH ONLY 4 CARDS!**

And don't worry about the overall strength of your hand- focus on the suit you want to bid, and you won't go far wrong. And don't worry too much about vulnerability – clearly you are going to be more cautious when vulnerable, but that judgement too will come later, with more experience.

So, when you make a simple suit overcall, you might have quite a weak hand, or quite a strong one— your overcall is unlimited in strength. Your partner will know you satisfy the SQOT for the suit you've bid, and make no further assumptions. This can be clarified further on in the bidding.

The Weak Jump Overcall (WJO)

This is a superb weapon to have in your armoury, but of course it needs partnership agreement. I highly recommend it. When opponents open 1 of a suit, and you overcall in a new suit **one level higher** than the minimum (eg they open 1♦, and you overcall 2♠) you are showing a weak (ie limited strength hand) with a good suit of at least 6 cards. It is very useful, a bit like using weak-two opening bids, as it crops up quite a lot, and its pre-emptive effect really cuts down the opposition's options. Your partner will know you are weak, and won't get carried away.

Playing WJO, you keep standard suit overcalls for the circumstances in 3 above, and play them as unlimited.

Note that you should play Weak Jump Overcalls for the sort of hand you'd have opened with a Weak 2 if you'd been dealer. If to make a Weak Jump Overcall you need to go to the 3 level (eg 1♠ – 3♦), then you need a 7-card suit – the sort of hand you'd have opened with a pre-emptive 3 level bid.

Examples:

Everyone vulnerable. The opponent on your right is dealer, and opens 1♥. It is now you to bid. What is your call?

a) ♠ A J 8 7 4 ♥ 6 3 ♦ Q 8 6 ♣ 9 3 2

Only 7 points, but a spade suit with a SQOT of 7. It's a very good idea to bid 1♠ here, as it cuts down opposition bidding space, gives a lead indication to partner if you end up defending, and might even find partner with some spade support (ie 3 or more cards).

