

At duplicate pairs, it seldom pays to allow the opponents to play in a 1-level contract. If you are fourth in hand, and your left-hand opponent's opening bid has been followed by two Passes, it is your responsibility to get involved in the auction if at all possible. This will often mean bidding on hands that you would have Passed on had your right-hand opponent opened the bidding, rather than your left-hand opponent.

The opponents open the bidding with One Club and your partner overcalls 1NT. What would you, North, bid with this hand :

♠ A106
♥ 974
♦ Q652
♣ A82

Maybe this is too easy. Partner has shown a strong, balanced hand with 16-18 points so you have an obvious raise to 3NT ... or do you ? Let me show you the auction :

W	N	E	S
1C	NB	NB	1NT
NB	?		

Does this make any difference to your decision ?

A 1NT overcall usually shows a strongish, balanced hand in the 16-18 point range, *but only when the overcall is made directly after an opponent's opening bid*. In the auction above, South has overcalled 1NT in the protective position (ie after an opponent's opening bid is followed by two Passes). This protective 1NT overcall shows a weaker, balanced hand in the 11-15 point range.

In fact, partner has this hand :

♠ K82
♥ AJ103
♦ J93
♣ Q104

If you think that bidding on this 11-point hand is very risky, ask yourself how the high cards are distributed around the table. Your partner is certain to have at least 5 points (if West has 19 and East has 5), will very likely have more, and could easily have 13 or 14. If partner has, say, 9 or more points, he is likely to have a fairly balanced hand too. Why ? Because he'd otherwise have overcalled in his longest suit. It is possible, perhaps probable, that your side has the balance of high card strength. If that's the case, you have to be able to compete in the auction whenever you have a balanced hand such as North's above. If you don't bid, well, your opponents will always look forward to playing against you !

What if the player in the protective position has a balanced 16-18 point hand ? In that case, you should double the opening bid, intending to rebid in No Trumps on the next round. Look at these two auctions :

(i)	W	N	E	S
	1C	1NT		
(ii)	W	N	E	S
	1C	NB	NB	Dbl
	NB	1X	NB	1NT

North's 1NT overcall in auction (i) (16-18, balanced) is equivalent to South's 1NT rebid in auction (ii).

So, back to the original question :

♠ A106	W	N	E	S
♥ 974	1C	NB	NB	1NT
♦ Q652	NB	?		
♣ A82				

Facing a balanced 11-15 point hand, it might be possible to make 9 tricks in 3NT if partner has a maximum hand. However, with this flat 10-point hand, the sensible action is to Pass.

There are always some exceptions. What would you, South, do in this situation :

♠ 6	W	N	E	S
♥ K1084	1H	NB	NB	?
♦ J83				
♣ AJ962				

Should you make a protective overcall of 2C ?

It's probably a bad idea. You know that partner has some points, perhaps a hand of opening bid strength, *yet he failed to overcall One Spade*. He is likely to have at most four cards in the suit, and that means East/West have at least eight spades between them. Also, partner failed to make a take-out Double, so maybe he has a few hearts in his hand ... perhaps a weak no-trump type of hand. The percentage call is to Pass. Overcalling Two Clubs might allow them to discover a spade fit. Defending a One Heart contract, especially if the opponents are vulnerable, looks a decent proposition.

Enjoy your bridge !