

The Exciting World of Bridge – Lesson 6

The Art of the Overcall

Up to now each partnership has been able to bid back and forth without any interference from the opponents. We've assumed that once one side has opened the bidding, the opponents quietly pass. Now we are going to happen in a competitive auction, where both sides are bidding. Let the real fun begin!!

There are several advantages to competing when your opponents have opened the bidding.

- 1) To try to buy the contract for your side.
- 2) To make the bidding more difficult for the opponents.
- 3) To push the opponents higher on the Bidding Scale.
- 4) To help your side when you are defending.

There are also some disadvantages.

- 1) You might be left to play in your contract and be defeated.
- 2) You'll give information to the opponents.

Before we look at how to compete, we'll look at another danger.

More on Scoring

On every deal, your side is either non-vulnerable or vulnerable. How vulnerability is determined depends on a number of factors. For now, all you need to know is that vulnerability affects the scoring. The bonuses for making contracts and the penalties for being defeated are bigger when you are vulnerable.

Another new element that affects the scoring is the penalty double. If your opponents bid to a contract you don't think they will make, you can say double when it is your turn to call. You can double only the opponents' contract, not your own. A double doesn't end the auction unless it's followed by three passes. If someone bids, the double is no longer in effect. The effect of the double is to increase the penalty if the contract is defeated and increase the score if the contract is made.

The penalty for going down in a doubled contract when non-vulnerable is 100 points for the first undertrick, 200 points each for the second and third undertricks and 300 points for the fourth and subsequent undertricks. The penalty when vulnerable is 200 points for the first undertrick and 300 points each for subsequent undertrick.

When you are considering bidding in competition, scoring becomes important. Observe the following chart and notice the differences that vulnerability and whether or not you are doubled makes to the score. You are in 3♥ and are defeated two tricks.

	Nonvulnerable	Vulnerable
Undoubled	100	200
Doubled	300	500

If you are vulnerable, you must be more careful when competing. The penalties for going down are much greater, especially if you are doubled.

The Overcall

The simplest competitive action you can take is the overcall. When an opponent opens the bidding, you can make a bid or call over your opponent's bid. An overcall can be made at the one level or the two level (or even higher). You can overcall in a suit or in notrump. When you make an overcall in a suit, you should have at least a five-card suit. Overcalling is similar to opening the bidding. However, sometimes you must start the auction at the two level.

Here are some examples (your right-hand opponent has opened 1♦):

1) ♠AQ742	2) ♠A42	3) ♠A42
♥76	♥76	♥KQ7
♦JT8	♦A8	♦KJT2
♣AK5	♣AKT975	♣KJ2

In the first example, you would overcall 1♠. In the second, 2♣. In the third 1NT.

Strength and Shape for an Overcall

When you overcall, you run some risk. The opponents have opened the bidding, indicating they hold some strength. It's as though they have landed the first blow in a fight. Let's look at what you need to consider before competing.

Your hand: ♠A72 ♥KQJ93 ♦754 ♣92

If you were Dealer, would you open this hand? With 10HCP and 1 length point, we should pass with this hand. How about if your right-hand opponent has opened 1♣ or 1♦? Now we should want to overcall 1♥. What would you hope to accomplish by bidding this suit? You expect to interfere with the opponents' bidding, compete for the contract, tell partner something about your hand and perhaps push the opponents too high.

Would it make a difference if the opponent on your right opened 1♠? Yes. To overcall 2♥ would be more dangerous.

Let's look at another hand: ♠Q4 ♥K873 ♦AJ2 ♣K962

If you were the opening bidder, you would open this hand 1♣. However, if your right-hand opponent has opened the bidding with 1♣, you should pass with this hand.

When you overcall, you should have at least a five-card suit, whether you are bidding a major or a minor suit. A five-card suit provides some measure of protection against a possible penalty double. Try to have a six-card suit to overcall at the two level. Although overcalling is similar to opening the bidding, in competitive situations it sometimes pays to be more aggressive. You should have between 8-17 HCP (10-18 total points) for an overcall. Overcalls at the two level suggest a hand that is strong enough to have opened the bidding. To overcall 1NT, you should have a balanced hand with 15-18 HCP and a stopper in the opponents' suit.

Advancing After an Overcall

When you respond to partner's overcall, you are called the Advancer. Obviously, you are a responder in this situation, but it will be clearer if you think of the responder to the overcaller as the Advancer when discussing competitive auctions.

When you are the Advancer, you can do all the same things that you can do when partner opens the bidding. You can pass, raise partner's suit, show a new suit of your own or bid notrump. There is one additional thing that you can do and that is to make a cuebid. A cuebid is the bid of a suit first mentioned by the opponents. The cuebid is really the only truly forcing call that the Advancer can make in our bidding system, and it promises a limit raise or better in the overcaller's suit. The cuebid asks the Overcaller about the quality of the overcall. With a minimum hand, the overcaller would just rebid the original suit of the overcall. Any other bid by the overcaller shows an opening hand.

However, if the Advancer knows there is game, even when the Overcaller has a minimum bid, the Advancer should bid game directly and not worry about using the cuebid.

The most important thing to say about bidding as the Advancer is that you want to take the bidding to the level that will be best for your side, remembering that your final contract may be doubled for penalty. If you have support for your partner, it is important to show it right away, in case you run into interference from your opponents. You should keep in mind that your partner as the overcaller may not have an opening hand if the overcall is made at the one level.

To decide how to advance the bidding when your partner has overcalled, it would be nice to be able to use the same responses as when our partner opens the bidding. However, since we may be advancing the bid when our partner does not have an opening hand, we have to be more cautious with our responses. The main reason we respond with a six-point hand when partner opens is that partner could have 19-21 HCPs and we might belong in game – so we must bid. When partner overcalls, this is not the case, since the maximum total points partner could have is 18.

So, with a minimum hand, 8 or 9 total points, you will raise overcaller's suit with support or bid a new suit at the one-level with no support and a good five-card suit of your own.

With a limit raise or better hand, more than 10 total points, you can bid a good suit of your own, make a cuebid or just bid game on your own. Let's see how this works.

On our first three examples, our left-hand opponent has opened 1♣ and our partner has overcalled 1♠.

- 1) ♠A87 ♥T9 ♦K763 ♣J752 - bid 2♠
- 2) ♠J632 ♥9 ♦KQ87 ♣Q876 - bid 2♣
- 3) ♠KT763 ♥- ♦AJ82 ♣QT73 – bid 4♠

This time our left-hand opponent has opened 1♣ and our partner has overcalled 1♥.

- 4) ♠9732 ♥Q2 ♦K863 ♣753 – pass
- 5) ♠AQJ85 ♥T4 ♦K83 ♣J42 – bid 1♠
- 6) ♠QT8 ♥76 ♦KT63 ♣KJT7 – bid 1NT

When advancing to a one-level overcall, raise directly with three-card or longer support. Raise to the two level with 8 or 9 total points, and begin with a cuebid with 10 or 11. Bid game if you have enough total points opposite a minimum overcall. You may wonder what a jump to the three level in the overcaller's suit would mean. This is a preemptive bid that we will learn more about later. If you can't raise, bid as though you were responding to an opening bid, but pass with only 6 or 7 points. Remember, if you want to advance with a notrump bid, you must have a stopper in the opponent's suit.

Advancing After a 2-Level Overcall

When partner overcalls at the two-level, it promises an opening hand with a maximum of 17 total points. Keep this information in mind if you decide to advance the overcall.

For these examples, your left-hand opponent has opened 1♠ and your partner has overcalled 2♥.

- 1) ♠KT73 ♥J4 ♦QJ62 ♣742 – pass
- 2) ♠A8 ♥KJ5 ♦QT62 ♣J542 – bid 2♠
- 3) ♠J3 ♥AT72 ♦AKJ8 ♣T42 – bid 4♥

Advancing After a 1NT Overcall

This is the easiest one of all. If your partner overcalls 1NT, you should act as if they had opened 1NT and do exactly what you would have done in that situation.

Your opponent has opened 1♦ and your partner overcalled 1NT.

- 1) ♠4 ♥976532 ♦QJ7 ♣642 – transfer to hearts intending to pass
- 2) ♠KJ3 ♥Q96 ♦AJ3 ♣7542 – bid 3NT
- 3) ♠8753 ♥K962 ♦T83 ♣75 – pass