

### The Simple Suit Overcall

When a player opens the bidding, he has hopes that it will be the start of a dialogue with his partner that will result in them arriving at game or even slam. When a player, after the opponents open, enters the bidding with an overcall, he may hope to outbid them and buy the final contract.

Almost equally important, however, is that the player making the overcall may disrupt the opponents' bidding sequence, take up bidding space and make it difficult for them to arrive at the right final contract.

For an overcall, playing strength (i.e. the ability to take tricks with your suit as trumps) becomes more important than points or high cards. The strength of the suit bid is rather more important than when you are opening the bidding. The better the suit, the more likely it is that you have a sound overcall. In fact, a strong suit is practically enough in itself to make an overcall sound.

Also, the weaker you are (in terms of points) the more likely it is that you will eventually be outbid by the opponents and that your side will end up defending. In this situation, it is even more important that your suit is good, because if partner is on lead (which he will be half the time when your side is defending) he is very likely to start by leading your suit.

### The suit quality test

A suit overcall at the 1-level usually shows a hand in the 8-16 point range with a good suit of at least 5 cards.

Occasionally, you may choose to overcall in a very strong 4-card suit at the 1-level, perhaps to encourage partner to lead the suit, or because you feel that you ought to bid and alternatives are unattractive. The 4-card suit should contain at least three high honours, e.g. AKQ9, KQJ8, AQJ7, AKJ10.

There is a good way of deciding, on minimum hands, whether it is worth bidding. We look at the strength of the long suit and apply the Suit Quality Test.

Count how many cards are in the suit. Add the number of honours (only count the 10 or jack if there is a higher honour in the suit as well). This total is the SUIT QUALITY.

A Q J 7 4      has suit quality 8: you count 5 cards in the suit + 3 honours

A J 8 5 4 3      also has suit quality 8: 6 cards in the suit + 2 honours

J 8 6 5 4 3      counts as 6 for the 6 cards in the suit. There are no points to add for honours: the jack does not count as there is no higher honour accompanying it

### Applying the suit quality test

If you are considering an overcall at the 1-level on minimum values (e.g. about 8-10 points, less than opening strength) then the suit quality should be at least 7. You should note that the 4-card suits that were considered suitable for an overcall at the 1-level (e.g. AKQ9, KQJ8, AQJ7, AKJ10) all passed this suit quality test.

If your overcall is at the 2-level, the suit quality should be 8 as a minimum. An overcall at the 2-level should always be based on a 5-card or longer suit.

Remember it like this: the suit quality should be as high as the number of tricks needed in order to make your contract: 7 at the 1-level, 8 at the 2-level

With extra high-card strength the suit quality may be slightly less, although overcalls on bad suits are best avoided.

♠ K Q 10 9 6

♥ 6 5 2

♦ 7 4

♣ K 10 8

The opponent opens 1♣. Should you overcall 1♠?

Verdict: overcall 1♠

This represents a sound overcall of 1♠. The suit is good (suit quality 8), and if we end up defending we would be happy for partner to start by leading the spades.

In addition, we have made a bid that may well inconvenience the opponents, for responder may have been ready to bid 1♦ or 1♥, and neither of these bids is now available.

♠ K 5 4 3 2

♥ K 8 5

♦ Q 3 2

♣ Q J

Over 1♣, do we overcall 1♠?

Verdict: do not overcall. pass.

This hand is stronger than hand (i) in points, but is a rather poor overcall. Firstly the suit is weak (quality 6): if our side ends up defending, we would be worried that partner will get off to a bad start by leading a spade from, say, ♠ J 6 which will probably help declarer more than us.

And we may deter partner from his natural lead when we can supply help in any other suit he may choose to lead. Finally, the hand is less strong than it looks: the bare Q J of clubs is possibly worth nothing if opener's values include a suit headed by the ♣ A K

♠ Q 2

♥ K J 5

♦ K Q 5 3 2

♣ J 8 6

Do we bid 1♦ over 1♣?

Verdict: perhaps overcall, but do not be too proud of it.

Hand (iii) is, again, a less attractive overcall than hand (i), even though (as dealer) it represents a sound, if minimum, opening bid. The diamond suit is not particularly good - remember that KQxxx is much less attractive than KQ109x.

We would be quite happy for partner, if he ends up on lead, to lead his suit and find us with a helpful card or two. Also, the nuisance value is low; if responder were planning to bid 1♥ or 1♠ then he may still do so. However, with opening values it would not be wrong to overcall. This hand is borderline.

#### Simple Overcalls: summary

When considering an overcall, remember the following points:

- The hand need not have opening bid values. A decent suit plus a high card outside is enough at the 1-level, but rather more at the 2-level (i.e. approaching opening values).
- We should be more inclined to overcall if it takes up the opponents' bidding space. A 1♠ overcall is more of a nuisance against a 1♣ opening than if they have opened 1♥ as they are deprived of two potential responses at the 1-level
- An important factor is the quality of the suit. I would prefer to overcall 1♠ on ♠ KQJ1098 (suit quality 10) and nothing else than a flat 15 point hand with ♠ J5432 (suit quality 5) and assorted high cards!

#### **Responding to simple overcalls**

When partner opens the bidding, you can often look at your hand and form a good impression of the combined potential.

Your initial response and the way in which you develop the subsequent auction will be guided by questions such as

- Do we have a game?
- Do we have a slam?
- Which suit is best?
- Should we stay in a part-score?

However, when one of the opponents has announced the strength to open the bidding, the chances of you being able to make a slam, or even a game, are greatly reduced.

Now the relevant questions are probably

- How high should we compete?
- Is it possible for us to make a game?
- What suit would I like partner to lead if we end up defending?

The opening bidder has expectations of his side playing the hand for a plus score. The overcaller has thoughts of pointing the defence in the right direction and making life more awkward for the enemy. Since the objectives are different, it is entirely reasonable for the subsequent bidding to be different too. The questions to answer are:

- How strong are raises of partner's suit?
- If partner overcalls, should a new suit by you be forcing?
- What should a cue-bid (e.g. 1♣ - 1♥ - pass - 2♣) mean ?
- What should a bid of 1NT, or a jump to 2NT, show?

I will look at the latter two cases next week.

**Be positive and aggressive with a fit for partner's suit, cautious without**

#### Responding to partner's overcall: raising his suit

The single raise (e.g. 1♣ - 1♥ - pass - 2♥)

This is pretty much the same as a single raise when partner has opened the bidding, except that your range is slightly wider, about 5-10 points. This seems a wide range, but in practice it's not so bad. The objection is that bidding games is more difficult, but that is less important than after partner has opened. What is important is getting a firm foundation, i.e. the trump suit, so that your side can compete effectively.

Your trump support can be more limited. Remember that, although he may be rather weaker than an opening bid, partner should promise a decent, 5-card or longer, suit (especially if he overcalls at the 2-level).

Here is a typical situation

West	North	East	South	As South, you hold
1♣	1♥	pass	?	♠ Q J 8 6 4
				♥ K 8 7
				♦ 9 7 4
				♣ 4 2

When you have good trump support (and Kxx opposite an overcall is good support) you should raise. Your bid is 2♥ to tell partner that you are happy for your side to compete in hearts. Bidding 1♠ would suggest no liking for partner’s suit, and pass would make life too easy for the enemy.

West	North	East	South
1♣	1♠	pass	?
As South, you hold			
			♠ K J 8 7
			♥ 3
			♦ 10 8 7 4 3
			♣ 4 3 2

What do you bid?

Good trumps and useful distribution. Bid 2♠. Even with a minimum(!) it is a clear raise. And think how difficult you are making it for the opener if he has a strong hand. If he has another suit to show (e.g. hearts) he will have to bid it at the 3-level and risk partner, wanting to give simple preference, returning to his club suit at the 4-level!

West	North	East	South
1♣	1♠	pass	?
As South, you hold			
			♠ 8 6 2
			♥ A Q 6 4 3
			♦ 8 7 4 3
			♣ 4

What do you bid?

This hand is a clear raise to 2♠. Your hand will be very useful to partner, with 3-card trump support, a decent suit of your own and a ruffing value. Your first duty is to confirm to partner that your side has found a fit, perhaps allowing you to compete further. Do not bid 2♥ which would show a different sort of hand.

West	North	East	South
1♣	1♠	pass	?
As South, you hold			
			♠ Q 10 8
			♥ 6 4 3
			♦ K J 8 7
			♣ Q J 2

What do you bid?

Again you should raise to 2♠. Your hand is balanced, but with 3 trumps and fair values it would be wrong not to support partner. Do not bid no trumps - it is nearly always right to confirm a suit in which you are able to compete, and you also raise the level of the bidding to inconvenience the opponents.

**Showing stronger support for partner's overcall**

The double raise (e.g. 1♣ - 1♠ - pass - 3♠)

Immediate raises of partner's overcall are nowadays played as being based on distributional support rather than high cards. They are usually based on 4-card or better support, although since partner has strongly suggested a 5-card or longer suit, then a raise with 3 trumps and a ruffing value is also fine.

The high card strength may be quite limited, as there are other ways of raising partner when you have good high card values, as we shall see.

West	North	East	South
1♣	1♠	pass	?

As South, you hold

♠ J 8 7 6  
♥ 3  
♦ K Q 4  
♣ A 10 9 7 5

What do you bid?

Raise to 3♠. If partner has anything like a decent hand you could make game. Knowing you hold 4 trumps and a shapely hand, partner is well-placed to make the right decision.

**Responding to partner's overcall: Introducing a new suit**

If partner opens the bidding, a change of suit response (e.g. 1♣ - 1♥) is forcing. This is because your side may have a game or slam, and the change-of-suit-forcing principle gives you room to explore.

When the opponents open and your side overcalls, you have different objectives. You are trying to find the best fit in which to compete and to take bidding space away from the opponents (i.e. be a nuisance) in the process. You may perhaps bid a game, but it will come as a pleasant surprise.

It seems to me that if your principal aim is to find a fit, then it should be as easy as possible to show your suits. It is therefore sensible to treat a new suit response as non-forcing.

Here is a typical situation

West	North	East	South	As South, you hold
1♣	1♥	2♣	?	♠ K 6 4 ♥ 3 ♦ A K J 10 9 4 ♣ 10 7 6

What do you bid now? If you bid 2♦, is it forcing? If so, then you are quite likely to hear partner bid those wretched hearts of his again - after all, if your bid of 2♦ is forcing, he cannot pass - has to bid something. Then you may well be in trouble.

If you are able to bid 2♦ non-forcing it must surely be the best bid. The suit is good enough to be trumps opposite very limited support, and if partner can raise diamonds in further competition you will be happy. Although non-forcing, your change of suit is constructive: partner will only pass with a poor hand.

What you don't want is to hear partner try again with 2♥. After a bid of 2♦ from you this is unlikely, for partner will realise that, if you have some values you would have raised his heart suit if at all possible. If all he can do is rebid his suit, then you will pass.

A final point in favour of bidding: if West now ends up playing in no trumps, you would much prefer a diamond lead to the otherwise inevitable heart.