

OVERCALLS

19 DEC 2017

One-Level Overcalls

At the one-level, let's say that we normally have 9+ for our overcall. And normally at least a 5-card suit. Say that RHO opens 1♦ ... on which of these would you overcall?

A. ♠ Q 7 5 4 3, ♥ K Q J, ♦ 8 5 2, ♣ J 4

No! The hand is minimum in terms of HCP, the suit is lousy, and we'd prefer a Heart lead if Partner is on lead.

B. ♠ K Q J 6 4, ♥ K 10 6, ♦ 8 5 2, ♣ 5 4

Yes! Still minimum and lacking in distribution, but we'd like to get that nice suit into the auction, all the more so as it is the Spade suit.

C. ♠ K 8 7 6 4, ♥ A K J 3, ♦ 8 2, ♣ K 7

Yes, another 1♠ overcall. True, the suit is weak, but the hand is way too good to pass. How about a take-out double with this hand? No, it's rarely a good idea to make a low-level take-out double when holding 5 Spades ... better to bid the Spades, first, and the Hearts later (if you can.)

D. ♠ A K J 3, ♥ K 8 7 6 4, ♦ 8 2, ♣ K 7

There are reasonable options here. Overcall 1♥ ... or Double (the doubleton Club is a defect but not a deal-breaker) ... or even a slightly off-shape Michaels Cue-bid.

	♠ Q 10 8 2 ♥ 2 ♦ A 7 6 ♣ J 10 9 4 3	
♠ 7 6 5 ♥ Q J 5 3 ♦ J 10 9 5 ♣ Q 2	<i>Partner</i> <i>LHO</i> <i>RHO</i> <i>You</i>	♠ 9 4 ♥ A 10 9 ♦ K Q 4 3 ♣ A 8 6 5
	♠ A K J 3 ♥ K 8 7 6 4 ♦ 8 2 ♣ K 7	

Let's try each in turn (Both Vul).

You *LHO* *Pard* *RHO*

1♥ 2♦ Dbl Pass
 2♠ All Pass

You *LHO* *Pard* *RHO*

1♦
 Dbl 2♦ 2♠ All Pass

You *LHO* *Pard* *RHO*

1♦
 2♦ Pass 3♠ All Pass

As N-S can scrape up 9 tricks, all three auctions led to +140! In the first auction, Pard's Responsive Double found the 4-4 Spade fit, and the Takeout Double did likewise in the second auction. But the Michaels auction was not convincing and got N-S perilously high. Anyway, based on the evidence of just one hand, we think that the overcall is the way to go with this type of hand (but only if you play Responsive Doubles!).

Too Good to Overcall?

We said that we need a decent 9-count for an overcall, but what's the upper limit? Many players mark their cards as 9-16, and with 17+ HCP they will double first. That's not far off the mark, but consider these hands (after RHO opens 1♦):

♠ A K Q J 5, ♥ A K 5, ♦ 6 4, ♣ 8 5 3

♠ A K Q J 5, ♥ A K 5 4, ♦ 6 4, ♣ 8 5

♠ A K Q J 5 4, ♥ A K 5, ♦ 6 4, ♣ 8 5

♠ A K Q J 5 4, ♥ A K 5 4, ♦ 6 4, ♣ 8

The first is a 6-loser hand, and looks to us like a 1♠ overcall despite the 17 HCP. Likewise the second, though it's only a 5-loser hand. The third is a slightly better 5-loser hand, we could go either way with this one. And that last hand, with its 4 losers, *does* qualify for doubling first.

How would you handle this one? ♠ A Q 8, ♥ A 5 4 3 2, ♦ K, ♣ K Q J 5. That's 19 HCP, though hardly 19 of the finest, as ♦K is likely to be useless. Double does not look very appealing because we would hate to see this auction:

1♦

Dbl 3♦ Pass Pass
?

Now we are in a real pickle! Our Hearts are not good enough to bid at the 3-level (in this situation a good 5-card suit is minimum, and 6 is preferred). So we have to make another Take-out Double, after which we might well end up in 4-3 Spades instead of 5-3 or 5-4 Hearts. It would have been better to have overcalled 1♥ originally, and then to have backed in with a Take-Out Double next time around. And if there is not a next time around? That's possible, but in that case you may not be able to make game anyway.

How about this rock-crusher? ♠ A K Q 10 6 5 2, ♥ K Q J 2, ♦ --, ♣ 7 2

Red vs. White. After RHO's 1♦ opening, we could just up and bid 4♠. But that shuts out Partner, who will expect us to have a weaker hand (say 7 good Spades and out). And will thus be unable to provide any informed help if the opponents compete vigorously. So our suggestion is to Double first, then bid 4♠. Now Partner knows that we mean business, and may be able to contribute something to the bidding.

Four-Card Overcalls

It's customary to have at least 5 cards in the overcall suit, but take a look at this hand (let's assume a 1♦ opening): ♠ A Q 10 8, ♥ A 2, ♦ K 10 9 7, ♣ 7 5 3

That's a nice 13-count, but what should we do after that 1♦ opening bid? We cannot make a Take-out Double, with only two cards in an unbid major ... and though we have Opener's Diamonds under control, our hand is not strong enough for a 1NT overcall. Not to worry, this hand is perfect for a 4-card overcall! The magic ingredients for this bid are:

- Diamond length and strength over the opening bidder.
- Good trumps
- Some values (this may not be such a great success on a 9-count)

	♠ J 9 4 ♥ Q 8 7 4 ♦ 6 5 ♣ A 9 8 4	
♠ 7 6 5 3 ♥ K 10 5 3 ♦ Q 8 ♣ Q 10 6	North West East South	♠ K 2 ♥ J 9 6 ♦ A J 4 3 2 ♣ K J 2
	♠ A Q 10 8 ♥ A 2 ♦ K 10 9 7 ♣ 7 5 3	

You West Pard East
1♠! Dbl 2♠ 1♦ All Pass

Declarer makes 9 tricks.

As soon as East opens 1♦, South can be pretty sure that a Spade contract will play well, provided that Partner has at least three of them.

After Partner Overcalls

Let's say that the auction commences (1♦) 1♥ (Pass). Now it's our turn, what are the choices?

- A cue-bid of 2♦ shows Heart support and at least game-invitational values.
- 1NT is natural, let's say about 8-11 HCP
- 2NT is natural, let's say 12-14 HCP
- 3♥ and 4♥ are preemptive.

The above is pretty much standard, but there is no standard treatment covering new suits. What would 1♠ or 2♣ mean in this situation? Most importantly are these bids weak, or strong, or somewhere in-between. The most common treatment is perhaps this one:

- Natural, 5+ in the bid suit, around 10-13 HCP.
- No fit with Partner's Heart suit.
- Non-forcing. If Partner's overcall is weak, he can pass, or scurry back to his own suit
- With a decent overcall, Partner will look for a descriptive and constructive bid.
- If Partner has a really good (forcing) hand without a fit for Partner, his options are to bid some number of NT, or jump the bidding in a new suit.
- This treatment is called "Non-forcing, constructive."

Overcalls at Two- and Three-Level

Not much to report here. To make a (non-jump) overcall at the two-level, you need something very close to an opening bid, a 9-count just won't cut it. Non-jump overcalls at the three-level are risky business, so be sure that you have a good suit (six of them) and hope it's your lucky day.

Unusual Two No Trump

They open one of a suit, we bid 2NT to show the two lower unbid suits (should be 5-5):

(1♠) 2NT	We have the minors
(1♦) 2NT	We have Clubs and Hearts
(1♦) Pass (1♠) 2NT	We have Clubs and Hearts
(1♥) Pass (1♠) 1NT	Some play this as a Sandwich NT, showing the unbid suits. We prefer it to be natural. Take your choice.
(2♥) 2NT	Generally played as natural (balanced, 15-18)
(1♠) Pass (Pass) 2NT	In balancing seat, natural, shows 19-20
(1♠) 4NT	We have the minors and extreme distribution
(1♥) 3NT	To play

The Unusual No Trump is generally used as a preemptive maneuver, so Partner will join in the fun by bidding his better minor at as high a level as he dares.

Looking at it now from the opening side, how do we contend with a 2NT overcall? There are two cue bids available, as well as some natural bids. Here is a simple and effective method. For example, 1♥ (2NT) shows the minors so 3♣ and 3♦ are our available cue-bids, and 3♥ and 3♠ are our available natural bids:

- 3♣ A cue-bid of *their* lower-ranking suit shows *our* lower-ranking suit (Hearts) and is at least game-invitational
- 3♦ A cue-bid of *their* higher-ranking suit shows *our* higher-ranking suit (Spades), and is at least game-invitational. As Spades are being (indirectly) bid for the first time, we need a good 5-card suit, preferably six.
- 3♥ A competitive bid in Hearts ... as Hearts are already bid, this means it is a competitive raise.
- 3♠ A competitive bid in Spades ... let's say equivalent to a decent Weak Two in Spades.

This method is known as "Lower for Lower", because the cue-bid of the lower minor (Clubs, of course) is always for the lower major, regardless of whether the opening bid was 1♥ or 1♠.

In addition to the aforementioned 3-level suit bids, these bids are available:

- Dbi** Could be used to show support for Opener's suit, but better to use it to show a willingness to double at least one of their suits.
- 3NT** To play, of course.
- 4♣/♦** Splinters

Michaels

As is well-known and widely played, if they open one of a suit and we cue-bid two of that suit, we are showing a two-suiter.

Let's start with (1♣) 2♣ and (1♦) 2♦, which both show both majors. Distribution should be 5-5 (or occasionally more). How strong? There are a couple of schools of thought:

- One method is to play Michaels on basically any hand strength. This is great for getting into the auction frequently, but it makes constructive bidding difficult. Suppose LHO opens 1♦, and Partner bids 2♦, showing the majors. RHO passes and your hand is: ♠ K J 6, ♥ A 2, ♦ 7 6 5, ♣ A 8 7 3 2. Game in Spades is possible if Partner has a medium-strength Michaels, but 3♠ might be too high if he has a really weak hand.
- For this reason, many players prefer that their Michaels bids are either weak or strong, but not the in-between range of 11-15. With those middling hands, we just overcall 1♠ and hope we get the chance to bid Hearts later. We rather like this treatment.

Using (1♦) 2♦ (Pass) as our starting point, here is our follow-up to Michaels:

2♥/♠ Sign-off..

2NT Natural, let's say 16-18, no more than a doubleton in the majors. Non-forcing.

3♣ Shows game (or even slam) interest in Hearts. Now Partner bids 3♥ with a rotten hand.

3♦ Similar to 3♣, but in Spades.

3♥/♠ Preemptive, usually with 4 cards in the bid suit.

3NT To play (presumably loads of minor suit tricks).

Things are quite different when the auction starts (1♥) 2♥ or 1♠ (2♠). In these cases the Michaels bidder is showing the unbid major and one of the minors. Still a two-suiter, but one of those suits is known and one of them is unknown. The follow-up is also quite different, let's see what happens when things start off with (1♥) 2♥, showing Spades and a minor:

2♠ Sign-off

2NT Asks for Partner's minor suit, usually with a view to playing in three of that minor.

3♣/♦ In this case we don't care what Partner's minor is, we have a long one of our own (6+ in length). Non-forcing.

3♥ Artificial and game interest in Spades or the minor.

3♠ Preemptive, usually 4 Spades.

3NT To play.

Defense to Michaels

First, let's defend 1♦ (2♦), where the Michaels bidder has shown both majors. We could use the same "Lower for lower" cue-bidding method that we used against Unusual 2NT overcalls, but perhaps it's better to show stoppers, aiming for a 3NT contract. With that in mind:

- 2♥** Heart stopper and at least game-invitational values.
- 2♠** Spade stopper, at least game-invitational, presumably no Heart stopper.
- 2NT** Stoppers in both majors, game-invitational.
- 3♣** Game-invitational, 6+ Clubs.
- 3♦** Competitive (about 7-10 points)
- 3♥/♠** Splinters
- 3NT** To play.

After a Michaels beginning of, say, 1♥ (2♥), we only know one of their suits (in this case it's Spades), so it's best to ignore their minor suit until we actually know what it is.

- 2♠** A Heart raise, at least game-invitational.
- 2NT** Natural, 11-12 HCP.
- 3♣/♦** Game-invitational, 6+ in bid suit, non-forcing.
- 3♥** Competitive raise, 7-10, usually 4 Hearts.
- 3♠** Splinter
- 3NT** To play.
- 4♣/♦** Splinter
- Dbi** Interested in penalizing at least one of their suits. May or may not have a Spade stopper.