



When to Overcall

The first rule about overcalling is the most important: you need *five* or more cards in a suit to overcall. This is essential to good bidding.

I like to play an aggressive style of overcalling – bidding is fun – but it is important to do so for the right reasons; do not simply overcall for the sake of bidding. There are several good reasons for entering the auction and if your hand fits with a number of these then you should go ahead and overcall.

Reasons for Overcalling

- 1 *Competing* (High-card-point strength)
- 2 *Sacrificing* (Long suit in a shapely hand)
- 3 *Disrupting* (Taking up bidding space)
- 4 *Asking for a lead* (Good suit)

When we discuss these reasons we will also bear in mind the general bridge background that affects your overcalls:

- *Bidding level*: generally, the higher the call, the more the strength required, since the danger of going down is greater.
- *Vulnerability*: vulnerable overcalls need to be stronger because the penalties are bigger.
- *Spades*: the most powerful suit because it is the highest-ranking. If both sides can make eight tricks, then the side with the spade suit wins; also, if you hold spades you can make sacrifice bids at lower levels. Whenever you hold a five-card spade suit you should seriously consider an overcall.

And finally:

- *Suit strength*: interior strength can be very important; K-J-10-9-4 is a good suit, whereas K-J-6-5-4 is somewhat frail.

1. Competing

Just because your opponents open the bidding does not mean it is their hand; if you have high-card-point strength of your own, together with a long suit, you should consider entering the auction. This is perhaps the most common type of overcall, and involves competing for the *part-score*.

So many points can change hands on deals like this:

Dealer: West. Love All.

♠ A 6 ♥ A K 9 5 3 ♦ J 9 4 ♣ J 8 3	♠ J 9 5 3 2 ♥ 7 4 2 ♦ A K ♣ K Q 4	<table border="1" style="margin: auto;"> <tr><td>N</td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td>S</td></tr> </table>	N	E	W	S	♠ K 10 4 ♥ Q J 10 8 ♦ Q 10 8 5 ♣ 7 2
N	E						
W	S						
♠ Q 8 7 ♥ 6 ♦ 7 6 3 2 ♣ A 10 9 6 5							

Auction 1

West	North	East	South
1♥	1♠	2♥	2♠
Pass	Pass	3♥	Pass
Pass	3♠	End	

Auction 2

West	North	East	South
1♥	Dbl	3♥	End

North holds an opening hand which fulfils the requirements of Reason 1 and he should be thinking that he has something to say; after all, his hand could be better than opener's. Moreover, North holds the spade suit which is so useful in competitive auctions. His suit is perhaps the worst it could be and North will not be proud to have his partner leading it, but this deficiency is far outweighed by the hand's strength, the spade suit and the vulnerability (non-vulnerable). Note that when one feature of the hand is very poor (in this case, suit quality) it is very important that there should be enough other factors to outweigh it in order to make the overcall worthwhile.

Contesting the part-score is important at all forms of bridge; this is especially true at Duplicate Pairs, where a score of -50 or -100 can be very good when your opponents can make a part-score of -110 and above.

The deal above is a good example of a part-score hand: both sides can scrape together nine tricks. In *Auction 1* the overcall locates the fit right away: South is assured of North's five-card spade holding, and so can raise spades at his first turn and subsequently push on over 3♥. With no defensive tricks, he can be pretty sure that this is the right course of action – either because 3♠ might make or, more likely, because 3♠ will go one off (-50, or even -100 if doubled) and thus gain a better score than allowing 3♥ to make (-140).

As it is, North will make 3♠ (+140), 280 points more than 3♥ by West, making (-140). Note that if East-West knew that 3♠ was making, they, in turn, could push on to 4♥ going one off – a better score for East-West than allowing North to play in 3♠, making!

Now consider what happens in *Auction 2* when North elects to double to show opening values: when East leaps preemptively to 3♥, East wins the auction because South has absolutely no useful bid to make.

Remember that it is very important to show a five-card major by overcalling; a take-out double usually implies a four-card major – and of course it should also suggest, and be based on, shortage in the opponent's suit.

Many hands pass by unnoticed without these intriguing bidding battles, but there are not many part-score hands when both sides should not be in the auction!

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2. Sacrificing

With weak but distributional hands, if you can find a fit, you may well be able to find contracts that, although destined to fail, enable you to give less away than letting your opponents score game. The only way to know whether a ‘sacrifice’ is possible is to bid in order to locate a fit. A sacrifice will generally be a worthwhile proposition only if your side has a good fit.

How can you find out whether you have a fit? By making an overcall!

Dealer: West. E/W Vul.

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

West	North	East	South
1♥	1♠	3♥	3♠
4♥	4♠	End	

North has a very weak hand, but a lot of playing strength in spades; when you hold a hand that will take very few tricks playing in the opposition’s suit, but many in your own, you should think of sacrificing – you have an “attacking”

hand. If you play weak jump overcalls, this hand would fit the bill, but without them a simple overcall suffices.

With sacrificing in mind you should make an overcall; yes, it is important for your partner not to get too excited, unless he has a fit; if he has a fit with you, then your hand is a gold mine. On this deal North-South will only lose four tricks with spades as trumps, which means that, even if doubled, they will lose just 100 points in 4♠, and 300 points in 5♠. With East-West able to make 5♥ for 650, both 4♠ and 5♠ are a bargain.

Big fits (of ten or more cards) are the most suitable for sacrificing; such hands can often take a surprising number of tricks as, with shortages in different suits, both hands can make full use of their trumps.

3. Disrupting

Without opponents’ bids auction are a lot simpler, rather like talking one-to-one. However, try talking to someone across a crowded room with other voices and the conversation is a lot more difficult to follow. The same is true in bridge: put in a bid at the right time and your opponents will have a tough time of it. Over 1♣, 1♠ is very disruptive, taking up the whole of the one level. In contrast, a 1♥ bid over 1♦ causes little disruption: with you holding length in hearts, your LHO was unlikely to want to bid 1♥ anyway.

Auction 2

West	North	East	South
1♣	1♠	Pass	2♠
...			

Auction 3

West	North	East	South
1♣	Pass	1♥	Pass
2♥	End		

North’s hand is not strong, but in every other respect it is perfect for an overcall: good suit, a great lead, the spade suit, and the overcall takes up the whole of the one level – forcing East to bid higher to show his hand. The 1♠ overcall blocks the simple 1♥ response. East can use the negative double to show four hearts (if he plays the convention), but is West strong enough to bid over 2♠?

This deal is very similar to the first one, in that it is a part-score battle, but by bidding obstructively you might manage to stop your opponents finding their fit, and by bidding spades up to the two level in one round of bidding you certainly make it difficult for them. If you do not use the negative double, what would you bid on the East hand after 1♣ – 1♠? Not easy, is it? All of this trouble caused by a simple 1♠ overcall!

East-West can make nine tricks in hearts whilst North-South can make eight tricks in spades. Once again if East-West do manage to reach 3♥, North-South will do better to finish in 3♠, losing 50, which is better than giving away 140. The intricacies of part-score hands at Duplicate Pairs are endless; start winning these types of hand and you will soon see your scores jumping up.

Something that becomes apparent very quickly when studying overcalls and part-score hands is that spades are a very powerful suit – good for barraging and good for sacrificing.

4. Asking for a Lead

Perhaps the most important reason for overcalling is to tell partner what to lead. Suits such as ♠A-K-4-3-2 and ♥K-Q-J-10-9 are crying out to be led, but if you are not on lead how can you be sure to have them led? By overcalling! The first rule we are taught in defence is: “Lead your partner’s suit.”

This should severely sway you against overcalling on weak suits. Generally the stronger your hand, the

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Dealer: West. Love All.

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

Auction 1

West	North	East	South
1♣	1♠	Dbf	2♠
...			

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weaker the suit can be (as we saw in the first example); thus any weak overcall should be based around a very strong and long suit.

Dealer: South. N/S Vul.

♠ 8 7			
♥ A 8 6 2			
♦ A 5 2			
♣ K Q 9 8			
♠ K 2	N	♠ 10 9 5 4	
♥ K Q J 10 9	W	♥ 4	
♦ 9 8 7 6	S	♦ K Q 10 4	
♣ 7 6	E	♣ 5 4 3 2	
		♠ A Q J 6 3	
		♥ 7 5 3	
		♦ J 3	
		♣ A J 10	

Auction 1

West	North	East	South
			1♠
2♥	3NT	End	

Auction 2

West	North	East	South
			1♠
Pass	2♣	Pass	2♠
Pass	3NT	End	

With the vulnerability favourable, 2♥ is not really that dangerous, especially as it will almost always help the defence. We do not know who is going to bid 3NT, but if it is North we must make sure our partner knows what to lead. On Auction 2 above, West will surely lead the king of diamonds; when the spade finesse loses, East-West will make their diamond tricks, but that is not enough: four tricks and declarer makes his nine. However, after Auction 1, partner is sure

to heed your call and lead the four of hearts, after which declarer will struggle to get home: the spade finesse will still lose, but this time the defence will make five tricks because they started with the right suit. Even if declarer aims for some kind of endplay, West can still foil him with accurate defence.

Notice that because of the solidity of your suit, even if partner only turns up with 5 points and a doubleton heart, you still have a good chance of making 2♥ (perhaps with four hearts, three diamonds and a spade). Yes, best defence will foil you, but then the risk of reaching an unmakeable contract was certainly outweighed by the ability to tell partner what to lead.

Beware as Responder

In general I advocate overcalling as often as possible, but think about the reasons why – do not just call for the sake of calling; remember that your opponents can listen too, and can gain important information with regard to the play of the hand. I have outlined the reasons for overcalling rather than giving strict guidelines; this is because there are so many different hands on which it can be right to overcall, that you cannot fit them all in one box.

Notice, however, that since I advocate some very weak overcalls, when responding to an overcall you do need to be more wary. What this means is that you need to make use of the opponents' suit to show a strong hand, e.g. 1♣ – 1♠ – Pass – 2♣ (the last bid saying: "Partner, I am strong") rather than leaping to 3NT!

This situation will be cleared up when we consider responding to an overcall in a future article. ■

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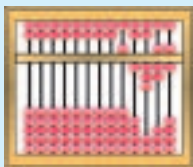
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