TIPS FOR TOPS

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All boards referred to in this article were played in the 299er game at Bridge Centre of Niagara on Feb. 9, 2021, (Game #10495). Full results and game schedule at www.bridgecentreofniagara.com.

- More Overcalls & Advances
- Declarer Play

Some top players will tell you that an overcall is the most dangerous action in bridge. Does that surprise you? Don't we all love to "jump in" to the auction with any little excuse we can? How can it be dangerous? Let's consider - from the point of view of your LHO.

LHO might be looking at a good hand, ready to open. If you open ahead of him, you make his position a little less certain; he doesn't know which side the hand belongs to. But if your RHO has opened the bidding (ie - you are now an overcaller), LHO, with a good hand, now KNOWS that the hand belongs to their side. And if you've stuck your neck out when you shouldn't, they know they can whack (ie DOUBLE!) it.

This is why we say that to overcall, you should have either a good hand or a good suit - or both. If you have a good hand, the board might still belong to your side. If you have a good suit, the opponents have less of a trump stack, which makes it a little harder for them to double. But if your LHO's good hand includes AQJx of a suit that you overcalled with K5432, they won't have any trouble finding that red card.

Of course, there are still good reasons for overcalling - with the right hand. If you have a good hand, you don't want to throw in the towel; this board might belong to your side. But why overcall light? There are 2 good things you are hoping for; if you don't buy the contract, you have given your partner an indicator of what suit you would like her to lead. And you can get in the way of the opponents finding their best contract.

The first priority of an overcaller's partner ("advancer") is to raise the level of the overcall if you have support. If partner has a maximum overcall (about 18HCP) and you have support, game is not out of the question. But if partner has a minimum and the board belongs to the opponents, you want to be as obstructive as possible. It may not always be obvious to you which is the case, but the weaker your hand, the more likely it belongs to the opponents - and the more you should want to get in their way, if you can do so safely. Safety comes from trump length, so the methods of raising an overcall are not the same as raising an opening bid. If your partner makes a 1H overcall, you should:

- Raise to 2H with 6-9 points and 3 Hs
- Raise to 3H with 6-9 points and 4 Hs
- Raise to 4H with 6-9 points and 5 Hs

You should count your dummy points when evaluating your hand in this situation; add 1 for a doubleton, 3 for a singleton, and 5 for a void. (Maybe a little less if your support is only 3 cards.) So if the bidding was (1H) 1S (2C) to you, bid 4S with K7532/6/865/8532.

If the overcall was at the 2-level, you know that partner has a good hand, but the same principles apply; raise with support, and jump raises are preemptive.

So how to show your partner you have a better raise? You make a cue-bid. In other words, you bid the suit that your opponent opened. That tells your partner you have an invitational raise or better for her suit. The "or better" is important. If you have a good enough hand to raise your partner's overcall to the game level, don't jump there immediately; that shows a much weaker, shaplier hand. Go through the cue-bid first; partner will bid again if the opponents pass, and then you can bid the game. This can be important; if your partner later has to decide whether or not to keep bidding, she needs to know which type of hand you have.

A recap of the basics of overcalling:

- An overcall at the 1-level promises at least 5 cards, and a good suit or a good hand.
- An overcall at the 2-level promises very close to an opening hand - 11 minimum - and a good suit of at least 5 cards.
- The first priority of overcaller's partner (the advancer) is to show support if she has it.
- A new suit bid by the advancer should meet the same conditions as that of the overcaller in terms of hand and suit strength.
- A new suit bid by advancer is not forcing.
- Advancer may bid 1or2 NT with good stoppers in the opponents' suit(s) and 8-11/12-14 points.

Bd: 5 Vul: N/S Dlr: North	♠ 8 ♥ Q8 ♦ QJ72 ♣ K98743	Optimum EW 6N: -990
♠ A9 ♥ AK76532 ♦ 8 ♣ JT5	N W 5 E S	♠ K652 ♥ J ♦ AK54 ♣ AQ62
8 12 HCP 17 3	♠ QJT743 ♥ T94 ♦ T963 ♣ --	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - - - - - S - - - - - E 4 2 6 2 6 W 4 2 6 2 6

Board 5 this week presents an opportunity to observe some very aggressive overcalls, and also a look at declarer play.

N passed and E opened the bidding 1D. Some Ss, with 3HCP, chose to overcall 1S, 2Ss and even 3S. Vulnerable! Did I say "dangerous"? Let's just say that the score for down 4 doubled and vulnerable is -1100 - not a score your partner wants to see on her card. And that should be the result if 3Ss is played against good defense. Even 1S doubled down 2 scores -500, which is more than E/W can make playing a game contract their way. Enough said?

Whatever S does, W will bid her Hs. No jumping, please; 1H is enough over 1D, or the lowest H bid available if S has interfered. This is a new suit by responder and is 100% forcing; E must not pass. E should now bid her Ss (unless S bid hers), and W can now jump to 4H. With a 7-card suit headed by AK, that needs to be trump. A few Ws heard NT from their partners and elected to raise to 3. This worked out this time, but was a very risky move. If you doubt, consider this: suppose you get a S lead against NT and your partner doesn't have the K. Declarer can hold off playing your A one round, but then it's gone; now there's no point in setting up the Hs, because you will have no entry to cash them. 6 probable tricks in Hs become 2 if played in NT.

Now let's look at the play in 4Hs, because some declarers didn't make their contracts. Depending on the bidding, there were 2 possible leads; most chose the singleton S, while 2 chose a C. What's the first thing declarer should do? Make a plan. Look at your hand and count your losers. You have no S losers - the K in dummy takes care of your 9. You have 8 Hs; if the missing cards break 3-2, you will lose 1; if they break 4-1 you will lose 2. But there's nothing you can do about that. You have no D losers, and you may lose a C, depending on the location of the K. Worst case; 2 trumps and a C - your contract looks safe, and no reason not to pull trumps immediately.

For those who got the C lead, the analysis is a little different, but leads to the same place. You should play low from dummy on the first trick in hopes that LHO has the K. Surprise! S ruffs. But that doesn't actually cost you. You knew you were going to lose at least one trump; now if the others fall 2-2, it all works out the same. You can take the second trick no matter what is led, and proceed with your plan.

But how to play the trump suit? This is where a few declarers went wrong. Players see the J and want to lead it for a "finesse", but unless you have the 10 to go with the J, this gains you nothing. If the J is covered by the Q, you're still going to lose a trick to the 10 or 9. Playing from hand towards the J gains nothing either; you know you will lose that trick, and there's the risk (as you discovered) that they will find a way to use one or more of their remaining trump to ruff. There is nothing better to do with this suit than to play the A and K right away; get the kiddies off the street as quickly as possible before they can hurt you.

If you do that, and if you finesse the Cs, you will come home with 12 tricks.

I offer one more tip. The most important key to partnership success is not conventions, gadgets or even knowledge; it's mutual trust and understanding. This can take a while to develop, but is worth the effort. I highly recommend that, after each game, you discuss one or two situations with your partner where you had a misunderstanding. This is not to assign blame, but to get yourselves on the same page for next time. Did you make a jump bid to show strength and your partner passed because she thought it was preemptive? Or you wanted your partner to return the suit you led, but she thought you wanted a switch? These things happen, but if you don't want them to keep happening, you need to work out which of the interpretations you are going to use going forward. A little effort in working out clear communications can work wonders.