

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 January 11, 2022, (Game #15854). Full results and game schedule at www.bridgecentreofniagara.com.

- Overcalls
- Interference over 2C
- A Slam Bid

Last week I reviewed some of the basics of bidding; this week I am going to continue, because there is a major area that I neglected - that of overcalls. The first rule of overcalls is that an overcall promises a 5-card suit. The second rule; an overcall at the 2-level promises a hand of opening-strength, or very close to it. This means that there are plenty of hands which qualify for an opening bid, but which have to be passed if the opponents have already opened the bidding. Don't think that you have to find a bid just because you have 13HCP or just because you have a 5-card suit. Overcalling is, by its nature, a risky move; your opponents have already exchanged information about their hands, and are in a good position to punish you if you step out of line. Sometimes you have a good hand, and you have to sit quietly. But don't despair; often you get a second chance.

Bd: 1	♠ J62	Optimum
Vul: None	♥ Q874	EW 3S: -140
Dlr: North	♦ K973	
	♣ 87	
♠ K953	N	♠ QT874
♥ K	W 1 E	♥ JT93
♦ 642	S	♦ QJ5
♣ AK965		♣ T
6	♠ A	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N
13 HCP 6	♥ A652	N 1 1 2 - -
15	♦ AT8	S 1 1 2 - -
	♣ QJ432	E - - - 3 1
		W - - - 3 1

Take **Board 1**. South opens 1C, and West has 13HCP. But you can't overcall 1S - that's a terrible suit, and you can't make a takeout Double - because what will you do when your partner bids Hearts? Your opponent has opened with your best suit,

and you must pass, which doesn't say you are bust, it simply says you have nothing convenient to say. But, after North responds 1H and South raises to 2Hs - NOW you can consider a takeout X, because now you do have support for the unbid suits - Spades and Diamonds. Partner will oblige by responding to your double in Spades, and NS will have to decide whether to take the push to 3H.

Let's address that question: if EW bid 2S, should NS take the push to 3H? There is a simple principle to follow here. You never do well at matchpoints letting your opponents play in 2 of a Major IF they have an 8-card fit. In this case, NS can be pretty sure EW have at least 8 spades between them, so yes, North should bid 3H when the auction comes back. And South should not take this as an invitation; North's hand hasn't got any better, she's just competing. EW now should be content that they have pushed their opponents a level higher than they wanted to play. And, in fact, with best defence, NS can make 2H but not 3.

I will conclude with a comment on "best defence". In most cases, East was on lead and several led their singleton Club - dummy's first bid suit. This was not optimal. In general, when you hold long trumps, leading a singleton, looking for a ruff is not best. Your 4 trumps will cause trouble for declarer - and take tricks - in any case, and you will usually do better to lead from a long suit - Spades in this case. On this hand, even if East leads the Club, West should switch once she sees the long Clubs in dummy. The last thing you want to do is help declarer set up her long suit. In fact, looking at the club spots, W should realize she can beat each one of South's clubs if she just waits for declarer to play them. No ruff is needed; save East's trumps for a better purpose.

Board 14 presents a bidding situation that is a bit unusual. East is dealer and has a very strong hand - 22HCP, with a 4=1=5=3 shape. Hands of this shape are notoriously difficult to describe

Bd: 14	♠ T97653	Optimum
Vul: None	♥ 973	EW 3N+1: -430
Dlr: East	♦ 5	
	♣ T75	
♠ KJ	N	♠ AQ82
♥ J854	W 14 E	♥ A
♦ 43	S	♦ AQJ62
♣ J9432		♣ KQ6
0	♠ 4	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N
6 HCP 22	♥ KQT62	N - - - -
12	♦ KT987	S - - - -
	♣ A8	E 5 3 1 2 4
		W 4 3 - 2 4

with standard methods. You don't want to open 1D and hear everybody pass, but you don't really want to open 2C and hear partner respond 2D; after that, how are you going to show her your 5-4 combination? Still, it's hard to resist the 2C call, so that was the choice of most. Opposite a 2C opener, West has a decent hand - certainly enough for game, but not enough to consider slam. Your response will depend on your system, but most pairs will use 2D. For many, this is an ambiguous "waiting" bid, for others it's a positive (not bust) bid, but under either system you would need a much better suit than what you have to go anywhere else. But what made this hand interesting was that several Wests didn't have a chance to make their choice of response, as their South opponent overcalled 2H.

2H was a great bid. Any time your opponents open 2C, there is a very good chance they are heading for a game contract, and the more you can get in their way the better. And, should your partner later be on opening lead, you want a Heart lead, don't you? With a weaker hand, I would hold out for a 6-card suit, but your suit is chunky, and you have enough HCP to avoid any serious damage.

What does West do after an overcall? There is no universal rule here, but the popular modern approach is that a pass by W shows a hand with some values - one that was going to push to game - such as this one. A double, on the other hand, shows a hand with nothing to offer - no A, no K, and probably not 2 Qs - a hand that would have bid 2H for those who play that as a bust hand. Of course, if you had a suit that you were going to bid, go ahead, but it has to be at least 5-cards long, and topped by at least two top honours,

You don't have to use this system; perhaps it makes more sense to you to double when you have something, but you and your partner should discuss this and know what your bids mean here. If you use a pass to show a hand with some values, then when the auction comes back to opener, they can make whatever their bid was going to be; a double would be for takeout. Double would be my choice here; after West shows clubs and East bids Diamonds, they should find their way into 3NT.

Board 5 provided excitement for some NS pairs. North opened

Bd: 5	♠ A942	Optimum
Vul: N/S	♥ KQT9	NS 6H: +1430
Dir: North	♦ AQ3	
	♣ 97	
♠ J765	N	♠ KQT8
♥ J765	W 5 E	♥ 83
♦ 74	S	♦ J9862
♣ Q85		♣ 43
15	♠ 3	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N
4 HCP 6	♥ A42	N 6 4 6 3 4
15	♦ KT5	S 6 4 6 3 4
	♣ AKJT62	E - - - -
		W - - - -

the bidding with a normal 1NT, and South had 15 HCP with a 6-card club suit. I watched the whole room slow down for a moment; everyone was thinking about slam, and not sure how to get there. In the end, several Souths used 4NT. This is, in fact, not the way to ask for keycards in this sequence; it's a quantitative bid. It invites North to bid 6NT if she is at the top of her range; she isn't, and should pass. Alas - even 4 is a level too high unless declarer gets a bit of help from her opponents, or has x-ray vision. But there is a good slam here - 6C. Matchpoint players are conditioned to try for NT games, rather than minors, but when it comes to slams, any makeable slam in a club game, will usually get you ahead of the field. And there's a relatively safe way to get there with this hand, by using 4C - Gerber - instead of 4NT to ask about Aces. This is the exact situation where Gerber is used - where the opening bid or the last bid was in NT and there is a jump to 4C. When you find North has the two missing Aces, 6C is an excellent contract; even missing an Ace, it would have good play. In fact, once you know you have all the Aces, you can ask for Kings with 5C. If you had them all, 6NT would be a worthwhile shot, but missing one, 6C is the wise choice.

Bd: 16	♠ J95	Optimum
Vul: E/W	♥ T842	NS 1S: +80
Dir: West	♦ AT97	
	♣ J9	
♠ T8	N	♠ A632
♥ AK973	W 16 E	♥ J65
♦ K54	S	♦ 832
♣ A64		♣ KT3
6	♠ KQ74	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N
14 HCP 8	♥ Q	N 1 1 - 1 -
12	♦ QJ6	S 1 1 - 1 -
	♣ Q8752	E - 1 - -
		W - - 1 - -

I will use this little bit of extra space to point out a play situation on **Board 16**. The hand was played in Hearts from the West, and the results were heavily influenced by the play of the trump suit. With J65 in the East hand and AK973 in the West, several

declarers led the J toward the AK, apparently thinking this was a finesse opportunity. Now, if you had the 10 as well as the J and 9, this might be the right play. But, in this situation, leading the J cannot gain; if it's covered by the Q, you have simply set up the 10. The only way to make use of the J in this setup is if the Q is singleton, or is in the North hand, and you play towards the J. And the way to cover both of these possibilities is to play the A first; here the Q drops, but if it didn't, you would next play toward the J. By playing the J first, the suit was now set up for North to win both the 10 and the 8. The key here; before you lead an honour ask yourself if you really want the opponent to cover it.

