

Overcall or Double?

By Neil H. Timm

When you overcall, partner does not know whether you have 8 or 15/16 HCP while a double usually shows at least 12 HCP. What is the “best” strategy?

Advantages of Overcalling

1) It is usually lead directing

You should have an ace or a king in the bid suit! Do not overcall with junk. However, if you have two bids and an opening hand, it is usually better to double provided you have support for the other three suits.

For example with the hand: ♠975 ♥975 ♦ AK1096 ♣ 75 you would overcall 1♦ after the opponents bid 1♣.

But, with the hand: ♠K75 ♥A75 ♦ AK1096 ♣ 75, it would be better to double. Telling partner you have at least an opening hand and support for the other three suits is much better than telling him to lead a diamond.

Suppose partner has the hand: ♠642 ♥KQ9864 ♦ 4 ♣ A84 and you overcall a diamond. The bidding went: 1♣ - 1♦ - 3♣ - ?, partner would probably pass fearing a misfit and only moderate values. However, if you instead double so the auction was: 1♣ - X - 3♣ - ?, partner would confidently bid 4♥.

What do you do in the fourth seat? The bidding goes 1♥ - P - 1♠ - ?? And you hold the following hand: ♠8732 ♥K ♦ KQJ9 ♣ K764. Your partner has passed and you are not going to outbid the opponents. Clearly, a lead directing bid of 2♦ is better than a takeout double. In addition, your bid will certainly not be doubled for penalty.

2) An overcall does not give the opponents (or your partner) information about your distribution.

This may be important for declarers when deciding to finesse a queen in a suit which you have doubled for takeout. This is the price you pay for describing your hand accurately with a double. You have to weigh what information you need to give partner versus the opponents.

3) You can sometimes bid a second suit, clarifying your distribution.

Suppose you hold the following hand: ♠AK875 ♥7 ♦ AJ10652 ♣ A and the RHO opens 1♣. What do you bid?

You have to overcall a diamond and then bid spades (reverse by overcaller). You have two very good suits, always bid the longer. However, if instead you had the hand: ♠AK875 ♥7 ♦ 987652 ♣ A, bid 1♠; you do not have the strength to reverse.

Disadvantages of Overcalling

1) The bidding may die before you can show support for the other suits.

This may happen if you have a strong hand on which you have decided to overcall instead of double. Sometime it is better to describe your two suited hand which may only happen if the bidding continues.

2) A fit in another suit may be missed.

It happens.

3) Defensive values are undervalued or overvalued.

Partner does not know whether you have 8 or 16 HCP, this is a significant drawback when you have support for all unbid suits. Even though you are very distributional, it is sometimes better to double and take a chance since partner knows you have at least an opening bid.

4) You may get doubled and go down when you have a fit elsewhere.

Advantages of Doubling

1) Shows high card strength.

A double shows at least 12 HCP and hence defensive values; partner more able to place the contract with this information.

2) Allows partner to double the opponents.

Even though you have 12 HCP you should not always double. For example, suppose you have the following hand: ♠ Q42 ♥KQ109 ♦ KQJ75 ♣ 5. With this hand you should bid 1♦ over 1♣. Even with 12HCP you do not have defensive values to double.

3) Allows partner to bid a suit confidently, knowing you will have at least three card support.

4) A new suit bid by you later shows a hand too strong for a simple overcall.

For example, suppose you have the following hand and the opening bid, on your right is 1♠. Even though you have 5 cards in the other major, you are too strong to overcall. You must double and then bid hearts. If your partner now bids 4♥ and the opponents go to four spades you can then double for penalty.

5) Avoids being doubled when you have a better fit.

If you overcall and are doubled, usually you just have to sit and take your medicine. It is often too dangerous to scramble around trying to find the right spot. Starting off with a double, you have a better chance of finding a fit.

Disadvantages of Doubling

1) Partner may miss the best lead.

This is especially true against a notrump contract. However, unless you have a very top-heavy suit, doubling may in fact be your best chance of getting the defense off to the right start.

2) You might misjudge your fit.

It is easy to make the wrong decision as to how high to bid, or what defensive values you have, as you may have a nine- or ten-card fit which you think is only an eight- or nine-card fit.

This issue is often overlooked. For example, over a heart opening, you have a choice of bidding 2♦ or to double with the following hand: ♠Q86 ♥98 ♦AKJ107 ♣J64. Again, any bid may work; however, if you overcall and partner is all diamonds, he will know either to preempt or keep quiet hoping that the opponents misgauge their fit. Let's look at an example.

North	
♠ J752	
♥ J75	
♦ Q9854	
♣ 9	
West	East
♠ K1043	♠ A9
♥ Q6	♥ AK10432
♦ 632	♦ void
♣ AK73	♣ Q10852
South	
♠ Q86	
♥ 98	
♦ AKJ107	
♣ J64	

With East-West vulnerable, if South double East's 1♥ opening, the bidding might go:

West	North	East	South
		1♥	Dbl
Redbl	1♠	2♣	Pass
3♣	Pass	5♦*	Pass
5NT	Pass	7♣	All Pass

* Exclusion Keycard Blackwood, asking partner not to count key card in the diamond suit.

However, if instead you bid 2♦, thing may go:

West	North	East	South
		1♥	2♦
Dbl	6♦	Dbl	

Down four for =800 for East-West, instead of +2140.

This material is from the book by Neil Kimelman (2008) “Improve your Bidding Judgment”, Mater Point Press. A must read for any serious bridge player since bidding is where you often win or lose at bridge. There are many more topics in the book to help bridge players know when to be passive or aggressive. Neil Kimelman is a Canadian expert bridge player.