

Responding To Overcalls

On the convention card (CC) there are many boxes to fill out with lots of arcane labels. The designers of the CC have tried to hard to balance the potential complexity of the information with the ability to quickly read it and understand the general approach of your opponents. Remember, the CC is primarily for your opponent's to read. (It's a good idea to fill it out for yourself as well to make sure that you know what you are playing! 😊)

One of the more commonly glossed over sections is the Simple Overcall box. It's divided into 2 sections, the top part being for the actual Overcaller and the bottom part (cleverly labeled Responses) for the Advancer (or responder to the overcaller).

Here's the section itself.

SIMPLE OVERCALL	
1-level _____ to _____ HCP (usually)	
Often 4 cards <input type="checkbox"/> Very light style <input type="checkbox"/>	
Responses	
New Suit: Forcing <input type="checkbox"/> NFConst <input type="checkbox"/> NF <input type="checkbox"/>	
Jump Raise: Forcing <input type="checkbox"/> Inv. <input type="checkbox"/> Weak <input type="checkbox"/>	

The only thing in red (and therefore alertable) is the line at the bottom where you would enter any special conventional agreements you might have.

There are 3 common methods for responding to overcalls and none of them are prominent enough to be considered the "default" agreement and none of them are unusual enough to be considered alertable. I'll briefly touch on each of the response types and discuss some pros and cons of each.

But first of all, let me present you with some auctions and see what you all think:

1. 1 over 1 response

<u>West</u>	<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>
1♣	1♥	P	1♠

2. 2 over 1 response

<u>West</u>	<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>
1♣	1♠	P	2♥

3. 2 over 2 response (non competitive)

<u>West</u>	<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>
1♥	2♣	P	2♦

4. 2 over 2 response (competitive)

<u>West</u>	<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>
1♥	2♣	2♥	2♠

There are of course, plenty of other scenarios like a preemptive opening or Responder bidding a new suit rather than raising, but the above should give you a taste of the kinds of situations you might be confronting.

Forcing - bidding a suit shows values and is forcing for 1 round.

Playing this style, all of the above auctions are forcing. This is great if you hold say ♠ Kx ♥ AKJxx ♦ KQx ♣ xxx and you are in a situation like #2. You can bid 2♥ with confidence and know that your partner may not pass you. You have a good 16 count and your partner overcalled. It's your hand and you want to explore for game despite not having a fit or a stopper.

However were you holding a less flexible hand like ♠ x ♥ KQxxxx ♦ Axxx ♣ xx, or worse yet ♠ x ♥ KQxxx ♦ Axxxx ♣ xx, bidding 2♥ would force you to the 3 level (or 2♠) and your partner might not have a fit for you and you certainly don't have a fit for them. Yet you might also be missing a potential game in hearts if you pass.

Furthermore, remember that by making this bid forcing, your partner must bid again. Even if they overcalled on ♠ AKJxx ♥ x ♦ xxxx ♣ xxx. Or something else unsuitable. With the above hand most players would opt to either pass and break partnership agreements or else rebid 2♠ without the sixth spade.

With all of those disadvantages, there is one huge advantage which is why many players adopt this style. That is it enables the cuebid of the opponents suit to guarantee a fit. If you aren't playing this style and you have 18 HCP and your partner overcalls you'd better have a game to jump to because your suit bids aren't forcing.

Non Forcing Constructive (NFConst or NFC) – bidding a suit shows values, but is non-forcing. Something like 8-12 HCP.

Playing this style none of the above auctions would be forcing, but they would promise an honest effort to make the contract bid.

NFC gives you a lot of flexibility when your partner has shown values by overcalling and you wish to explore for the best fit. You can introduce a potential trump suit without committing yourself to higher levels.

When playing this style it is usually best to also follow the maxim of support with support. Bidding a new suit should tend to deny a fit for overcaller's suit. If you had a fit you would usually either raise immediately with less than invitational values (6-10) or cuebid with invitational or better values (11+). This should give you confidence that in the auction (1♣)-1♠-(P) - 2♦-(P)-2♠ your partner has a playable suit opposite a non fit and thinks that this is better than playing in your suit.

NFC does present you a challenge with a very good hand like :

♠ x ♥ AKJxx ♦ AKxx ♣ xxx.

If you bid 2♥ your partner will quite likely pass, but if you cuebid your partner will believe that you have a fit. This is why it is usual to play that cuebids are either a fit with invitational values or else a hand that is too strong to be passed in a suit bid (Typically 13+ HCP, but this depends upon the strength promised by your overcall)

Many players do not like the ambiguity inherent in the cuebid and hence opt for one of the forcing response style, or some other bid to show a limit raise like a jump cuebid or jumping to 2N.

Non Forcing (NF) - As this implies, the bid is completely non forcing and doesn't even promise values.

This style is popular amongst highly active players for whom overcalls are more about disrupting the opponents than about seriously trying to win the contract. This enables you to bid 2♥ in the auction (1♣)-1♠-(P) – 2♥ With a hand like ♠ x ♥ KQTxxx ♦ xxxx ♣ xx. You should be convinced holding this hand that hearts are a better place to play than spades, but you simply don't have the values to bid 2♥ immediately if you are promising something. You could play weak jump shifts here, but since your partner didn't promise much with their 1 level overcall, it's not clear that you are safe at the 3 level.

Many people take this a step further and play Negative Free Bids, in which bidding a suit actively denies values and you must double or cue bid with 8+HCP and a suit to bid.

Lastly, many players chose to combine these styles and play things like:

1 over 1 is forcing, higher levels are NFC.