

When Am I Too Strong To Overcall?

Say you pick up the following hand:

♠AKQJT6 ♥AQ4 ♦A43 ♣2

You start to debate about opening 2C (I would) and then all of your plans get foiled by your RHO opening 1H. You need to adjust to this new information and come up with some countermeasures. The big thing to realize is that *If you simply bid your suit at the 1 level or 2 level then partner will pass on many hands in which you will make game.*

Much like the 2C opening bid there are times when the opponents open the bidding and we are so strong that we want to encourage them to bid on hands that they would ordinarily pass. The technique we use to describe these hands is called “double and correct” or simply the “big double”. What you do is start with double, and then whatever our partner bids, you bid your own suit.

1H-X-P-2C

P-2S***

Let's translate this auction into english:

X - I have points and I don't know what to do

2C - Let's play clubs

2S - I want to play spades

Why did I suggest that I don't know what to do and then insist that I really do know what to do? I think of this as a “bait-and-switch”. I asked you to choose your best suit and then said “I don't care.” This sequence is best used as revealing a hand that was too strong to overcall.

The comparable sequence for big balanced hands is

1H-X-P-2C

P-2N***

I was too strong to simply overcall 1N Typically 19+

You simply rebid NT after doubling instead of a suit.

Much like when you open 2C, there are predominantly 2 types of hands when you make a big double. Either you are balanced or you are single suited. (Many 2 suited hands can use Michaels or Unusual 2N to start with) So when are you too strong to overcall and should instead use a big double?

Let's start with the simpler case which is when you are balanced. This is simpler because as soon as you have more HCP than a 1N overcall you must start with double. So whatever your 1N overcall range is, add a point and that's when you start with a double. If you are playing a standard range of 15-18, then you start doubling on balanced hands that are 19+ HCP

How about the single suited hands? Well this is where partnership agreement becomes important.

Consider these hands

- A. ♠AQJxx ♥xxx ♦xxx ♣xx
- B. ♠Qxxxx ♥xxx ♦KQx ♣Ax
- C. ♠AKxxx ♥KQx ♦Kx ♣Jxx
- D. ♠AQJxxx ♥Ax ♦Kxxx ♣x

On how many of them would you overcall 1S?

This is important information to share with your partner because your partner will end up having a hard time knowing when to bid without a fit but some values. If your partner will pass some 10 counts then you will need to aggressively make a big double with some lighter hands or else you will miss good games.

Let's consider the auction from your partner's perspective. If your partner held

♠Tx ♥Jxx ♦Axxx ♣KQxx

And the auction proceeded 1H-1S-P-?

What should your partner do? Many players pass this hand because every action is a lie. Bidding 1N shows a heart stopper, bidding a minor shows a 5 card suit and raising spades shows 3. Rather than lie to their partner they pass. That will work fine opposite A and B, but will miss a good game opposite C & D.

Conversely doubling with hands like C & D will get you into trouble if when you double and bid again partner had a 3 count.

My suggestion is to pick a number and agree that if I have this many HCP I must respond to partner's overcall. Then you can comfortably set your big doubles as OK with not being in game if partner doesn't have that many points and a fit.

What I play is a good 8 HCP. If I have a good 8 HCP I must respond to partner's 1 level overcall if RHO passes. That way with 17 HCP partner can simply overcall and not feel like they are going to miss a 25 HCP game.

In fact, I go a little further and suggest that if I have a 5332 hand, then I am essentially a balanced hand and I need to be stronger than the 1N overcall in order to make a big double. I.e. 19 points. (I do adjust for the 5 card suit and so in practice this is usually 18 HCP) It's when I have a 6 card suit that I start to make big doubles with lighter hands and start doubling with 17 points (often 16 HCP after adjustments).

Hopefully you can see that your big double agreements need to be in alignment with your overcall style and your responding to overcall style. So whatever your style is, adjust your big doubles to fit that.