

Dealing with an overcall.

As shown in my last article, the take-out double is quite easy to deal with. However, the simple overcall can be much more of a problem. This is because the take-out double takes no bidding space away from us, but the overcall does. The unassuming cue bid is a useful gadget to distinguish between value and pre-emptive raises to the 3-level or higher but, unfortunately, the transfers, as described in the previous article, will not do because the overcall will usually be at the 2-level when we open with 1 of a major. Therefore, a raise to the 2-level can only be considered as competitive.

Some pairs play a double of an overcall as a kind of support double showing 3-card support and about 7-9(10) points and so, the direct raise is a pre-emptive raise. The problem that this leaves us with is that we have to give up the Sputnik double. This is far too high a price to pay. Although pre-emptive raises are very useful, they should never replace value raises or other natural responses that show reasonable values. Sputnik is a very useful tool which allows responder to show values and/or length in the 2 unbid suits. It suggests that we have at least as much strength as our opponents making it much easier for us to compete. I may write more about Sputnik, later.

This just shows how effective the simple overcall can be. However, that does not mean that, when we are overcalled, we should get too carried away. We still have 2NT available to use as a value raise to the 3-level and so there is a tendency to pre-empt by raising to the 3-level on some hands that would have been better described by a value raise to the 2-level. You might get away with this when not vulnerable, after all 2 down not doubled is only -100 but is cheaper than the opponents bidding and making a part-score. However, 2 down vulnerable is -200 and is worse than any part-score but, if you are doubled whether vulnerable or not, you will have incurred a substantial penalty when the opponents probably do not have game on. And, if game is on, you might miss it.

If in doubt, pass, particularly at teams. If the opponents end up in a part-score, you will not lose too many imps, and the result may well be duplicated in the other room flattening the board. At pairs, you sometimes have to push hard to score well and, sometimes, you will get it very wrong, but you should still score well in the long run, once you have practised a little and worked out when, and when not, to push. At teams, we should always be trying to achieve a flat board but picking up decent swings when they present themselves. There is less need to force things to happen unless you have the perfect hand for such tactics. The deal below is typical :-

North	
♠	AQJ53
♥	4
♦	AJ94
♣	973

West	East
♠ 642	♠ 98
♥ 1087	♥ AQJ65
♦ 85	♦ Q76
♣ AKJ108	♣ Q62

South	
♠	K107
♥	K932
♦	K1032
♣	54

North	East	South	West
1♠	2♥	2♠	3♥
Pass	pass	?	

What should South bid after this auction? The 2♠ raise looks a little heavy and some would bid 3♠. However, it is only a 9-count and there are probably no ruffing values at all in the hand. So, it is probably not wise to encourage partner too much, hence the single raise to 2♠. West's 3♥ raise is really a bit undisciplined but has the value of really making life hard for North/South. North/South will be able to take 5 tricks for certain in defence taking 2 in spades and 2 in diamonds before declarer can take a trick and then one later in the trump suit, but that is only 1 down and any more losers will disappear on the clubs.

If I was South, I would certainly bid 3♠ at pairs but, at teams, the decision is more difficult. At teams, we should always aim at a plus score. You are not adding to the team's overall score if we end up with a negative score on the board. Obviously, the bigger the plus score, the greater your contribution to the overall score on the board but it is not always easy to decide how to generate a plus score. It could be by bidding on, a pass might do it and, of course, if the opponents are going off, a double would score well.

First of all, the most under-valued bid in auctions of this type is the pass. The problem with the double is that you could double a contract that makes and gift them a game swing so, at teams, double is probably not the way to go unless you are *certain* of defeating the contract. We are left with 3♠ or pass and you may be expecting me to suggest that pass is the best bid available. But, on this hand, I would bid 3♠ expecting to make it most of the time. The reasoning behind this is dependent on how robust your partnership's opening bids are. North's pass on the second round suggests a minimum opening bid but, if that is 12 high card points, or possibly 13, then we have the balance of strength, just. But, if South adds that to the fact that his king of hearts appears to be a

trick and the trumps should be solid, 3♠ should make. In fact, if declarer gets the diamonds right, 10 tricks can be made and that is why I would select 3♠ on this deal, in case partner can go on to game when playing teams.

This is a very difficult example and, again, shows the value of the simple overcall, but it is difficult to give more advice on the subject, except to say, if you are in doubt, remember that under rated bid, i.e. the pass. But one thing is sure and that is that South has a greater problem if the opening bid only guarantees a 4-card suit.