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This Week in Bridge

(320) Simple Overcalls at the 1-Level

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Level: 1

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General

When the opponents open the bidding with 1♣, 1♦, or 1♥, one of the most common ways for us to compete in the bidding is to make a simple overcall. The most common of these are 1-level overcalls, showing a 5+card suit and about 7 to 18 points. The fact that this action is so wide-ranging in both strength and shape means that it is an action that will be taken frequently. But this also means an overcall may be used for a large variety of reasons. These overcalls can be used to guide our side on defense and get partner off to a good opening lead (“Lead Directing Overcalls”). Overcalls are used as destructive bids, attempting to make it more difficult for the opponents to reach their best final contract. Finally, overcalls can also be used to compete in the bidding in a constructive way, trying to win the final contract. Let’s take a look at these simple 1-level overcalls in more detail.

1-Level Suit Overcalls

A simple overcall at the 1-level of 1♦, 1♥, or 1♠ shows a 5+card suit (usually) and about 7 to 18 HCP. We usually classify these hands in “Buckets” based on their strength.

- 7 to 10- points Subminimum Overcall (usually not made when vulnerable)
- 10+ to 12- points Minimum Overcall
- 12+ to 14 points Sound Overcall
- 15 to 18- points Maximum Overcall

If our hand has additional distribution, then it is used to re-evaluate our hand’s strength.

Hands with 5-card suits and a good 18 HCP are often too strong to make a simple 1-level overcall of 1♦, 1♥, or 1♠. If we feel that overcalling may allow our side to miss a game, we can double and then bid our suit (“Double and Bid”) to show a hand that is too strong to make a simple overcall.

The strength or bucket of our overcall does not get communicated to partner on the first round of the bidding. Our initial overcall is a “blurry bid” and could have any of these strengths. We will not get a chance to let partner know the strength of our overcall until the second round of the bidding.



Suit Quality

More than just the length of our suit and our number of HCP is used to evaluate the quality of our hand. Another important factor in determining how we should value our hand is the location of our honors. The more honors we have in our long suit, the more aggressively we should strive to make an overcall. A quality suit is meant to be bid!

Suit quality is not limited to the top honors in a suit – the Ace, King, or Queen. A good suit can also be one that has good body cards. These are the Tens and 9s (sometimes even Jacks and 8s).

Example 1

KQT92 is a much better suit than KQ432. The first suit can play well even if partner is void in our suit, while the second suit needs a decent fit from partner to be established into tricks.

Shape of the Hand

Another important part of properly evaluating the strength of our hand is the shape of the rest of our hand. 5332 hands generally have the least playing strength of any hand that has a 5-card suit. 5422 is a slightly better shape and 5431 even better. Of course, hands with 6-card and 7+card suits have even more playing strength than hands with 5-card suits. We often use length points to try to adjust for this additional playing strength.

Borderline Decisions

When faced with a borderline decision about whether to make an overcall at the 1-level, there are many factors that affect our decision making process. The vulnerability is one of the most important factors when considering making a borderline overcall. We usually do not make a vulnerable overcall with only 7-9 HCP unless we have an extremely strong suit. Vulnerable overcalls, even at the 1-level, are not usually made with poor hands – they usually have either a good suit or a strong hand.

There are other times when we may choose to make aggressive overcalls. This is usually done in an effort to make the bidding more difficult for the opponents. One time we may make an aggressive overcall is when partner is a passed hand. In this case, we are free to make more aggressive actions if we think that it will provide a tactical advantage.

Another time we may “stretch” to overcall is in an effort to take away the opponents’ bidding space. The ♠ suit is the most effective suit for accomplishing this and we often make more aggressive overcalls with 1♠ than we do with 1♥ or 1♦. A 1♦ overcall (after a 1♣ opening bid) does not have much destructive effect and is usually made with a good hand, not a poor hand.



Overcalling a 4-card Suit

Usually, an overcall shows at least a 5-card suit, but there are some hands where we may choose to overcall on a 4-card suit – *making a small “lie”*.

Example 2

♠ KQT8

♥ 65

♦ K32

♣ AJT7

If our RHO opened the bidding with 1♥ then we would make a takeout double. But if our RHO opens the bidding 1♣ then we cannot make a takeout double, because we do not have support for the ♥ suit. Instead, our choice is between passing with 13 HCP or treating our good 4-card ♠ suit like a 5-card suit and making a simple 1♠ overcall. With this hand a 1♠ overcall is the best choice.

Overcalling a 4-card suit is only done with a good 4-card suit, when we have some extra values (usually at least 12 or more HCP), and with a hand that is not appropriate to make a takeout double or overcall 1NT. An overcall of a 4-card suit is often made with length (usually 4 cards) in the suit opened by our RHO.

Conclusion

A 1-level overcall of a suit may seem like an extremely simple action. It is one that almost every bridge player makes each time they play bridge. But though 1-level overcalls are an indispensable part of competitive bidding, they are not actually good constructive bids. These bids are so wide-ranging in both shape and strength that they do not effectively describe our hand to partner, leaving that to be done on later rounds of the bidding, but these 1-level overcalls are effective tools in competing in the bidding with a large variety of hands. Make sure you understand your options when choosing to enter the auction with a simple 1-level overcall.