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This Week in Bridge

(28) Simple Overcalls

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Level: 1

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General

An overcall is quite different from an opening bid. It is an effort to compete in the bidding after the opponents have already struck the first blow. An overcall is one of the worst-defined bids in all of bridge. It contains a tremendous amount of shape and strength variation. It is a flawed bid because it is extremely difficult for partner to know what we are showing. In spite of all this, overcalls are a vital part of bridge and competitive bidding. They are one of the most used parts of the game and something that every bridge player makes each time they play. So we must learn to use and understand them, in spite of their flaws.

Purpose of Overcall

There are many different reasons that we might make an overcall. Some of these are:

- Try to win the contract
- Try to push the opponents one level higher
- Make a lead-directing bid
- Try to make it more difficult for the opponents to find their fit
- Show partner some information about your shape and strength and get partner involved in the auction.
- And many more...

Often times the player making an overcall cannot predict how the auction will progress. Thus, it is difficult to make a plan about what we expect to happen.



Level of Overcall

- 1-Level Overcalls
 - 7-18 points with a 5+card suit.
- 2-Level Overcalls (not jump overcalls)
 - 12-18 points with a 5+card good suit.
- Vs. Preempts
 - The better our suit the fewer values we need to come in at a high level. The weaker our suit the more (compensating) values we should have in order to take action.
- Sandwich Seat
 - When both opponents have bid and partner has not we should be a bit more careful – have some extra values before acting.

Suit Quality

There are no strict suit quality requirements for making a simple overcall, but generally speaking, the weaker your hand, the better your suit should be. For a simple 1-level overcall we only promise a minimum of 7-8 points, but if we have a bad suit we would not make an overcall with so few points. Partner is already in the dark about our hand, so he should be able to count on us for at least either a good suit or a good hand.

For 2-level overcalls we should have either a good 5+card suit or (usually) a 6+card suit. Partner will be freely raising us to the three-level with 3-card support and 6+points. We will need to have a good suit to feel safe at this level.

One other thing to keep in mind is vulnerability. If we are vulnerable we should have either a better suit or a better hand for taking some action (do not overcall Txxx, especially when vulnerable.) Partner will expect that a vulnerable overcall is something to be taken seriously.

Hand Strength - Buckets

Just as we think of Opener's hand as belonging to buckets or ranges of strength, we also think of different buckets for Overcaller's hand strength. At the 1-level Overcaller's possible hand strengths are:

- | | |
|----------------|----------------|
| • 7-9 points | Subminimum |
| • 10-12 points | Minimum |
| • 12-14 points | Sound Overcall |
| • 15-18 points | Extra Values |

Note: At the 2-level or higher, overcalls should only be Sound or Extra Values.



Overcaller's Rebids

This is an extremely large and complex topic – how Overcaller shows his strength and shape after the first round of the bidding. The general rule (and most important thing to remember) is that the Overcaller strives to limit his hand whenever possible. If he is forced to make a second bid, then he shows a subminimum or minimum overcall by rebidding his suit at the cheapest level.

Note: We will discuss this topic in much greater detail in the future.

Overcall vs. Double

There are often situations where we are forced to choose between overcall and double.

These are usually times when the opponents have opened the bidding with a minor and you are 5-4 in the Majors. (Say 5431 with a singleton in the opponents' opening bid suit.) This is not an easy decision. Let's look at the different hands based on their strength.

- If we have subminimum values (7-9 pts) then our only option is to make an overcall.
- If we have minimum values (10-12 pts) then we will want to make our decision based on the quality of our 5-card suit. If our hand looks like one suit (points are concentrated in our one long suit), then we will make an overcall. If our values are more scattered, then we will make a takeout double.
- If we have a sound or better hand (12+ pts) then we may plan to take multiple calls with our hand. In this case, we start by making an overcall of our 5-card suit (to look for a fit there) and then make a takeout double later, in order to look for a fit in our other suit (4-card Major.)

This is only one example of many of the complex auctions that can arise from what seems like a simple thing of an overcall.

Conclusion

Overcalls are a part of the game that causes every player much difficulty. It will be common that making an overcall helps our side and it will also be common that an overcall leads our side astray. Fortunately, this is an area of the game in which every player gains experience and learns how to make use of all the information that becomes available to them at the table. The key to success in making overcalls is to make sure the overcall helps our side more than it does the opponents.