

Overcalls and Doubles

This is a very ambitious title. We will only look at the simplest situation where your RHO opens the bidding in front of you. If you bid or double now you are starting a contested auction. Most bidding books assume no competition, and indeed the uncontested auction is tough enough anyway.

Some good books on the contested auction are :

- Brock, *Step-by-step overcalls*;
- Flint & Sharp, *Competitive Bidding*;
- Kaplan, *Competitive Bidding*;
- Klinger & Kambites, *Understanding the contested auction*.

The contested auction is more difficult but also more interesting: you can pick up match points and swings by knowing what you are doing a bit better than your competitors holding the same cards at other tables.

Let us go back to the basics of bidding. Why are you advised to open the bidding with (say) a 13 point hand?

Three reasons:

- you expect to have the balance of points, for partner should have around one-third of the remaining 27;
- you want to name a suit that you like, to help partner;
- you want to show some defensive values in case the opposition get frisky.

Would you be happy opening these hands?

A	B	C	D
♠AJ76	♠KQJT9	♠QT9864	♠KQJT9
♥A32	♥42	♥KQ5	♥4
♦KJ52	♦75	♦85	♦863
♣86	♣KQJ6	♣93	♣Q642

With A you open 1NT, a bit uneasily. With B you happily open 1♠. With C you pass unless playing weak 2s. With D you pass unless playing some gadget.

In a competitive situation, some things have changed and others not.
 After a 1♦ opener on your right you are facing one of these hands:

E	B	C	D
♠AJ764	♠KQJT9	♠QT9864	♠KQJT9
♥A3	♥42	♥KQ5	♥4
♦J5	♦75	♦85	♦863
♣KJ52	♣KQJ6	♣93	♣Q642

Bid 1♠ with all of these hands. But notice playing/defensive strength.

Hand E you would open. It has 2 or 3 defensive tricks, but on a bad day it might be worth only 2 or 3 tricks playing in spades as declarer.

Hand B you would also open, but its defensive strength is less than hand A, maybe 1 or 2 tricks if things are bad; on the other hand you can count 7 tricks in a spade contract even if partner is very weak.

Hand C you would not open 1♠ as partner will take you for about 2 defensive tricks; you might open a weak 2♠ however, and you would expect to make 5 tricks if partner produced J♠ and not much else.

Hand D is not an opener, but is worth an overcall because of the good suit. Some systems put this type in as the weak 2, quite a risk.

ODR or Offence to Defence Ratio

A hand with a high ODR is one with playing strength but little defensive strength; a low ODR describes a hand you would rather defend with.

Typically a NT type hand has a low ODR and you should try to stay out of the auction if you can. For example Hand A:

♠AJ76	You might bid 1NT, but
♥A32	recommended point count is 15-18.
♦KJ52	
♣86	You should not bid 1♠ ever!

The higher your ODR the more you should be climbing into the auction, in fact some hands have so little defence you MUST bid strongly to prevent their game or sacrifice. An extreme case is when partner has passed (so probably has 2 defensive tricks or less) and you are looking at

♠KQJT9876	You must bid as many spades as you
♥4	can as fast as you can! 4 or 5?!
♦7	Some kamikazes will psych in ♥.
♣QJ6	

Why would you want to bid spades over 1♦?

- To get in the way. Most systems struggle with interference.
- To indicate a lead. At duplicate a good lead is worth half a trick.
- To compete for a part score. You must fight for the plus.
- To suggest a possible sacrifice if they have a game, maybe pushing them one level too high.
- To explore a possible game. With a good hand sitting over the opener, game may be possible on 24 or 23 points.

Notice that the reasons given above apply to the opening bid decision as well, but in different proportions. Game and partscore are paramount.

If opponents have more strength, the first two motives are important.

Two bad reasons not in the list: to “show your points” or “make a noise”!

Downsides

Bridge is a game of information, and the opposition have fired the first shot. They probably have a better idea of what is going on than you do.

By overcalling you give the opposition, as well as partner, information about suit lengths and high cards. What if they bid and make a thin game by exploiting that information? If you know they will be playing the hand and you will be on lead then it may be best to keep quiet.

Another downside of overcalling, especially at the 2 or 3 levels, is that you may get doubled for penalties and go for a large number. Playing rubber bridge for money is a good way to cure this habit. On the other hand at duplicate pairs you must be aggressive as a large minus is just a bottom board, the same as -110 when everyone else is -100.

One conclusion is: HAVE A GOOD SUIT. As your partner I am going to lead it, or sacrifice. If you have Jxxxx I will not be happy.

Let us look at other one-suited overcalls. If you have to overcall at the 2 level you need to be a little stronger and definitely have a good suit, as LHO may be doubling for penalties. This is especially true if the opening bit is 1NT, as then LHO knows the situation very precisely.

Try to improve your judgement in these situations so that you get it wrong less often than your competitors, the people holding your cards at the other table(s). Is it their hand or our hand or nobody's hand? Guess how many points the opener has, look at your own total and assume that the rest of the 40 points are evenly split between the other two hands.

Extreme example: RHO opens an Acol 2C game force, and you have 10 points. How many points does opener have? How many are left? Only the “get in the way” or “lead-directional” motives for overcalling really make sense, possibly only the first as you are likely to be on lead rather than partner. It is almost certainly their hand.

Extreme example the other way: RHO opens a weak 2H and you have 20 points. How many points does opener have? How many are left? Now it is almost certainly our hand, and they are getting in the way. So you should blast into game or make a very positive move.

A word on overcalling in NT. The books recommend that by overcalling 1H with 1NT you show 15-18 points, a flat hand, probably not a spade suit, and a heart stop. Your hand is now basically defensive and you need more strength to intervene. LHO has an easy lead and you may struggle in 1NT. Against that, at pairs the 1NT bidder often gets a good score if allowed to play there, so some bidders come in aggressively with 1NT.

Jump overcalls

There are three types of hand you might agree to describe by a jump overcall of 2♠ over an opening bid of 1♦.

F	G	H
♠AQJ764	♠AQJ764	♠AQJ764
♥A83	♥A83	♥Q83
♦A6	♦76	♦76
♣82	♣82	♣82

These are strong, intermediate and weak jump overcalls. The style you choose will influence other parts of your competitive bidding. You can play ATV (according to vulnerability). But you must know what the jump says, apart from “not suitable for a normal overcall”. Always have a good suit and preferably 6 cards as you are going to a higher level.

Two-suited overcalls are a specialized area, because you can have few points but great playing strength. After 1♦ on your right, you hold:

I	J	K	L
♠AJ764	♠KQJT9	♠AKQT98	♠AKQJT9
♥93	♥42	♥KQ	♥4
♦5	♦7	♦	♦8
♣KJ852	♣KQJT6	♣JT843	♣KQJ64

The basic principle is to bid both your suits no matter what! In order to give partner some clue as to your ambitions, it is recommended that you play Michaels weak or strong, so that the Michaels effectively bids both suits at once. Michaels has an anchor suit: if you don't have it you jump bid 2NT. There are other 2-suit conventions for example Ghestem. Overcall both suits if in between. You will get 2 bids in!

We have looked at one- and two-suited hands. What if you have 3 suits?

If one of them is opener's suit, pass quickly. The hand looks like a dangerous misfit where you might go for 1100 even at a low level. Forget about points and stay out. Over 1♦ do not bid with:

M	N
♠AJ76	♠AJ76
♥9	♥K
♦KQ94	♦KQ94
♣KJ85	♣JT62

If you bid partner will very likely bid his hearts and you will be in trouble. Let the opponents struggle with the misfit.

If you have 3 suits and not the opener's suit then you have an easy bid with around opening points. Make a takeout double.

O	P	Q	R
♠AJ76	♠KQJT	♠AKQT	♠AKQJ
♥QT53	♥QT52	♥KQ93	♥KQ93
♦5	♦7	♦3	♦8
♣QJ92	♣KQJT	♣QJT84	♣KQJ6

The takeout double takes care of one-suited hands that are too strong for a simple overcall, and also flat hands that are too strong for an overcall of 1NT. Agree with partner what "too strong" means. Double followed by another bid shows a big hand, either one-suited or flat, not two-suited.

S	T	U	V
♠AQJ76	♠KQJT92	♠AKQT52	♠AQ
♥AJ3	♥A2	♥KQ9	♥KQ9
♦53	♦76	♦3	♦AJT7
♣AKJ	♣KQJ	♣AKJ	♣AJ62