

Competitive Bidding—Part VI (October 18, 2021)

When an opponent opens the bidding, we have two ways to enter the auction: by making a **Takeout Double** (see September 13th and 20th lessons) or by making an **Overcall at some level**. The focus of today's lesson is the **Simple Overcall**. By “simple” we mean a natural, non-jump overcall. The range of a simple overcall can be anywhere from 7-17 high card points (HCP). On the back of your Convention Card under **Simple Overcall** is the place to indicate the specific range you and your partner are playing.

What are the reasons for overcalling?

- Even though the opponents have opened, we may still hold the majority of the strength and better distribution. Just because the opponents have opened the bidding doesn't necessarily mean that the hand belongs to them. If you have a reasonable hand plus a suitable suit, overcall to compete in the auction.
- If the opponents are resting in 2H and we bid 2S, they now have to choose between defending 2S and bidding 3H. In three hearts, they may have more difficulty in making their contract.
- Interfering with the opponents' auction may cause them to bid too much or too little or to reach the wrong contract. The more room our side takes away from the opponents, the better it may be for us. Most players have good understandings about what their bids mean when the opponents do not interfere in their auctions. However, bidding becomes less accurate after the opponents have overcalled.
- If we don't win the auction, the more partner knows about our hand, the easier it will be to defend. Our overcall might get partner off to the best opening lead. (See Feb. 1 lesson on opening leads after your partner has made a bid.) The opening lead is a key part of the defense. If you have a suit that you desperately want partner to lead (assuming partner will be on lead), you should overcall in that suit.
- Another good reason to overcall is to suggest a sacrifice. A sacrifice (bidding deliberately to go down) will give you a good score if you lose fewer points than you would have if you let the opponents play the hand. Always assume that you will be doubled if you sacrifice. You can afford to go down -300 if the opponents have a nonvulnerable game and -500 if they have a vulnerable game. An overcall can let your partner know that you are willing to sacrifice, but **partner makes the actual sacrifice decision**.

Differences of opinion exist over how many of the above reasons an overcall should satisfy. Some experts say you only need to satisfy one; others suggest that you should satisfy two. Needing to satisfy only one will result in more exciting auctions (with more scores that are very good and very bad). Needing to satisfy two will result in more average results.

Many experts advocate caution when making a risky overcall at matchpoints. At matchpoints, your opponents will be more likely to double you in a part score (unlike in a team game). Thus, a shaky overcall at matchpoints could prove to be quite expensive. **Always check vulnerability level when making an overcall!**

What are reasons for not overcalling?

- When we overcall, the responder is well-placed to decide what to do, having heard partner's opening bid. We may become trapped between the two opponents and be doubled for penalty. Even undoubled, we may go set instead of setting the opponents.
- If we overcall, responder can now pass, double, or cuebid. This may allow responder to better describe his hand than if we had passed.
- If we don't win the auction, declarer may have a better idea how to play the contract.

On balance, the advantages tend to outweigh the disadvantages. It's difficult for the opponents to double for penalty at low levels. At one time, the main criteria for overcalling was a “good” five-card or longer suit. The longer and stronger the suit, the less likely the opponents will double for penalty. The better the suit, the more lead directing value if the opponents win the auction.

Overcalling at the One Level

Let's look at some hands in which you might overcall at the **One Level**.

Example 1.	West	North	East	South
			(1D)	???

You (South) hold the following hand: AQJ95 83 92 7654

This hand has only seven HCP; but, the suit is good. Most players would overcall 1S. Your bid is only at the one level. You want your partner to lead a spade, if possible. The bid may prevent the opponents from bidding and making a 3NT contract.

Example 2.	West	North	East (1D)	South ???
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You (South) hold the following hand: J9653 83 AQ AQ54

Although your suit is very weak, most players would overcall 1S to get the partnership into the auction. There is more to gain than to lose.

Example 3.	West	North	East (1D)	South ???
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You (South) hold the following hand: AQJ763 83 KQ K104

In this example we have both a good hand and a good suit. You still would make a simple overcall of 1S. The range for a one-level overcall is large, somewhere between 7-17 HCP.

Example 4.	West	North	East (1D)	South ???
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You (South) hold the following hand: 104 Q8763 Q95 K83

Although this hand has 7 HCP and a five-card suit, the suit is poor. Most players would not overcall with this hand. With such a poor suit, the opponents may double us for penalty. If we don't get the contract, we don't want our partner to lead a heart. Note: If South passes, the auction isn't over. Your partner still has a chance to make a balancing (reopening) double (see Oct. 4 lesson).

Overcalling at the Two Level

Although we can be fairly free with a one-level overcall, we need to have a much better hand when we overcall at the two-level—the values for an opening hand. The danger is increased because the opponents will be more willing to defend, perhaps doubled. This is especially the case if we have backed them into a corner by taking away their bidding room.

Since an overcall covers a wide range, our partner may have to act with some values. That's fine after a one-level overcall since we may be able to escape at the two-level. If our partner makes a bid over our two-level overcall, we are likely headed for the three level or higher.

There are two basic requirements for a simple overcall at the two level.

1. A **good suit** that is at least five cards in length.
2. An opening hand with an outside ace or king.

In practical terms, this means that your hand needs to be 11-16 points for a simple overcall at the two level. When you have a stronger hand, (at least 17 HCP and a **good** six card or longer suit), start with a takeout double (see September 13th lesson) and then bid your suit. If you have a weak hand and a seven card or longer suit, make a preemptive bid at the 3, 4, or 5 level (see April 5th lesson on the **Preemptive Overcall**).

Let's look at some examples in which you might make a two-level overcall.

Example 1. Your RHO opens with 1H. You hold the following hand:

Kxx xx AKJ9x Kxx

Bid 2D. This is a perfect 2D overcall. You have an opening bid. You've achieved some obstruction. The opener's partner cannot respond 1S or 2C (although responder can make a negative double (see September 27th and October 4th lessons). If the opponents play the hand and your partner is on lead, you want him to lead a diamond. Sacrificing is unlikely to come up in this hand since the opponents probably will not bid game when you hold a hand strong enough to bid at the two level.

Example 2. Your RHO opens 1H. You hold the following hand:

xxx x AKJ9xx Kxx

Your hand is still a decent 2D overcall, especially if your side is nonvulnerable. Your hand is weaker than the one above, but still worth competing. You've achieved the same level of obstruction. Should the opponents play the hand, you definitely want your partner to lead a diamond. If the opponents bid game, your partner may be in a position to sacrifice with a suitable hand.

Example 3. Your RHO opens 1H. You hold the following hand:

xxx xx AKJ9x xxx

This hand is not good enough to overcall at the two level. The diamond suit is not long enough for a weak jump overcall. The best thing to do with this hand is to pass.

Example 4. RHO has opened with 1H. You hold the following hand:

xx xx AKJ984(x) xx(x)

The extra diamond(s) makes this hand suitable for a 3D weak jump overcall bid. Your hand is too weak to bid 2D.

Example 5. RHO has opened 1H. You hold the following hand:

Ax Kx Q10873 AJx

You should bid 2D with this hand despite the fact that your diamond suit is weak. If RHO had not opened the hand, you certainly would have opened this hand with 1D. So, competing for the auction in this case is quite acceptable. You have also achieved some degree of obstruction. Partner probably will lead a diamond; but, you have so much power on the outside of your suit that no harm will probably ensue from a diamond lead.

Example 6. Your RHO opens with 1S. You hold the following hand:

xx KQ109xx AQx xx

Bid 2H. This hand is a sound overcall of 2H. You have a good suit and would have opened the bidding with 1H if RHO had passed. Your side is unlikely to get into trouble.

Example 7. Your RHO opens with 1S. You hold the following hand:

Qx Jx AJ85 QJ763

A bid of 2C would be very risky. Your suit is not good enough. Better to pass for now and await developments. If you had held 5C/5D, you might consider making an unusual 2NT bid. However, the 2NT bid should be reserved for hands which are either weak or strong. With intermediate hands, it is better to bid one suit and then the other, if you can do so. We will be looking in more detail at the unusual 2NT bid in a subsequent lesson.

Example 8. The opener bids 1D, your partner passes and the responder bids 2C. You hold the following hand:

AJ10xx Jx Kxx QJx

You certainly would have bid 1S over the 1D opening, if you had had the opportunity. An overcall of 2S would be risky, especially if your side is vulnerable. The opponents likely have the majority of strength given opener's bid and responder's bid at the two-level. We may get doubled for penalty.

NOTE: We need a lot less to overcall at the two level or higher when we are in the balancing (passout) position (see Oct. 11th lesson).

Example 9. The bidding has proceeded as follows:

(1H) P (P) ???

You hold the following hand: Kxx xx KJ10xx Qxx

You can bid 2D safely with this hand. In the direct seat, you do not have the high card points necessary to bid 2D. We are in the balancing position. If we pass the bidding is over. The strength of responder's hand is known since he was not able to keep the bidding open. Your partner has some of the missing points. If you bid 2D, you may push the bidding one higher. Your partner may be able to raise your suit which would push the opener to have to bid one level higher than he is comfortable in bidding.

NOTE: If we hold a strong hand, we first begin with a takeout double and then bid our suit or notrump later (See September 13th lesson)

Example 10. Opponent has opened with 1D. You hold the following hand:

Kx AKJxxx Ax Kxx

Your hand has 18 HCP plus 2 length points for the six-card heart suit. It is too strong to make a simple overcall. Begin by making a takeout double. Partner will likely bid 1S or 2C. When you rebid 2H, you are showing a powerful hand which was too strong to simply overcall 1H. Your 2H bid is not forcing, but it is highly invitational.

NOTE: Some of the material for this lesson was taken from an article by Audrey Grant: see AudreyGrant.com and The Hamilton Bridge Centre: see Hamiltonbridge.com/Articles/SimpleOvercalls.html.

Next Week: Responding to your partner's overcall (including more on the mixed raise.)

