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This Week in Bridge

(110) Overcalls by Level

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Level: 1

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General

Overcalls are quite different from opening bids. They are an effort to compete in the bidding after the opponents have already struck the first blow. However, an overcall is one of the worst defined bids in all of bridge because 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, but 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.

Level of Overcall – General Concepts

When the opponents open the bidding and we are forced to overcall, what we promise partner changes based on the level at which we overcall our suit. Let's look at how our overcalls change in some different situations:

- 1-level Overcalls
 - These low-level overcalls are wide ranging – showing 7-18 points with a 5+card suit.
- 2-level Overcalls (not Jump Overcalls)
 - These 2-level overcalls are more sound. They show 12-18 points with a 5+card good suit (usually 6-card suit.)
- Vs. Preempts
 - When we are deciding whether to come in at a high level there is a lot of risk involved. The better our suit, the fewer values we need to have to overcall. The weaker our suit, the more (compensating) values we should have to take action. We need more than an opening hand to come in at these high levels. Having said that, we sometimes know that we are the one who needs to get into the auction if we have a long strong suit. These can be difficult situations to balance. If we have a hand that was planning to open 3♠ and the opponent opens 3♦ in front of us, then we generally won't be good enough to bid 3♠ now. If we do bid, partner will play us for more values and that can



lead to a lot of confusion if the auction gets more competitive. We should pass and wait to see if partner can get into the auction before bidding our suit. Partner will then know we have a long suit and not a great hand when we bid.

- 3-level Overcalls
 - Partner will expect us to have a least a good 5-card suit and about 14+ pts, about a King more than an opening bid.

- 4-level Overcalls
 - When the opponents open the bidding with something like 3♠ or 4♦ we are under a tremendous amount of pressure. We must make a decision to enter the auction for the first time at a very high level. This may be a now or never situation! We will frequently have to stretch. Partner will expect us to have a 6+card suit and a little better than an opening hand, 14+ pts. This is not much more than they would expect at the 2-level or 3-level. Of course, we would love to have much more than these minimum values, but when we are under so much pressure we frequently have to guess and hope that our LHO is not the one with a fabulous hand behind us – just waiting to double.

- Sandwich Seat
 - When both opponents have bid and partner has not, we should be a bit more careful overcalling, especially at the 2-level. We should either have a good hand or a good suit to get into the auction.

Suit Quality

There are no strict suit quality requirements for making a simple overcall. But again, the weaker your hand, the better your suit should be and vice versa. For a simple 1-level overcall we only promise 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 either a good suit or a good hand (or both).

For 2-level overcalls we should have either a good 5+card suit or a 6+card suit. Partner will freely raise us to the 3-level with 3-card support and about 6+points. We need to have a good suit to feel safe at this level. We do not want to be at the 3-level with a combined 18 HCP and only an 8-card fit.

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



When considering an overcall at a high level (when the opponents have preempted or bid-and-raised a suit), the suit quality becomes more important. When we overcall at a high level partner is unlikely to get to bid their suit and thus we are strongly suggesting our suit. If we have several options of where we would like to play (which we usually do when we have a poor suit) then we should strive to make a takeout double instead of bidding our suit. In many situations, we will make a slightly flawed (off-shape) takeout double instead of overcalling a very poor suit when we face high level bidding decision. Double is a much more flexible call and will land us in the right contract far more often!

Conclusion

Overcalls are a part of the game that causes every player some difficulty. It is common to feel like you are completely guessing when deciding whether to overcall or not in high level competitive auctions. Fortunately, this is an area of the game in which every player gains experience and learns how to judge the situation based on lots of factors – position, vulnerability, opponents, form of scoring, etc. The key to success in making overcalls is to understand that there are calculated risks involved. With each level higher the opponents push you, there is more and more of a guess involved in whether to enter the auction or stay silent. Keep working on refining your judgment and understanding that you aren't going to get every auction right – your goal is just to do better than most!