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This Week in Bridge

(487) When to Overcall a 4-Card Suit

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Level: 7 of 10 (3 of 6)

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General

When we are preparing to open the bidding but our Right Hand Opponent (RHO) opens in front of us, it can cause us difficulty. If we have a 5-card suit that we can bid at the 1-level, we will be fine – we make a simple overcall. If our suit (the one we were planning to open) would now have to be bid at the 2-level then we need a 6-card suit (or a very good 5-card suit) and some extra values (a solid opening hand) in order to now overcall it at the 2-level. If we are short in the opponent's suit (with 3+card support for the other three suits) then we can make a takeout double to show our hand. If we have length in the opponent's suit, we generally have two options – overcall NT (1NT with 15-18, more with 19+) or pass (with 12-14). But we have another option as well - to overcall a 4-card suit at the 1-level.

Overcalling 4-Card Suits

Let's start this discussion by looking at a useful example.

Example 1

♠ KQT7

♥ A6

♦ KJ54

♣ 932

If our RHO hand opens 1♥, we could easily make a takeout double. But what if they open 1♦? In this case, we could pass but that may cause us other problems later in the auction. One problem with pass is that it violates one of our modern tenets of bidding – “Get into and out of the auction as quickly as possible!” Thus, it would be better to overcall 1♠ than to pass and try to come back into the auction later.



Suit Quality (Expected 4-3 fit)

When we overcall a 4-card suit, partner will frequently raise us with 3-card support. Thus, we want our 4-card suit to be of good enough quality that can play well and make it relatively easy to draw trump opposite honor third (Hxx).

Looking at our example we can see that KQTx opposite Axx (or Jxx) will likely play for no losers (or 1 loser). This will allow us to still be in control of the trump suit. We do not want to be playing 2♠ with J432 opposite 765 – we will quickly lose control of the hand if this is our trump fit.

Compensating Values

When we overcall a suit that is only 4 cards in length, then we have one fewer trump than partner expects. That means that our hand will take fewer trick than partner expects – they will expect at least a good 9+ points and a 5+card suit (though they know we could have fewer points than that, they will play us for at least this many values.) Thus, if we overcall with 9 points and a 4-card suit our hand will not be as valuable as partner has a right to expect. To compensate for the “missing trump” we should have some extra HCP to overcall a 4-card suit. Then our hand will have the playing strength that partner expects.

Playing in a 4-3 Fit

When we overcall a 4-card suit, we will frequently end up playing in a 4-3 fit. For a 4-3 fit to play well, it is important to do any ruffing in the 3-card side, not the 4-card side. That means we want to think about what suit the opponents are likely to lead and now the play is likely to go. If we overcall a 4-card suit and win the auction, our LHO is likely to lead their partner’s suit (often the opening bidder’s suit). Thus, RHO’s suit is the one that we should most focus on. If we (the 4-card suit Overcaller) have length in RHO’s suit (and RHO has length in the suit they opened), then partner is likely to be short in the opponent’s suit. That means when we play the hand we will be able to ruff in the short side and produce extra tricks for our side. Additionally, the length in their suit in our hand makes it less likely that we will have to ruff in the 4-card suit side and less likely that we will lose control of the hand!

Example 2

♠ KQT7

♥ A6

♦ 54

♣ Q9832

If RHO opens 1♦ in front of us, then with this hand overcalling 1♠ may result in a 4-3 fit being tapped in the long side. This leads to “losing control of the hand!” When we are short in the opponent’s suit we would rather make a takeout double or pass than overcall a 4-card suit.



Conclusion

Overcalling a good 4-card suit can frequently be the best of bad choices. It can allow us to get into and out of the auction early when we are not planning to bid again. This hopefully saves us from more difficult decisions later in the auction. If you don't qualify for any of your other competitive bidding options, consider overcalling and competing with a good 4-card suit instead of passing and going quietly. Remember competing in the opponents' auction makes their lives more difficult, so whenever we can effectively do so we want to find a way to compete!