



Play & Learn

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Simple overcalls, part 1

Have you ever wondered what the word “simple” in the title of the overcalls section of your convention card means? Before we get to that, humor me by reviewing some basic terminology.

As a bridge teacher, I often hear a statement like: “I opened 1♣, the next player opened 1♥ and then my partner opened 1♠.” The title *opener* is given to only one player – the first person to make a call other than pass. The dealer has the first chance to star in that role, but dealer’s pass leaves the role of opener for another player. Opener’s partner is referred to as the *responder*. An opponent’s opening bid means you can no longer open. Your bid in a suit or notrump is now an *overcall*, and you are cast in the role of the *overcaller*. The partner of the overcaller is called the *advancer*. So the above sentence should be phrased, “I opened 1♣, the next player *overcalled* 1♥ and then my partner *responded* 1♠.”

You might think I’m nitpicking, but knowing each player’s title will make you more aware of the requirements for their bids. The guidelines are different for opener and overcaller, and a bid made by responder can have a different meaning than the same bid made by advancer.

An overcall is your side’s first bid in an auction where one or both opponents have already bid. A *simple overcall* is a non-jump overcall. After a 1♥ opening bid, 1♠ is a simple overcall, as is 2♣ or 2♦. A 2♠ bid over a 1♥ opening is a *jump overcall*, which most of today’s

players treat as a preempt similar to an opening bid at the same level. This is the first article in a series discussing simple overcalls over a one-level suit opening. For the time being, we’ll focus on auctions where the player to opener’s left makes a simple overcall.

When we overcall, an opponent has already announced approximately 12 or more points, so slam is seldom a possibility. Even making game might rely on partner having most of the remaining strength. Is overcalling really worthwhile if you aren’t that likely to reach game or slam? Absolutely. There’s no reason to give your opponents free sailing simply because they got to make the first bid.

There are several ways that you can improve your score by overcalling. Many overcalls lead to competitive auctions where both sides fight to see who gets to play the partscore of their choice. It’s possible that both sides can make a partscore. Occasionally, both sides can make a game. You would like to win the auction and make your contract to go plus, but going down isn’t bad if your opponents would have scored better making their contract. Even when you don’t win the auction, you might be able to push your opponents high enough that you can set them to collect a plus score. And when your side isn’t that likely to win the auction, your overcall can direct the best opening lead.

One difference between opening bids and overcalls is that opener sometimes bids a convenient minor, opening 1♣

or 1♦ on three cards to get things started. A minor-suit overcall shows a five-card or longer suit, just as a major-suit overcall does.

Another difference is the strength shown. A one-level suit opening can be as strong as 21 points. After a one-level opening, a simple overcall at the one or two level has a maximum of about 17 or 18 points. With stronger values, we generally double and bid our suit, as we’ll discuss in a future issue.

The level at which you must bid affects the lower limit of your overcalls. Modern players make fairly light one-level overcalls, as low as about 8 points. Doubling a one-level contract generally isn’t that lucrative, so we can take more risks at the one level. The approach to two-level overcalls is different. Opponents are more likely to double a two-level contract, especially when the deal seems to be a misfit. For that reason, it is generally suggested that a two-level simple overcall shows a hand worth opening.

A common mistake is to confuse the role of a two-level overcaller with the role of responder making a two-level response. In standard bidding, a 2♥ response to a 1♠ opening bid is sometimes described as showing the “five and dime” – a five-card suit and at least 10 HCP. It is not, however, the recommended requirement for a 2♥ overcall over a 1♠ opening. Most players treat two-level overcalls more like opening bids. We’ll look at examples of overcalls next month. ■