



Play & Learn

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Advancing overcalls without a fit

When partner overcalls at the two level, he is showing a hand worth opening – probably in the 13–18 point range. With only 6 or 7 points, game is unlikely and advancer can pass. With an opening hand, however, advancer wants to reach game. With the in-between hands, advancer would like to move toward game.

We've already seen how to show support for overcaller's suit in previous articles. Without support, advancer has two options: bid a new suit or bid notrump.

Let's deal with notrump bids first. After a two-level overcall, advancer can bid either 2NT or 3NT. Introducing notrump in a competitive auction always shows at least one stopper in any suit bid by the opponents. Suggested ranges for notrump responses to two-level overcalls are:

- 2NT = 8–11 points.
- 3NT = 12 or more points.

These notrump ranges are fairly standard. There is less agreement on other advances to an overcall. It's widely agreed that a new-suit advance shows a suit at least as long as overcaller's – five cards or more in length. Other areas involving overcalls have less agreement. Teachers and experts can suggest methods, but ultimately partnership agreement rules.

I've suggested that a cuebid advance guarantees a fit for overcaller's

suit, but not all pairs agree on that. Some just use the cuebid as a forcing bid. There are differing opinions on whether advancer's new suit should be forcing, non-forcing but constructive or weak and non-forcing. If you have an agreement that you like, stick with it. If not, pick one that makes the most sense to you and partner.

Because a player making a two-level overcall is guaranteed to have a decent hand, I prefer treating a new-suit advance to a two-level overcall as forcing, showing at least 9 or 10 points, unless advancer is a passed hand. (A player who could have opened the bidding but chose to pass has limited his strength and seldom has reason to make a forcing bid.)

One-level overcalls can be made with as few as 8 points, so advancer has to take more care not to get too high. Again, your partnership has to decide whether advancer's new-suit bids are forcing or not. While you can use different agreements depending on the level of your overcall, it's easier to remember if your methods are the same. You might agree to treat advancer's new suit as forcing after a one-level overcall if that's what you agreed on over two-level overcalls. If your partnership chooses one of the non-forcing options, you can agree that a jump advance in a new suit is forcing, showing enough for game opposite a minimum overcall.

After a one-level overcall, advancer

might be facing only 8 points across the table while opener's partner is facing an opening hand. It makes sense that advancer's notrump bids should be stronger than responder's. Of course, your notrump call shows a stopper in the opponent's suit(s). Suggested point ranges for notrump advances to one-level overcalls are approximately:

- 1NT = 8 to 11 points.
- 2NT = 12 to 14 points.
- 3NT = 15 or more points.

Did I hear you screaming, "Enough already!" This all seems like a lot to remember, but it's the price you pay for making light one-level overcalls. If you don't think you're ready to handle it and want advancer's point ranges to be similar to a responder's point ranges, you can make the lower limit of your one-level overcalls closer to the lower limit of an opening bid. Even then, there will be some differences, most notably this: Unlike responder, advancer's new-suit bid shows five cards, not four.

There's a downside to raising the strength requirements for overcalls and new-suit advances or notrump advances. Today's duplicate players are highly competitive, and you won't be in there fighting on hands where many are making light overcalls and either winning the bidding or giving their opponents problems that your opponents won't encounter. ■