

## Lesson 8 - Overcalls

Any bid higher than an opponent's bid is called an "overcall." There are some things you need to keep in mind when you overcall an existing bid. Sometimes, even though you have opening points, you may have to pass.

If opponent opens with **1♣**, you can overcall at the 1 Level in any other suit. Sometimes experienced players will overcall at the 1 Level with as few as 6 points and a good 5-card suit. For example, they may overcall **1♥** when they have 5 hearts, only two honors, the Ace/Queen of hearts and just 6 HCP. To overcall at the 1 level, you should have 8-16 HCP. If you have 17+ HCP, you should "double." Your hand is too strong for an overcall.

If the opponent opens in a major and you have a good suit in a minor, you must bid at the 2 level to get into the bidding. Sometimes you may have opening points but you cannot overcall because you do not have 5 cards in a suit. There are certain rules about overcalls. Sometimes, it is better to use the "double."

Here are my recommendations:

- 1) In the first round, you should have 8-16 points and a good 5-card suit to overcall. A good suit means 2+ honors in that suit.
- 2) If you have a No Trump hand (15-17 pts, balanced) and opponents have opened the bidding in a suit, you should have a stopper (see description on next page) in the opponent's suit before bidding 1NT, preferably two stoppers if the opponent bid a major suit. When overcalling using a 1NT bid, you can have as high as 18 pts. Take time to assess any other options available, such as "double" (weakness in suit bid and strength in other 3 suits).
- 3) If you passed in the first round with 10-11 pts and the bidding by opponents has not progressed too high, you may benefit from overcalling in a suit in which you have length and strength, though not the required 12+ points to open. Use your judgment! Your partner will be aware that you do not have opening points because you passed in the first round. Now your partner will know that you have at least 5 in your suit and close to opening pts. Your partner is not required to respond to your bid and you cannot always expect a response, but s/he may want to raise the bid if s/he has support in your suit. (Use "The Law of Total Tricks.") Also, be aware that you are giving away information to your opponents which may help them assess the bidding and determine strategy for playing the hand. This overcall is also useful as a lead-directing bid — if your partner is on lead, s/he should lead your suit.
- 4) If your opponent opened in a major, you must have a good 5+-card suit in a minor (two or more honors recommended) to overcall at the 2 level with minimum opening points. Your partner must understand that you have overcalled at the lowest bid available and you may not have any more than opening points. This is the same idea if the opponent bid **1♠** and you overcalled **2♥**.

- 5) A jump overcall over an opponent's suit means a weak bid. For example, if opponent bid 1♥ and you overcalled 2♠, you are showing 6 spades and a weak hand. If you have opening points, you would bid at the lowest level over the opponent's suit (i.e., 1♠ in this case).
- 6) If you are not vulnerable and your opponents are, you can be more aggressive. If you are vulnerable, you need to be more careful. You should use the most effective bid to describe your hand. Sometimes it may be the best strategy to pass, even with opening points, and hope to defeat the opponents' contract.
- 7) An overcall of 2♣ over 1 of a suit or 1NT means at least 5 clubs and at least opening points. (Not to be confused with the opening bid of 2♣, meaning 22+ points and having nothing to do with club suit).
- 8) If you have no support coming from partner, you may wish to keep overcalling and raising on your own if you are not vulnerable, but bid only as high as the number of cards in your suit ("The Law of Total Tricks"). For example, if you have 7 spades with two of the top three in that suit and opening points, you may bid as high as 3♠ on your own (no support from Partner), as if it were a weak bid. However, the danger is that you could push the opponents into game level and they make it!
- 9) What do you do if West opens 1♥ and you are North with this hand (13 HCP)? Sometimes it is a good strategy to pass.
- 10) The most important thing of all — always use your judgment!



**What is considered to be a stopper?** A stopper is a high card in a suit that can stop the opponents from taking or continuing their lead. This is important if you end up in a No Trump contract. You must have a stopper in opponent's suit to overcall with 1NT. In a suit contract, it's not as important to have stoppers in every suit since you are usually able to trump in after 2 or 3 rounds. An Ace is always considered to be a stopper. A King is a stopper, but never if it is a singleton; it's okay if it is a doubleton. A Queen can be a stopper, with at least 3 cards in that suit. When opponents open with a major, it's best to have at least 2 good stoppers in that suit if you overcall with 1NT. If opponent opened at the 2 or 3 level (weak hand, long suit), you will have to be very careful to assess if a NT contract is safe.

## Responding to an Overcall by Partner:

The partner of an overcaller is called the Advancer. Responding to your partner's overcall can be a bit tricky and takes some thought. As Advancer, you have to take into account that the overcall may not be a full opening strength hand.

Here are some guidelines for the Advancer:

If partner overcalled at the 1 Level, you can respond as you would normally. If you have 3-card support for Partner's major and 6-10 pts, support the suit at the 2 level, if that is still possible. If your partner has more than just opening points, s/he will likely raise the level. If Partner overcalled with fewer than opening pts, s/he will likely pass.

With 11+ pts, you should raise partner's suit by jumping a level.

If partner overcalled at the 2 Level (e.g. Opponent bid 1♠, Partner overcalled 2 of another suit), then be careful that you don't take the bidding too high. With 8+ pts, you may consider it safe to bid at the 3 level. You can count Dummy pts, however, and that may bring your point count higher. Your ability to compete becomes stronger if you are short in opponent's suit.

Use the Law of Total Tricks as a guideline: Consider bidding to the level of the number of cards you both have in the suit you are bidding (which would become the trump suit). If your partner used an overcall bid of 1♠ or 1♥ and you know you have 9 spades or hearts together, consider bidding as high as the 3 level in that suit. This is similar if Partner overcalled with 2♣ or 2♦. If you have few points, you may wish to wait to see if opponents bid higher. Also, consider if you are vulnerable or not. If Responder passes, it may be better to pass also to keep the bidding lower. You must realize that the Opener likely has opening pts, so take that into consideration. If you cannot reach game, should you bid higher? You run the risk of going down. You must also consider that your partner may have full opening points or may have less. You cannot be sure of your partner's points exactly. Your judgment is important and may not always be "spot on," as they say in Britain.

As you gain more experience, you can be more competitive. Here's an example of an aggressive overcall made at a tournament.  
(N/S not vulnerable, E/W vulnerable)

North (dealer): Pass

East: 1♠

South: 4♥

South's reasoning: South knows partner (North) has fewer than 12 pts since he passed; South would rather go down than let opponents take the contract; this bid might make it very difficult for opponents to find their suit if it isn't spades; opponents may not be quite sure how strong that bid 4♥ is. It could also backfire; opponents could double for penalty. Makes the game interesting if nothing else!

