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Overcalling in a suit

Bridge gets much more exciting when all four players join in the auction. Just because the opponents make the first call, it can still be your hand – you might even make a game or slam. But bidding is not just about making contracts but about getting the best score possible for your side.

Suppose your opponents can make 2♥, you score -110. You can beat that score by playing in 2♠ and going one down, losing -50 when not vulnerable or -100 if vulnerable. Your best score is a minus, but it's a smaller minus than letting the opponents make a contract. More exciting still is if opponents can make 4♥ for -420 and you play in 4♠ going one down for -50, your little minus is an amazingly good score. That is how bridge events are won.

Even if you overcall and are then outbid by opponents, your overcall may help partner find the best lead. Holding 4♥ to ten tricks for -420 is better than letting them make an overtrick and scoring -450. Look at this hand where your right hand opponent opens 1♣.

♠ K Q J 10 9
♥ 4 2
♦ 8 7 6 5
♣ K 6

With 9 HCP hand and five good spades, you wouldn't dream of opening the bidding, but it is correct to overcall 1♣. Bridge is a battle, opponents may have struck the first blow but you needn't give in tamely. Interrupt their conversation by getting in the way. If you overcall 1♣, left hand opponent cannot respond 1♦ or 1♥. If opponents win the contract, partner will lead a spade and set up winners for your side. Here is the deal that hand came from.

♠ 6 5
♥ A K Q 10 8 5
♦ 10 2
♣ 10 9 4

♠ K Q J 10 9 ♠ A 8 7 3
♥ 4 2 ♥ 7
♦ 8 7 6 5 ♦ Q J 9 4 3
♣ K 6 ♣ 8 3 2

♠ 4 2
♥ J 9 6 3
♦ A K
♣ A Q J 7 5

South West North East
1♣ 1♠ 2♥ 3♠
4♥ 4♠ all pass

When West bid 1♣, North could bid 2♥ with a 6-card suit. Holding four spades, East thought if partner could bid 1♠, he was worth 3♠. South raised to 4♥, but when 4♠ came back to him, it wasn't at all clear who could make what contract. N/S passed the hand out, which was a great deal better than bidding 5♥ and going one down. In fact the best N/S could do was to penalty double 4♥ and collect +100 instead of +50, no big deal when every other N/S was making +420. It is a wonderful result for E/W and all because West said 1♣.

The agreements with partner for when a simple overcall can be made are:

- A one level overcall can be as few as 8 HCP, but with a poor hand the suit will be good, since the main aim when overcalling on weaker hands is to get the best lead if you defend.
- A one level overcall shows a 5+ card suit. The suit should have at least two honours including one of the Ace, King or Queen. A two level overcall shows a better suit, either 6+cards or three good honours in a 5-card suit and 10+ HCP, as it's a level higher.
- A simple overcall can be made on strong hands up to 19 HCP, when no other bid seems better. Hands over 19 HCP, and many hands of 16+, start with a double.
- Single and double jump overcalls will be covered next time.

If overcalls can be made on such thin values, how can overcaller's partner know how to respond when partner overcalls?

- You don't have to bid just because you don't like partner's suit. An overcall may have fewer points but it shows a better suit. So just pass with not much and no liking for the suit.
- You can give a raise with only 3-card support since partner has shown at least five. Value your hand as you would had partner opened the suit.
- With 4-card support you will often raise a major to the three level and with 5-card support to the four-level. The more distribution you have, the more you bid. But watch the vulnerability, going down vulnerable can be expensive, particularly if opponents make a penalty double.
- If you have a good long suit of your own and high card values, then bid it. If you can't support partner, maybe partner can support you.

- Since partner can be a king less than an opening bid, you should have that bit extra to bid no trumps and you need a good stopper in the suit opened.

Here are some examples:

♠ K 10 6 ♠ Q 9 3
♥ A Q J 7 2 ♥ K 8 4
♦ 10 7 3 ♦ Q J 9 2
♣ 8 6 ♣ 9 3 2

Janet overcalled the 1♣ opening with 1♥. Peter was going to say 1NT as he would over a 1♥ opening bid, but thought a bit more and correctly bid 2♥. A combined 18 HCP was enough to make 2♥. If Janet passes North would bid 1NT and make eight tricks on any lead,

but over 1♥, he didn't like to say 1NT without a heart stopper, so he passed.

♠ K 10 6 4 2 ♠ A 9 8 5 3
♥ A 10 7 ♥ 4 2
♦ 3 ♦ 9 8 4
♣ K 9 8 6 ♣ A 3 2

Keith overcalled South's opening 1♦ with 1♠. North bid 2♦ and Daisy thought she had a suitable hand for 3♠. Keith, who always expects his wife to have underbid her hand, went 4♠ and was delighted to find he had only one club, one heart and one diamond to lose. Neither hand has an opening bid but game is unbeatable, showing that good distribution and a good trump fit is just as important as high cards.

♠ K Q 10 9 4 ♠ 5 3
♥ 10 7 ♥ Q 4 2
♦ 3 2 ♦ J 6 5 4
♣ K Q 8 6 ♣ A 3 2

opponents will often save you.

Over 1♥ West bid 1♠ and East, thinking she had to bid with 7 HCP, particularly as she didn't like spades, tried 1NT. Everybody passed, but the play went horribly; -150 was a poor score. If East passes, South will bid 2♦ and rescue West from the poor 1♠ contract. If you keep quiet when you don't like the overcall,

♠ K Q 9 4 2 ♠ 5 3
♥ A Q 10 ♥ 4 2
♦ J 3 ♦ A K Q 9 8 4
♣ K 9 8 ♣ Q 5 2

Doreen was good for her 1♠ overcall of the opening 1♥, but there is no better bid. When Lucy replied 2♦ she bid 3NT to show extra values and hearts well stopped, trusting her partner to provide a good suit with the winners needed.

