

# The Foundation System

## Overcalls

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we deal with the bid of a new suit after an opponent has opened the bidding, treating both the simple bid of a new suit at the cheapest possible level and the jump overcall in a new suit, made at least one level higher than required for a simple overcall. The overcall, plus the takeout double (treated in an earlier chapter), constitute the primary weaponry in your defensive bidding armory. Lesser weapons include the notrump overcall (discussed only briefly here, since the response structure is the same for a notrump overcall and a notrump opening bid) and certain specialized bids showing two-suited hands, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Since the takeout double is usually made with a relatively balanced hand (4432 is the most common hand pattern), it is usually selected with the intent of reaching game or competing with opener's side for the partscore. That motivation applies to the overcall as well, but the more distributional nature of an overcall brings other motivations into play. We list those secondary motivations here, with no implied order of priority, since the importance of each will vary, depending on such factors as the type of game (matchpoints vs imps), the state of your game (Do you need a swing, or do you want to avoid a swing?) vulnerability, and the quality of the opposition. These secondary motivations are in addition to the primary objective of reaching a makeable partscore, game, or slam.

- Consume bidding space in order to make it more difficult for the opponents to find the proper contract.
- Pave the way for a possibly profitable sacrifice against an opposing game, slam, or partscore.
- Prepare the defense against an opposing contract, by suggesting an opening lead to partner, or helping partner to better visualize the declarer's probable distribution and high-card location.

The Law of Total Tricks was discussed in the preceding chapter from the standpoint of the side which opens the bidding, but it is equally applicable to the other side as well. In this chapter, we're the other side, so if it's been a while since you read that chapter, please go back and review it before you tackle the companion *Bidding Practice* chapter.

## 1NT Overcall

Before moving to the heart of this chapter, let's dispose of the 1NT Overcall. The requirements for this bid are a balanced hand with 15-18 HCP and a stopper in Opener's suit. If Opener's partner passes, the further development of the bidding uses the same structure already described for a 1NT Opening bid (see that chapter for review), while if Opener's partner bids, all further bidding by our side is natural, and the only forcing bid we can make is a cue-bid of a suit bid naturally by Opener or his partner.

## The Simple Overcall

To satisfy the primary objective of a simple overcall, you need a good 5+card suit and at least near-opening bid strength. Partner will assume a suit at least as good as KJ9xx, and will hope for still better. Any reduction in suit quality requires additional high-card strength; at least a full opening bid or better is needed as suit quality deteriorates. As suit length increases, the high-card requirements can be reduced slightly, but below 9 HCP the primary objective vanishes, so you should be passing unless you're pursuing one of the secondary objectives, which we'll discuss later after we digress briefly to discuss responding to the simple overcall.

## Responding to the Simple Overcall

With 3-card support and about 8-10 HCP, or with 4-card support and about 6-8 HCP, a single raise is appropriate. With greater strength, a cue-bid of Opener's suit is used to show limit raise strength or better and invite game; overcaller can then retreat to his suit with a minimal hand. With 4-card support and no more than one defensive trick, a preemptive jump raise can be used to consume bidding space while warning overcaller of your limited defensive strength, relying on the Law of Total Tricks to avoid a disastrous penalty. If you passed originally before the opening bid, a new suit bid in response to the overcall is non-forcing and mainly lead-directing; it denies 3-card support but shows a way for overcaller to reach your hand so that you can lead his suit through declarer. If you have not yet passed, however, a new suit is forcing one round and asks overcaller to show 3-card support or else return to his own suit or bid the fourth suit. A notrump bid in response to the overcall is constructive, showing around 10 HCP with a stopper in Opener's suit and 2-card support, preferably Qx or better; higher notrump bids show greater strength. **Do not bid notrump with a singleton in overcaller's suit in an attempt to escape a penalty.** Just pass and hope the opponents compete further; that's why we require a decent suit for the overcall. If partner gets doubled and wants to escape to another suit, he will redouble. That's called an SOS Redouble.

## **The Jump Overcall**

This shows a decent 6+card suit with a maximum of about 7 HCP, concentrated mainly in your long suit, and no more than one defensive trick. AQJxxx with nothing outside is about a maximum, while K109xxxx with a side queen is about a minimum. This warns partner that you have abandoned the primary objective unless he has an exceptionally strong hand; he will have to cue-bid Opener's suit if he wants to force, since you do not plan to bid again unless he does so.

## **Decisions, Decisions!**

Even though our response structure is quite simple, we still have a lot of ground to cover. The rest of this chapter will consider such decisions as : Overcall vs Pass; Overcall vs Jump Overcall; Overcall vs Takeout Double; Suit Overcall vs NT Overcall; the Reopening Overcall; and Overcalling with a 4-Card Suit.

## **Overcall vs Pass**

This decision will usually arise only when you have less than opening bid strength with a good suit, or opening bid strength with a weaker suit. Then you want to focus first on your holding in Opener's suit. Something like AQx or KJx would tilt you toward bidding, while you would be more inclined to pass with xx or xxx, since this suggests that partner may have some wasted strength in Opener's suit. Vulnerability is a key consideration; with a weak suit, you will resolve all close decisions by passing if vulnerable. The other important factor is the amount of bidding space consumed by your overcall. After a 1C opening, a dubious 1D overcall should be eschewed since it will not seriously discommode the opponents, while a 1S overcall could force them into a negative double auction where Opener will have difficulty discerning whether his partner has 4 hearts or 5 for his negative double. Similarly, a 2H overcall of a 1S opening may make it hard for them to find a fit in diamonds, while a 2C overcall would steer them toward that fit. Finally, with a marginal overcall and a suit you do not need partner to lead, you might prefer a pass against good opponents so as not to give declarer any clues about how to play the hand.

## **Simple Overcall vs Jump Overcall**

Here the decision depends mainly on your suit quality and your holding in Opener's suit. If you think there's a reasonable chance for game when partner has a fit and opening bid strength, prefer the simple overcall. Again, your holding in Opener's suit is critical. A singleton or void would suggest the simple overcall, but the death holding of xxx would tilt you toward the jump overcall.

## Overcall vs Takeout Double

This is the tricky one. I could write a whole book on this subject. My favorite author, Mike Lawrence, has written **two**, in fact! It all boils down to this. If there is only one unbid major (i.e., the opening bid was a major), you bid a 5-card major, even with two 4-card minors, unless you are strong enough to double first and then bid your major on the next round. If there are two unbid majors (i.e., the opening bid was a minor), you bid the 5-card suit if your majors are 53, again unless you are strong enough to double first and then bid your major on the next round. If your majors are 54, you tend to double first and bid your 5-card major next if partner doesn't bid your other major. The basic idea is the primacy of the major suit in the modern game. Failing to overcall with a 5-card major risks missing a 53 major suit fit. This is more costly in the long run than failing to double and thus missing a 44 minor suit fit. When your 5-card suit is a minor, it's a different story. Now you will tend to double whenever you have at least 3 cards in each unbid major, even with 6331 shape, unless strong enough to overcall and then double on the next round if partner doesn't bid a major.

## Suit Overcall vs NT Overcall

Unless you have a solid suit as a source of tricks for notrump, you will tend to overcall a 5-card major in preference to a NT overcall, but will prefer a NT overcall if your suit is a minor. However, if your minor suit is broken, bid it in preference to a NT overcall unless you have a double stopper in their suit.

## The Reopening Overcall

The usual rule when reopening in fourth seat after an opening bid and two passes is that you can bid with about a king less than would be required for the corresponding bid in the direct seat. This would place the absolute minimum for a reopening overcall at 6 HCP with a good suit, and of course none of those HCPs should be in Opener's suit. A bid that weak would be mainly lead-directing, and should be ventured only when not vulnerable. If vulnerable, the minimum for a reopening overcall with a good suit is about 9 HCP, again depending mainly on your holding in their suit, but in this seat KJx is a death holding while xxx is almost neutral. The main consideration when considering light action in the reopening seat is the likelihood that partner has made a trap pass with a strong holding in Opener's suit, hoping for a reopening takeout double. Here again the main factor is your holding in Opener's suit. With a singleton or doubleton, consider the reopening double seriously regardless of your holding in the other suits, but be wary of the double with a void, since you won't be able to lead a trump through declarer if partner is indeed trapping and passes the double for penalty. With 3 or more cards in Opener's suit, it is unlikely that partner is trapping, so forget the double and make your normal call, which will often be a pass unless you have a good suit.

## Overcalling with a 4-Card Suit

Is it ever proper to overcall with a 4-card suit? Conventional wisdom says no. Mike Lawrence, my favorite authority in this area, says yes, under certain conditions. The bid **must** be made at the 1-level; it is **never** permitted at the 2-level. It must be a **good** 4-card suit, something like AQJx is about minimum suit quality. Finally, the hand must be strong enough to want to compete, yet unsuitable for any other action such as a 1NT overcall or a takeout double. I see a suitable hand perhaps once every ten sessions. Typically, it will have a good 4-card major, a decent 5-card holding in Opener's minor, such as AJ10xx, a singleton somewhere to rule out a NT overcall or a takeout double, and about 14-16 HCP. Partner assumes I have a 5-card suit, and I sometimes end up in a 43 fit, but because the high cards are favorably placed, I frequently scramble home with a plus score, or partner finds the killing lead when they play the hand.

## The Secondary Objectives

Don't get carried away with those secondary objectives. Treat them mainly as additional motivation for pursuing the primary objective when you hold a suitable hand for doing so. In pursuing these secondary objectives, the minimum suit quality should be something like Q109xx. Bidding a jack-high suit is more likely to give away a defensive trick when partner leads your suit than it is to defeat a notrump game or suggest a good sacrifice. Consuming bidding space is not sufficient justification for risking an 800 penalty, but paving the way for defeating an opposing game could be. Many notrump games could be defeated when the opening leader has a balanced hand if he only knew which suit to lead. In those cases a lead-directing overcall can be effective, but only if you have a semi-decent suit with good prospects for an outside entry after your suit has been established. Preparing for a potential sacrifice is a different story. Here a light overcall can be effective if you have exceptional distribution and are lucky enough to find partner with a fit. This is often successful when you hold a second suit as an additional source of tricks. Consider this possibility when holding 64 or better distribution. Use the LTC as a guide, and consider an overcall with LTC=6 or better even if relatively weak in high cards.