

Keeping Up With Conventions

Overcalls - Part I

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This series of articles looks at how to fill out the standard convention card. Previous articles in the series can be found by visiting the Articles section at www.AudreyGrant.com.

There are several sections on the convention card covering partnership agreements on overcalls. Let's see what each is about.

The Simple Overcall

The opponent on your right opens 1♦. What call would you make with this hand? With enough strength to open the bidding and a good five-card suit, you—and everyone else—would overcall 1♥. This is a *simple* ... non jump ... overcall. Simple overcalls are covered in this area of the card:

SIMPLE OVERCALL

1 level ___ to ___ HCP (usually)
often 4 cards very light style

Responses

New Suit: Forcing NFConst NF
Jump Raise: Forcing Inv. Weak

Would you also make an overcall of 1♥ with this hand? You don't need 13 or more points to overcall at the one level, but most partnerships agree on some minimum requirement, such as 7 high-card points. If you do make a simple overcall with this type of hand, you need to put a checkmark beside "very light style."

What would you do with this hand if the bidding is opened 1♦ on your right? An overcall typically shows a five-card or longer suit but many players will

occasionally overcall at the one level on a good four-card suit if there is no better option. That's okay, but if you frequently overcall with a four-card suit, you'll need to check the box beside "often 4 cards."

Suppose this is your hand and the bidding is opened 1♦ on your right.

Do you make a simple overcall of 1♥? Most partnerships agree on an upper limit for a simple overcall, typically around 16 high-card points. With more strength, you take some stronger action, such as making a takeout double and then bidding your suit. So, you can fill out a range for your one-level overcalls:

SIMPLE OVERCALL

1 level 7 to 16 HCP (usually)
often 4 cards very light style

The "usually" beside the range indicates this is an approximation. You can occasionally step outside this range if your judgment tells you to make a simple overcall with a slightly weaker or stronger hand.

Notice also that this range applies only to one-level overcalls. Suppose we return to an earlier hand, but this time the bidding is opened 1♠ on your right. You could still make a simple overcall of 2♥ but you might not get unanimous agreement. The standard range for a two-level overcall is higher than for a one-level overcall ... typically a sound opening bid or better. Some players would consider this hand too weak. That's more a matter of judgment than conventional agreement, so there's no requirement to enter anything on the convention card for simple overcalls at the two level.

Responses to an Overcall

Suppose you are South and the auction begins:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♦	1♥	Pass	?

Partner has made a simple overcall of 1♥ and you have this hand:

If partner had opened 1♥, you could respond 1♠ and that would be a forcing call ... a new suit by responder. An overcall, however, especially at the one level, can be made on fewer than 13 points. The situation is not quite the same.

There is no standard agreement on how to respond to overcalls. In fact, even the terminology is open to discussion. It is becoming popular to refer to the player responding to an overcall, or a takeout double, as *advancer* rather than responder. This avoids confusion with the responder to the opening bidder. The convention card, however, still refers to "responses" to an overcall instead of "advances."

Some partnerships prefer to treat advances of an overcall in the same manner as responses to an opening bid. A new suit is forcing ... unless *advancer* is a passed hand. Using this style, you would bid 1♠ with the above hand, expecting partner to bid again.

Others prefer to give the overcaller more leeway. A new suit by *advancer* is *constructive*, but not forcing. The overcaller is invited to bid again but can pass with a minimum overcall. This approach is abbreviated to "NFConst" (non-forcing but constructive) on the convention card.

A third approach is to agree that a new suit is non forcing, "NF." The overcaller is expected to pass except with a very good hand for the overcall.

The partnership checks the appropriate box on the card:

New Suit: Forcing N/FCnst NF

If the partnership agrees that a new suit by advancer is non forcing, then advancer will have to do something else with a strong hand, such as cuebidding the opponent's suit.

Now, suppose you ♠ K 8 4
have this hand and the ♥ K J 7 5
auction starts the ♦ 7 3
same way: ♣ A 10 8 3

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♦	1♥	Pass	?

If partner had opened 1♥, you could make a *limit raise* to 3♥ with this hand, showing support with about 11–12 points and inviting partner to continue to game.

When partner overcalls 1♥, you could bid the same way, using a jump raise to show an invitational (Inv.) hand. In competitive auctions, however, many partnerships prefer to use the jump raise of an overcall as a preemptive (Weak) ♠ 8 4 3 bid. With this agreement, 3♥ would show this type of hand: ♥ K J 7 5 ♦ 7 ♣ 10 8 5 3 2

The advantage is that you take room away from the opponents when you have a fit but are unlikely to win the auction. This is important when competing for the contract is likely to be more important than getting to game or slam. You would mark the card appropriately:

Jump Raise: Forcing Inv. Weak

This approach is common enough that it is not alertable. Notice that you could also play the jump raise of partner's overcall as forcing, rather than invitational or weak. Not many partnerships use this approach ... usually only those that also play forcing jump raises in response to opening bids.

If you decide to use the jump raise as a weak bid, you need another way to show a good hand with support for partner's suit. That can be handled through a cuebid of the opponent's suit ... 2♦ in the above auction.

The cuebid is something that isn't available when partner opens and the next player passes. However, it's a very versatile call when advancing an overcall ... or a takeout double. It can be used to show an invitational or better hand with a fit for partner's suit; it can also be used to show some other type of strong hand if a new suit response is not forcing.

Some partnerships use a jump cuebid ... 3♦ in the previous auction ... to specifically show a limit raise of the overcalled suit. This is the type of agreement that is alertable and is written on the red line of this section.

Jump Overcalls

Suppose you hold ♠ 7 5
this hand and the ♥ K Q J 9 8 3
bidding is opened ♦ J 10 6 3
1♣ on your right. ♣ 8
What call do you make?

You could make a simple overcall of 1♥, but many players would jump to 2♥ with this hand. If that's your partnership style, you are using *weak jump overcalls* and should check the appropriate box in this section:

JUMP OVERCALL
Strong Intermediate Weak

If the bidding were opened 1♠, you would have to jump to 3♥ to make a weak jump overcall. That's a little dangerous with a six-card suit, but you might risk it when non vulnerable. Your other choice is probably to pass since partner will expect a stronger hand for a simple two-level overcall of 2♥.

It used to be popular to play *strong jump overcalls* ... showing a hand close to a strong two-bid ... or intermediate jump overcalls ... showing a good six-card or longer suit and the values for an opening bid or better. These styles have fallen out of favor, however. They are both marked in red, so you must alert if this is your approach and you check the "Strong" or "Intermediate" box.

The reason that weak jump overcalls have become standard is that there is another way to handle hands that are too strong for a simple over-

call. Start with a takeout double and then bid your suit. Also, the range for a simple overcall at the one level is wider than it used to be.

Opening Preempts

The section on opening preemptive bids is a bit out of place among overcalls and doubles. It really belongs on the front side of the card with other opening bids. However, since it's a form of obstructive bidding similar to the jump overcall, it can be dealt with here.

OPENING PREEMPTS
Sound Light Very Light
3/4-bids
Conv./Resp. _____

Would you open ♠ A Q J 10 8 7 3
3♠ with this ♥ 4
hand? Most ♦ 10 8 3
players would. ♣ 9 2

This is a *sound* preemptive opening bid when non vulnerable against vulnerable opponents, since you expect to take at least six tricks with spades as trumps. It obeys the *Rule of 500* ... you won't suffer a penalty of more than 500 points if the opponents double for penalty. It also satisfies the *Rule of 1–2–3* ... you don't want to overbid by more than 1 trick when vulnerable against non-vulnerable opponents, by two tricks at equal vulnerability, or by three tricks when non vulnerable against vulnerable opponents.

Most partnerships would consider this a sound preempt even if your side is vulnerable. You may occasionally go for a penalty of 800, but it's unlikely.

If you would ♠ K J 10 8 7 5 3
open this hand ♥ 4
3♠, however, ♦ 10 8 3
check the box ♣ 9 2
under "light." You have a good seven-card suit, but there's no guarantee you won't go for a large penalty.

Finally, if you ♠ Q 10 9 7 5 3
would open this ♥ 4
hand 3♠, be sure ♦ 10 8 3 2
to check the "Very ♣ 9 2
Light" box. And make sure you have an understanding partner!

