



Bidding Opposite a Suit Overcall

Supporting partner's overcall

Later on in this series, I will look in detail at how high you should bid in a competitive auction in order to outbid your opponents, when both sides have found a fit. In the meantime, I need to introduce an idea which we need now.

Suppose that you find the points are distributed roughly 20-20 between the two sides. Suppose you have a total of nine spades between your two hands. If the finesses work approximately half of the time for you, you are likely to make nine tricks: (3♠ making). Here

is the interesting extension: your opponents are also likely to have a nine-card fit, maybe hearts and they can probably make nine tricks with hearts as trumps (3♥ making). At this stage I will not attempt to prove or even demonstrate this to you, that comes later. It has been demonstrated by lots of experts looking at many hands.

Does it matter if there are two finesses in the minor suits and instead of one being right for each side, they both work against you and for your opponents? In that case, you might make one fewer trick (3♠ – 1) but they make one more trick (3♥ +1 or 4♥ making). Since you cannot tell in the auction who the finesses favour, it pays to assume the first scenario (ie half your finesses working). You should also realise that if you bid 3♠ on this assumption and it goes one off, you should not worry that you ought to have been in 2♠ making because opponents can probably make 4♥, and if you had given them enough bidding space they may well have bid it. A win-win situation.

This works equally well if both sides

have lesser or greater fits. If you have an eight-card heart fit, your opponents are likely to have an eight-card fit and

it is quite likely that each side can make eight tricks with their chosen trump suit. If you have a ten-card heart fit, your opponents are likely to have a ten-card fit (maybe spades) and it is quite likely that each side can make ten tricks with their chosen trump suit. This is the scenario where both sides might be able to make game. It is so disheartening to see your opponents make 4♥, open the traveller and see that you could have made 4♠, but you never got into the auction.

This lends itself to a valuable principle:

If you know you have a nine-card fit, you should be eager to bid to the three level to put maximum pressure on opponents.

This tactic is known as **Bidding to the level of the fit**. It is very effective if you can do it before your opponents know how good their fit is, and if they don't know their best fit it can prevent them from ever finding it.

Suppose you are South at game all, the auction starts:

West	North	East	South
1♣	1♠	Pass	?

What are your thoughts with hands A to D?

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

Hand C	Hand D
♠ K 7 6 3 2	♠ 9 6 5 4
♥ 8 6	♥ 8 6 2
♦ Q 10 9 8	♦ 8 7 6
♣ 8 5	♣ 8 5 4

Partner has promised five spades. I don't need to think much. With Hands A and B, I do not particularly want to investigate game if partner has at most 16 points, but I do want to raise to the level of the fit.

With Hand A we have at least a nine-card spade fit so I jump to 3♠. This will make if partner is maximum. If partner has fewer values it will fail, but in that case opponents can make their contract. Note that our best case scenario is to find that opponents have a heart fit because they haven't yet bid hearts. They may well find they should have been in 4♥, but were unable to ever mention the suit. Partner is expected to pass my 3♠ bid whether minimum or maximum.

With Hand B we have at least an eight-card spade fit so I raise to 2♠. Partner is not expected to voluntarily bid on just because he has a few extra points.

With Hand C we have at least a ten-card spade fit so I pre-empt to 4♠. Let opponents pick the bones out of that.

So far I have made few concessions to vulnerability, quite intentionally. If I raise partner's 1♠ overcall to 3♠, opponents find it hard to make a penalty double, even if they want to, because it is correct and normal to play double of a freely raised suit as take-out.

However, I will reinforce what I said in my previous article. You cannot be a winner at bridge without some risk.

You should accept that risk with grace and calmness whether it works or not. In the long term it is winning tactics. However, even I have qualms about bidding 3♣ with Hand D, particularly if I am vulnerable and opponents are not.

To summarise:

All direct raises of an over-called suit are pre-emptive.

Of course, this leaves unanswered the question of what to do if you have support for partner's overcalled suit and want to make a game try. You clearly cannot use a direct raise of his suit for that purpose as well. What should South do with Hands E and F after this start to the auction?

West	North	East	South
1♣	1♠	Pass	?

Hand E	Hand F
♠ K 7 6	♠ K J 6
♥ A 9 8 2	♥ A 9 8 2
♦ K J 10 3	♦ K Q J 3
♣ 8 6	♣ 8 6

North has at least five spades so the three-card support in Hand E is quite sufficient. South wants to show his support and make a game try. He should show this by bidding the opponents' suit, clubs. This is called an unassuming cue bid (UCB).

There are various styles of continuations but I suggest you keep it simple. Overcaller bids what he thinks he can make.

West	North	East	South
1♣	1♠	Pass	2♣
Pass	2♣		

Here North recognises that 2♣ is a game try in spades but shows a minimum overcall by repeating his suit at the cheapest level. South then gives up. With Hand F, South would certainly want to insist on game opposite an opening bid, but he is mindful of the fact that North's 1♠ overcall could be made on as few as seven points. Nevertheless, he wants

to be in game unless North is really minimum.

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

West	North	East	South
1♣	1♠	Pass	2♣ ¹
Pass	2♣ ²	Pass	3♣ ³
Pass	4♣ ⁴	All Pass	

¹An unassuming cue bid.

²North declines the original game invitation.

³South recognises North's lack of interest but has another try.

⁴North looks again at his hand. Yes, it is towards the lower end of a 1♠ overcall but it could be worse. North realises that South must have a very good hand and so goes to game. 4♣ makes with the loss of just one trick in each side suit.

Supporting partner when he has made an opening bid

Of course it makes sense for the opening side to bid to the level of the fit as well. Many players play Jacoby raises in response to a 1♥ or 1♠ opening.

introduced spades.

Auction J			
West	North	East	South
1♥	1♠	2NT	

Auction K			
West	North	East	South
1♥	1♠	2♠	

Some players play 2NT in Auction J as a heart raise. This makes no sense in Acol. You need 2NT as a natural bid, showing 10-12 points and spade stoppers. There is a bid that you don't need that also keeps the bidding below 3♥, namely bidding their suit. 2♠ in Auction K is the UCB, showing at least a high card raise to 3♥. You certainly don't need 2♠ to ask for a spade stopper. If you have sound values but no spade stopper why not start with a negative double?

Bidding no-trumps opposite partner's overcall.

The large majority of this article has been given over to helping your judgement when you have found a fit with your partner. You must then bid aggressively, conscious of what you might be able to make, but also of making life hard for your opponents. However, sometimes you don't particularly like the suit of partner's overcall. In that case you must bid much more cautiously. Your prospects of a high contract are much reduced, and so is the danger of opponents prospering at a high level.

Auction L			
West	North	East	South
1♥	1♠	Pass	?

Because the overcall shows a five-card suit, a no-trump bid logically is made on a hand with at most two spades. Note also that the 1♠ overcaller might have as few as seven points, so if South has a misfit he must be cautious.

With Hand M, South certainly wouldn't pass a 1♠ opening bid but he has no reason to bid opposite a 1♠ overcall. North has at most 16 points and with a misfit game is highly u

Auction G			
West	North	East	South
1♥	Pass	3♥	

Auction H			
West	North	East	South
1♥	Pass	2NT	

In Auction G, East's 3♥ is pre-emptive, aimed at preventing North/South finding a spade fit. In Auction H, East's 2NT is Jacoby, showing a good heart raise.

However, suppose they have already

unlikely. The fact that North has at least five spades means that he won't be playing in a 4-1 fit.

With Hand N South bids 1NT, showing 9-12 points. Of course South needs at least one heart stopper after West has bid hearts.

How about Hand P? South certainly cannot pass with 14 good points and no-trumps is not an option with no stopper in the opponents' suit. South does best to improvise by assuming he has three spades and making the 2♥ UCB.

Hand M	Hand N	Hand P
♠ 8	♠ 8	♠ KJ
♥ K 8 7 2	♥ KJ 8 7	♥ 6 5 3
♦ A J 8 7	♦ A J 8 7	♦ A 9 8 2
♣ 7 5 3 2	♣ Q 10 5 2	♣ A Q 10 2

If partner makes a one level overcall:

A 1NT bid shows 9-12 points and at least one stopper in the opponent's suit.

A 2NT bid shows 13-14 points and at least one stopper in their suit.

A 3NT bid shows 15+ points and at least one stopper in their suit.

How about if the overcall is at the two level?

Auction Q			
West	North	East	South
1♠	2♣	Pass	3♣

Auction R			
West	North	East	South
1♠	2♣	Pass	2♠

3♣ in Auction Q is still pre-emptive with 2♠ in Auction R the UCB. However remember that as in the uncontested auction, while finding an eight-card major suit fit usually settles the trump suit, an eight-card or even nine-card minor fit leaves you looking for 3NT, of course provided your side has a stopper in the opponents' suit. I am a little bit reluctant to give precise point counts because the better the fit you have with partner's minor suit the easier you will find 3NT.

Suppose your partner overcalls 1♥ with 2♣.

Hand S	Hand T
♠ K J 6	♠ 10 5 4
♥ A 8 7	♥ A 8 7
♦ K J 4 2	♦ A 5 4 2
♣ 8 6 3	♣ K J 6

With Hand S you have only one heart stopper. If you play in no-trumps it is quite likely that you will need to run nine tricks as soon as you get the lead. That means the clubs will have to run with no loser, and you have no club honour to help partner. Even if the clubs do run, you are likely to need to set up tricks in spades or diamonds and if you have to lose the lead it will be to the opening bidder, who will have the hearts set up. I would be content with an UCB of 2♥, and if partner can only rebid 3♣ I would pass.

Hand T is more promising. My clubs are good and that increases the prospect of running partner's expected six-card suit. Six clubs and two red aces already makes eight tricks, and partner is sure to have something outside clubs. Twelve points just as with Hand S, but well worth 3NT.

Changing suit after partner's overcall

Auction U			
West	North	East	South
1♠	2♣	Pass	2♥

Auction V			
West	North	East	South
1♠	2♣	Pass	3♥

Opinions differ as to whether 2♥ is forcing in Auction U. Traditionally, it was played as highly encouraging but not forcing, so you had to jump to 3♥ if you wanted to create a forcing auction, as in Auction V. That is for you to agree with partner. However, one thing is certain. South's hearts should be at least as robust as North has promised in clubs: an excellent five-card suit or goodish six-card suit. Even if you play 2♥ in Auction U as not forcing, bidding 2♥ just because you dislike clubs comes under the heading of fighting partner. That is a recipe for turning a small minus into a large minus. ■

Bidding Opposite a Suit Overcall Quiz

- 1 With North/South vulnerable what should South bid with these hands when the auction starts as shown?

West	North	East	South
1♥	1♠	Pass	?

Hand A	Hand B	Hand C
♠ J 8 7 ♥ 9 6 ♦ A Q 7 5 ♣ 7 5 4 3	♠ J 8 7 2 ♥ 6 2 ♦ A Q 7 5 ♣ 7 5 4	♠ Q 8 7 ♥ 9 6 ♦ A Q 7 5 ♣ A 8 7 3

Hand D	Hand E	Hand F
♠ Q 8 7 2 ♥ 6 2 ♦ A Q 7 5 ♣ A 5 4	♠ K J 7 6 2 ♥ 6 2 ♦ J 10 7 6 ♣ 7 5	♠ 7 ♥ A J 10 3 ♦ Q 8 7 6 5 ♣ 8 7 6

Hand G	Hand H	Hand J
♠ 7 ♥ A J 10 3 ♦ Q 8 7 6 5 ♣ A J 6	♠ 7 ♥ A J 10 3 ♦ Q 8 7 6 5 ♣ A K 8	♠ 7 ♥ 8 4 3 ♦ K Q J 10 8 6 ♣ A K 8

- 2 (i) At love all what should North bid with these hands when the auction starts as shown?

West	North	East	South
1♥	1♠	Pass	2♥
Pass	?		

- (ii) What should North bid with these hands if South had bid 3♠ rather than 2♥?

Hand A	Hand B	Hand C
♠ K Q 7 5 2 ♥ 9 4 ♦ A 7 6 ♣ 8 6 5	♠ K Q 7 5 2 ♥ 9 4 ♦ A K 8 ♣ K 7 5	♠ K 8 6 5 3 ♥ A Q 6 ♦ A 8 7 ♣ K 7

- 3 With East/West vulnerable what should North bid with these hands when the auction starts as shown?

West	North	East	South
1♥	1♠	Pass	1NT
Pass	?		

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

- 4 At game all what should North bid with these hands when the auction starts as shown?

West	North	East	South
1♥	1♠	Pass	2♣
Pass	?		

- (i) If you play 2♣ as forcing?
(ii) If you play 2♣ as encouraging but not absolutely forcing?

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

- 5 What should South bid with these hands when the auction starts as shown? Assume you are playing a change of suit after an overcall as forcing.

West	North	East	South
1♦	2♣	Pass	?

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

Hand D	Hand E	Hand F
♠ A K 8 6 5 ♥ K Q 3 ♦ 8 ♣ Q 8 7 2	♠ A K Q J 7 6 ♥ 9 7 6 ♦ 8 ♣ Q 8 7	♠ K Q 7 5 3 ♥ A Q J 2 ♦ 7 5 4 ♣ K

Answers to Bidding Opposite a Suit Overcall Quiz

- 1 With North/South vulnerable what should South bid with these hands when the auction starts as shown?

West	North	East	South
1♥	1♠	Pass	?

Hand A	Hand B	Hand C
♠ J 8 7 ♥ 9 6 ♦ A Q 7 5 ♣ 7 5 4 3	♠ J 8 7 2 ♥ 6 2 ♦ A Q 7 5 ♣ 7 5 4	♠ Q 8 7 ♥ 9 6 ♦ A Q 7 5 ♣ A 8 7 3

Hand D	Hand E	Hand F
♠ Q 8 7 2 ♥ 6 2 ♦ A Q 7 5 ♣ A 5 4	♠ K J 7 6 2 ♥ 6 2 ♦ J 10 7 6 ♣ 7 5	♠ 7 ♥ A J 10 3 ♦ Q 8 7 6 5 ♣ 8 7 6

Hand G	Hand H	Hand J
♠ 7 ♥ A J 10 3 ♦ Q 8 7 6 5 ♣ A J 6	♠ 7 ♥ A J 10 3 ♦ Q 8 7 6 5 ♣ A K 8	♠ 7 ♥ 8 4 3 ♦ K Q J 10 8 6 ♣ A K 8

- Hand A 2♠. A gentle pre-empt.
 Hand B 3♠. Bid to the level of your fit. Not a game try.
 Hand C 2♥. A UCB.
 Hand D 2♥. A UCB, just a bit stronger than Hand C because of your fourth spade.
 Hand E 4♣. Bid to the level of your fit.
 Hand F Pass. Not enough points for 1NT.
 Hand G 1NT. 9-12 points.
 Hand H 2NT. 13-14 points.
 Hand J 2♦. Whether or not you play it as forcing.

- 2 (i) At love all what should North bid with these hands when the auction starts as shown?

West	North	East	South
1♥	1♠	Pass	2♥
Pass	?		

- (ii) What should North bid with these hands if South had bid 3♠ rather than 2♥?

Hand A	Hand B	Hand C
♠ K Q 7 5 2 ♥ 9 4 ♦ A 7 6 ♣ 8 6 5	♠ K Q 7 5 2 ♥ 9 4 ♦ A K 8 ♣ K 7 5	♠ K 8 6 5 3 ♥ A Q 6 ♦ A 8 7 ♣ K 7

- (i) 2♥ is an UCB, inviting game in spades.
 (ii) 3♠ is pre-emptive.
 Hand A (i) 2♠. A minimum overcall.
 (ii) Pass.
 Hand B (i) 4♣. Maximum for 1♠.
 (ii) Pass.
 Hand C (i) 3NT. Why not show your double heart stopper while accepting the game try?
 4♣ is also reasonable as partner usually has at least three spades for his UCB.
 (ii) Pass.

- 3 With East/West vulnerable what should North bid with these hands when the auction starts as shown?

West	North	East	South
1♥	1♠	Pass	1NT
Pass	?		

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

- South has shown 9-12 points.
 Hand A 2♠. A sign off.
 Hand B 2NT. Inviting 3NT if South is maximum for 1NT.
 Hand C 4♣. Likely to be best even if South has a singleton or void spade.

- 4 At game all what should North bid with these hands when the auction starts as shown?

West	North	East	South
1♥	1♠	Pass	2♣
Pass	?		

- (i) If you play 2♣ as forcing?

- (ii) If you play 2♣ as encouraging but not absolutely forcing?

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

- Hand A (i) 2♠. Your spades are strong.
 (ii) 2♣.
 Hand B (i) 3♣.
 (ii) Pass. Good club support but a weak overcall.
 Hand C (i) 2NT.
 (ii) Pass. South should have good clubs.
 Don't fight your partner.

- 5 What should South bid with these hands when the auction starts as shown? Assume you are playing a change of suit after an overcall as forcing.

West	North	East	South
1♦	2♣	Pass	?

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

Hand D	Hand E	Hand F
♠ A K 8 6 5 ♥ K Q 3 ♦ 8 ♣ Q 8 7 2	♠ A K Q J 7 6 ♥ 9 7 6 ♦ 8 ♣ Q 8 7	♠ K Q 7 5 3 ♥ A Q J 2 ♦ 7 5 4 ♣ K

- Hand A Pass. Don't fight your partner.
 Hand B 3NT. Your ♠Q is priceless.
 Hand C 3♣. Pre-emptive.
 Hand D 2♠. Look for the ten trick game.
 Hand E 4♣. The obvious game.
 Hand F 2♠. Then 3♥ if North repeats his clubs.
 You certainly want to play in game.