

The

DIRIGO SYSTEM

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A New Approach to Competitive Auctions

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Dirigo (dir'-i-goh) v., Latin: I direct, I lead.

1. The Shortage of Competitive Bidding Systems

As new bidding systems have been introduced over the past several decades the emphasis has been on:

- (i) ever-increasing aggressiveness in opening the bidding
- (ii) keeping bidding levels low on strong hands
- (iii) quickly escalating bidding levels on weak hands, and
- (iv) discouraging competitive bidding

As a result of ever-weaker opening bid requirements it is more likely than ever that the dealer will find a way to open each hand. Between weak no-trumps, weak two-bids, and convenient minor openings, it becomes more probable that hands will be opened before your turn to call.

Against this onslaught of direct bidding systems, the old "defensive" bidding systems are woefully inadequate. A normal complement of overcalls, pre-empts, and takeout doubles are not likely to deter your opponents. In fact, many bidding systems are now designed to turn those traditional weapons against their owners.

There are, of course, a number of individual conventions (Michaels, unusual notrump, etc) that have been employed to attempt to moderate this advantage that the opening bidder and partner now have. However, it is now high time for introduction of a full system of competitive bids designed around today's game.

2. What's Wrong With Natural Overcalls?

Okay, you are non-vulnerable; your left-hand opponent has opened the bidding 1♦. Your partner has overcalled 1♠. You hold: ♠ 8 7 ♥ A 9 7 2 ♦ A 7 ♣ A J 4 3 2

Do you have interest in game? Do you want to show your club suit? What is partner has overcalled with:

♠ K Q J 10 6 ♥ 10 4 ♦ Q 6 3 ♣ 7 5

and wanted to get you off to a spade lead against 3NT? Are you still interested in game? You may have trouble taking 7 tricks.

But what is partner has overcalled with:

♠ A K Q 10 9 6 ♥ 4 ♦ K 6 3 ♣ Q 10 5

Do you have interest in game? Slam?

Maybe your partner could have started the latter hand with a takeout double and then bid the spade suit. But if you are holding a weak hand with no tolerance for spades, you will be quickly in trouble.

And what is your partner overcalled with:

♠ K J 10 9 6 ♥ 4 ♦ 6 3 ♣ K Q 10 7 5

Don't you wish you could have safely shown your club suit? Partner couldn't bid Michaels on this hand, because the suits were wrong...

The problem lies in the wide range of hands that can comprise the simple overcall. Advancer (overcaller's partner) has insufficient information with which to proceed. Any action, even pass, can be wrong.

3. A New Philosophy on Competitive Bidding

The Dirigo System is based upon the notion that there are four kinds of hands with which one would like to enter the bidding after the opponents have opened. The first of these is the pre-emptive type of hand in which it is your intent to deprive the opening partnership of bidding space with minimal risk. The normal approaches to these types of hands are left untouched in this system.

The second class of hands consists of those with which one would (normally) intend to make a simple overcall with the dual intent of directing the likely defense and of potentially finding partner with a suitable suit in which to compete.

A third class is comprised of those where the player holds a two-suiter. These types of hands have always been problematic, as the bidder must choose a suit to show first. A number of standalone conventional bids have been developed to address this dilemma, and there is no end to the conventions that are employed over an opponent's 1NT opener. Since many of these are similar in appearance but radically different in content, using them in casual or infrequent partnerships can lead to some "unusual" outcomes.

Finally, some of the most difficult holdings to handle easily are those where the opponents have opened the bidding and you hold a (relatively) strong hand. Of course, notrump overcalls and takeout doubles are available, but these fail to describe many of the hands which naturally occur. "Strongly encouraging" your partner to bid (with a takeout double) sometimes leads to good results, but can lead to uncertainty on how to proceed after the first round of bidding. It also provides a variety of otherwise unavailable options to the opener's partner; options which can assist your opponents more than your takeout double will aid you.

The Dirigo system employs a series of transfers as first bids in a competitive situation. Fundamentally, a direct call (overcall or double) of an opening bid is treated as a transfer to the next highest suit. Without intervening action the overcaller's partner will normally execute the transfer. The overcaller's intention (and holding) will be made clear by the following rebid. Doubles are included in this system of transfers, but notrump bids (and doubles of notrump openers) are excluded.

4. The Simple Transfer Overcall

The simple transfer overcall is exactly what it implies; a transfer to the next highest call. A call of clubs is a transfer to diamonds, diamonds to hearts, hearts to spades, and spades to clubs. A double is considered a call of the suit doubled (i.e. a double of diamonds is a transfer to hearts). Partner should assume in all cases that the holding for this bid is equivalent to a normal (vulnerability considered) minimal overcall in the suit implied. If the holding is otherwise, it will be identified on subsequent bids.

Without intervention by opponents, the normal response to such a transfer call is to execute the transfer. This will accomplish the same result as a normal direct overcall except that (i) the overcaller is now guaranteed another bid, (ii) the responder's hand is unknown, and (iii) such a contract would be played by the opposite hand. Two of these are a distinct advantage to your partnership, and the other is normally unimportant.

There are several cases where partner might decline such a transfer. Naturally, the most common case is a misfit. When partner is very short in the requested suit, has few points, and a differing long suit, it is permissible to decline the transfer. This would signal the original overcaller that such a misfit exists, and permits the advancer to select a safer contract without the normal requisite strength for a free bid. Note that when the advancer has a misfit and a weak hand, but without a "safe suit" of their own, the transfer is accepted. So the acceptance of the transfer does not guarantee trump support. However, if the advancer **freely accepts** the transfer after the opponents intervene, this does guarantee (normally three-card) trump support.

Another case where the transfer would not be executed routinely is when overcaller's partner is long in the implied suit and possesses few, if any, defensive tricks outside that suit. A pre-emptive raise or advance sacrifice is strongly suggested.

When the overcaller's partner holds a strong hand or a particularly good fit (one that could be interested in a game opposite a minimal overcall), that responder is expected to take an action **inconsistent** with either of the previous bids. A jump in a new suit, a notrump bid, or a cue bid of the opponents' suit are all considered to be game invitations opposite the most minimal of overcall hands.

It is important to remember that in the majority of transfer overcalls, the transfer is accepted as directed. The result of this is that the contract is identical to that which would have occurred with a natural overcall. The biggest difference is that the contract will be played from the opposite hand; this can be to the declarer's advantage, since the concealed hand is totally unknown to the defenders.

5. The Two-Suited Overcall

When holding a two-suited hand (either a weak hand which is minimally 5-5, or a stronger hand which is minimally 5-4), a transfer overcall is initiated into the 5-card suit. If the hand is 5-5, the transfer is made to the 5-card suit which would keep the bidding at the lowest possible level once both suits are shown. For example, holding spades and clubs over an opening of 1 diamond, you would bid 1 heart (showing the spades). Assuming no intervention, your partner would dutifully respond with 1 spade and you would bid 2 clubs. Partner can then correct, if necessary.

Why is this an advantage over any other system of overcalls? First, in making an overcall with a two-suited hand you are **guaranteed** a second bid to fully describe your hand. In addition, you are able to do so without your partner exposing strength, weakness, or distribution. Finally, you are permitted to make the same initial bid as you would make on either a normal overcall or a strong hand, thus discouraging the opponents from making too many assumptions about your holding. After all, the primary failure of such bids as Michaels is that it gives the opponents as much (and often more useful) information as it gives your partner.

Strong or very distributional two-suited hands can be shown with a jump in a new suit or in reverse order to communicate the strength/shape. On such hands, absorbing bidding space is of little consequence once the playing strength has been identified.

6. The Strong Hand

And so what do we do with the strong hand? This situation comes up more and more frequently with the advent of weaker opening bids.

First, we start with our normal transfer overcall. We are now **guaranteed** of another bid, even with passing opponents. If partner executes the transfer or declines the transfer with a new suit, we are free to show strength in several ways. Remember that simply bidding a new suit (unless the bid is a jump or is clearly a reverse) simply shows distribution, not strength.

The rebid of a new suit constituting a reverse is a sign of strength. A rebid of notrump is a sign of strength and promises stoppers in the opponent's originally-bid suit. A rebid of a cue bid of the opponent's suit indicates strength, together with shortness (singleton or void) in that suit. Note that rebids of notrump suggest that the originally implied suit could likely consist of only four cards.

So what about the three-suited hand that the standard takeout double addressed? With modern weak and short-suit openers it simply doesn't occur as frequently as it used to. With minimal strength and no 5-card suit to transfer into, it is often best to pass and await developments. But when the need arises to force partner to pick a suit, we have **two** types of cue-bids available. The overcall in the opponents' bid suit is a cue-bid, as well as the bid of the suit **directly beneath** the opponents' bid suit. In other words, on the sequence:

1♦ - ?

the bids of 2♣ and 2♦ are both cue-bids. It is recommended that the former (2♣) be used on hands of nominal strength and the latter (2♦) be used on hands of unlimited strength. The direct overcall in the suit beneath the opponents' bid suit is comparable to a standard takeout double, but does promise somewhat more strength. Because it is a limited bid and promises support for each of the other suits, **it may be passed by partner**. (When this call is Alerted, the proper explanation is: "Partner has a limited opening hand with support for each of the suits", meaning "not diamonds".)

Bidding the opponent's suit in response to this bid usually indicates a lack of preference for the other suits and is a one-round force:

1♦ - 2♣ - Pass - 2♦

would suggest a hand with 4 cards in each major and at least 10 HCP.

The transfer overcall cue-bid of the opponents' bid suit can be used for very strong hands and is completely forcing.

The original overcaller should always be cautious about making strong forcing bids in this situation because partner's hand is undefined. By the same token, the responder should be aggressive in making forward-going bids in response to the original transfer when additional values are held.

7. When Is Your First Bid a Transfer?

Your first bid is a transfer overcall when it is:

- a) a suit bid or double **AND**
- b) made on your first opportunity to make an overcall **AND**
- c) not a jump bid **AND**
- d) not made after the opponents have bid two suits.

On the following sequences, the last call noted is **not** a transfer, and would have its normal meaning:

1♦ - Pass - 2♣ - 2♥

(two suits have been bid; this is natural)

1♦ - Pass - 2♣ - Dbl

(two suits have been bid; this is takeout)

1♦ - Pass - 2♣ - 3♥

(jump is always pre-emptive and natural)

1♦ - 2♥

(jump is always pre-emptive and natural)

1♦ - Pass - 1♥ - Pass - 2♣ - 2♠ (natural; not first opportunity to overcall)

On the following sequences, the last call noted **is** a transfer:

1♦ - Pass - 1NT - 2♥ (only one suit bid; this indicates spades)

1♦ - Pass - 1NT - 2♦ (only one suit bid; this indicates hearts)

8. When Your Partner Overcalls Notrump

Your partner's overcall of 1NT is natural. It should be treated as such.

9. If the Opponents Open 1 NT

What happens when the opponents open 1 NT? You can continue to play Dirigo, treating a double as a transfer to clubs. However, combining Brozel (or DONT) doubles with the rest of the Dirigo system yields a number of advantages. In this scheme, a double shows a one-suited hand worth a bid at the two-level. The doubler should possess a six-card suit with two of the top three honors in that suit. Responder bids 2♣ to find out the suit (with a club suit, the doubler will pass). The extreme advantage of employing this wrinkle is that responder has the option of passing for penalties with a scattered 10 HCP or so and a semi-balanced distribution.

If utilizing the single-suited double, all **other** calls over 1NT should be treated as Dirigo transfers:

2♣→2♦; 2♦→2♥; 2♥→2♠; 2♠→3♣.

If **not** utilizing the single-suited double, **all** calls over 1NT should be treated as Dirigo transfers:

Double→2♣; 2♣→2♦; 2♦→2♥; 2♥→2♠.

10. When Opponents Intervene

When opponents decide to interject bids between the transfer overcaller and responder, several new options are available to that responder. These options hold fairly obvious meanings.

A pass indicates a weakness and no particular appetite for the suggested suit. In this case the value of the normal overcall in assisting the defense has been preserved without visible effect.

A double indicates a stronger hand, values in the suit doubled, and at least a tolerance for partner's (implied) suit. This is important, because partner should feel comfortable pulling this double with a minimal overcall hand.

Executing the transfer at this point indicates more than a tolerance for the suit, and a willingness to compete at whatever level is selected. Since it does not deny outside suits, the original bidder is free to bid a second suit (if the original bid was based on a two-suited hand) or to bid otherwise on a strong hand.

Bidding a new suit as a free bid when the opponents have intervened in the transfer is either pre-emptive (it will be obvious when this is the case) or strong (game invitation). It also suggests strongly an intolerance for partner's implied suit. This bid should only be considered when it can be made safely opposite a partner with a minimal overcall in the suggested suit and no tolerance for the new suit. This situation will not occur frequently against opponents who do not psyche (or vigorously overbid).

What about when the opponents double the bid that initiates the transfer? As before, two new options are available. Passing permits the transfer to come back around to the original overcaller and suggests a weak hand with either (i) some (limited) tolerance for the implied suit, or (ii) no long suit to show. Either way, the original overcaller can simply bid the implied suit, or can show a second suit if that was the original intent anyway.

A redouble of an intervening double would imply a hand of strength. Such a redouble would invite game even opposite a nominal overcall hand, so it must possess a combination of high-card points and/or fit for the implied suit to make such an invitation. The original overcaller should make the normal rebid (the implied suit, a second suit, or a strength bid) to clarify the holding.

11. Balancing (Reopening) Transfer Overcalls

All overcalls are treated as transfers, including balancing suit bids (and doubles). The transfer permits a maximum of flexibility with a minimal amount of exposed information. Here the reopener's partner has already passed, so values are limited. The adjustment to the system when making a transfer overcall in the balance seat is a requirement for about 3-5 extra points (depending on vulnerability), and a corresponding decrease of about 3-5 points on the part of responder to take aggressive action.

With general values and no specific suit, a balancing NT call is used.

12. Transfer Overcalls at Higher Levels

As with all overcalls at the 2- or 3-level, additional high-card strength (or distributional values) are required. Again, vulnerability is clearly a factor in determining when one should make such an overcall, but otherwise the system of transfers is unaffected.

13. Dirigo Versus Precision

Dirigo can be used against Precision (or similar strong-club systems) in conjunction with Mathe. Utilizing Mathe, a double of a 1♣ opening indicates (at least) 4-4 in the major suits, and a 1NT overcall indicates (at least) 4-4 in the minor suits, with some interest in competing. In this case, Dirigo is employed normally, with two exceptions: a diamond suit is now shown with a 2♣ bid (transfer), and the **only** takeout bid is 1♠, which may be passed. If Mathe is not used, Dirigo may be used in the normal manner.

Be very careful about employing takeout bids over artificial club openers. This action should be used only when holding support for **all four suits** (balanced) and sufficient points to compete at the two level in partner's chosen suit.

14. (Pre-) Alerting Dirigo

Dirigo is alertable. If possible, opponents *should be* pre-alerted that you are playing "transfer overcalls". The first (transfer initiation) bid **must be** alerted. The explanation offered upon request should state: "My partner has requested a transfer to (suit)...". A suggested Pre-Alert is attached.

15. Recommended Defense

The recommended bidding defense to Dirigo is to bid in the same manner as if the overcaller had made a call in the suit indicated by the transfer overcall. For example, opponents should double a transfer overcall when holding that bid suit (and the other suit not implied by the transfer overcall, if that other suit is a major suit).

SUMMARY

The Dirigo System is a competitive bidding system that consists of an initial transfer overcall. It is activated when opponents are first to open the bidding. If the first bid (or double) by the competing (non-opening) side is not a notrump bid, it is intended as a transfer to the next highest suit. All subsequent bids by the competing side are natural. It is thus easy to implement and does not require a lengthy memorization of artificial bids and responses.

The intent of this system is to enhance the ability of the competing side to describe a wide range of hands without having to make initial compromises. It permits the competing side to more fully engage in the auction and to neutralize the advantage that many aggressive (weak opener) systems provide.

Dirigo provides this ability in two ways. First, because it is a one-round force, it permits the competing side to enter the bidding without having to initially disclose the strength or distributional nature of the overcalling hand. Second, because the responder is coerced into performing the transfer, declining this action permits the responder to actively show weakness and an intolerance for the intended suit. This helps to avoid messy misfits and can give valuable guidance on defense.

Examples and Discussion

1) As South, you hold: ♠KQJ1073 ♥94 ♦K74 ♣98

Bidding has proceeded:

<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>
Pass	1♦	?	

Bid 1♥. Without intervention, your partner will bid 1♠, and you will pass. You are in the same place as if you had overcalled the spades. Opener's partner may have to make some difficult decisions whether to reopen this hand. Unless your partner has enough values to take aggressive action, it is unlikely you will actually play this hand at 1♠, but you have passed on the defensive information; and if you are given the opportunity to play this contract, it should be a very favorable result.

2) As South, you hold: ♠KJ1073 ♥94 ♦KQ754 ♣9

Bidding has proceeded:

<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>
Pass	1♣	?	

Bid 1♥. Without intervention your partner will bid 1♠, and you will rebid 2♦. Your distribution thus described, your task is finished and you can await any action by partner.

3) As South, you hold: ♠KJ1073 ♥94 ♦KQ754 ♣9

Bidding has proceeded:

<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>
Pass	1♥	?	

Double. This denotes the same as bidding 1♥ on the previous hand. Without intervention your partner will bid 1♠, and you will rebid 2♦. Again, your initial job is completed.

4) As South, you hold: ♠AKJ73 ♥KQ4 ♦AJ4 ♣95

Bidding has proceeded:

<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>
Pass	1♦	?	

Bid 1♥. When partner executes transfer to 1♠, you will bid 1NT. This will show the additional high-card values, and the diamond stopper situation. Note that this bid may be made with only 4 spades. Raising the spades would also show additional values, but would disguise the diamond stoppers.

5) As South, you hold: ♠AKJ73 ♥KQ4 ♦95 ♣AJ4

Bidding has proceeded:

<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>
Pass	1♦	?	

Bid 1♥. But this time when partner executes transfer to 1♠, you will bid 2♠. This will show the additional high-card values, but denies the diamond stoppers. This bid also confirms the fifth spade. Partner may pass with minimal values, but with any help partner should take action. With diamond stoppers and little support for spades, partner might explore notrump.

6) As South, you hold: ♠AQ3 ♥KJ4 ♦AJ53 ♣Q97

Bidding has proceeded:

<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>
Pass	1♦	?	

Bid 1 NT. This is a traditional 1NT overcall.

7) As South, you hold: ♠Q83 ♥64 ♦AQJ93 ♣Q97

Bidding has proceeded:

<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>
Pass	1♠	?	

Bid 2♣. This constitutes a normal overcall in diamonds. Note that in all cases the partnership will never be higher than as if you had make the "standard" bid. Unless partner takes strong action, you will be pleased to play this hand at 2♦.

8) As South, you hold: ♠J83 ♥64 ♦AQJ93 ♣975

Bidding has proceeded:

<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>
			1♦
1♥	Pass	?	

Bid 1♠. Assume that your partner has a normal spade overcall. Nothing more (or less) is expected of you on this hand than to complete the requested transfer. Envision your partner holding something similar to: ♠KQ1095 ♥Q75 ♦84 ♣K106.

9) As South, you hold: ♠Q83 ♥64 ♦QJ983 ♣975

Bidding has proceeded:

<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>
			1♣
Dbl	Pass	?	

Bid somewhere between 3♦ and 5♦, depending on vulnerability. You have a minimum of 9, and most likely 10, diamonds between you. Your opponents are looking at a probable game in one (or possibly either) major suit. Unless your partner has additional values, a slam is not out of the reach of the opponents.

10) As South, you hold: ♠8 ♥64 ♦QJ98652 ♣975

Bidding has proceeded:

<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>
			1♣
1♥	Pass	?	

Oops. The dreaded misfit. Bid 2♦. This will tell partner that not only are you weak with no tolerance for spades, but that your diamond suit is likely longer than your partner's spade suit. This is never an on-going bid and should be passed.

11) As South, you hold: ♠K98 ♥A96 ♦QJ52 ♣KQ5

Bidding has proceeded:

<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>
			1♣
1♥	Pass	?	

Bid 1NT. By declining the transfer and not offering a suit of your own you have shown the kind of hand that cannot discount a game, even opposite a minimal overcall. The NT bid promises solid values in the opened suit. The choice of spades, notrump, or a second suit has not been agreed upon yet.

12) As South, you hold: ♠8 ♥Q64 ♦AKJ852 ♣A75

Bidding has proceeded:

<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>
			1♣
1♥	Pass	?	

Another misfit. However, this time you hold substantial values opposite even a minimal overcall. Bid 3♦. This will announce the intolerance for spades, but will also announce a self-sufficient diamond suit; one which needs little help from partner. If partner has anything beyond the minimal overcall, he should show those values or bid notrump. With a minimal overcall and no fit, partner may pass.

13) As South, you hold: ♠8 ♥Q64 ♦AKJ852 ♣A75

Bidding has proceeded:

<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>
1♦	Pass	?	1♣

Cub-bid 2♣. This will confirm the fit for hearts, strongly invite game and show either strength or shortness in the suit opponents opened. With a minimal overcall partner will bid 2♥. With any additional values, partner will take more aggressive action. Even opposite a minimal overcall game is likely.

14) As South, you hold: ♠8 ♥964 ♦KJ98752 ♣Q5

Bidding has proceeded:

<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>
	1♥	?	

Bid either 3♦ or 4♦, depending upon vulnerability. Pre-emptive bids are unaffected by implementation of this system.

15) As South, you hold: ♠AQ63 ♥KQ104 ♦3 ♣KJ97

Bidding has proceeded:

<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>
Pass	1♦	?	

Bid 2♣. This bid should be treated by partner in the same manner as a standard takeout double. You will promise support for all unbid suits (if you had a 5-card suit, you would normally transfer into that suit originally). Suit responses to this bid are weak. The only positive responses are single jumps (in a self-sufficient suit), bids of notrump at any level, and cue bids. With intervening bids, a double is also a positive response. All subsequent bids are natural.

16) As South, you hold: ♠963 ♥KQJ1054 ♦3 ♣K97

Bidding has proceeded:

<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>
Pass	1NT	?	

Double (if playing Brozel doubles); otherwise bid 2♦. This hand illustrates the advantage of the Brozel double. If partner holds a 4-3-3-3 hand and a scattered 9-10 HCPs, this double will be converted to a penalty double with wonderful results. Otherwise, partner would bid 2♣, and you will convert to 2♥. If not playing the Brozel double, partner will simply transfer your 2♦ to 2♥; a favorable condition, but an opportunity lost.

PRE-ALERT

Transfer Overcalls are employed at the caller's *first opportunity to overcall*. They request a transfer to the next higher suit; the recommended defense is to treat the call as if the *implied suit* had been bid and to make calls (including negative doubles, cue bids, etc) based on that premise.