

A Commonsense Solution to an Old Problem

Let us assume that you believe in the usefulness of playing Unusual Notrump (for the two lower unbid suits) and of playing Michaels Cuebids (over both a minor-suit opening and a major-suit opening). If you are familiar with these two bids, you are probably also aware that they cover nearly all of the combinations of the opponents' opening the bidding and you are holding two of the remaining three suits. If you embrace both Unusual Notrump and Michaels, you ascribe to the notion that it is vital to show your partner that you have a two-suited hand and to permit your partner to assess immediately the viability of competing, of sacrificing, or of defending.

However, the hole in your set of two-suited bids is when the opponents open a minor suit and you hold spades and the other minor suit. The prevailing simple approach which you have likely been told is "overcall your spades, and rebid your minor suit at your next call". Consider the following: think back to the last time you had that holding and got a chance to bid your second suit at a level that made you comfortable doing so... Can't recall? I am not surprised, because it would be a rare hand that would permit you to have that luxury and it would be a rarer hand that you would elect to actually do so.

There are a variety of exotic ways to handle 2-suited hands, but most of them require that you abandon Unusual Notrump, or Michaels, or both; or, at least, to modify one or the other in such a way that you are bound to struggle with what are currently common auctions.

So what new wrinkle might you add to your game to address this dilemma? Consider this: if the opponents open a minor, you have two ways to show a hand with length or strength in the other minor; you may choose to simply overcall, or you may choose to make a jump overcall in the other minor. Clearly, the (standard) overcall shows a concentration of values in that suit, and implies a disinterest in other suits. Contrastingly, a jump overcall shows length, but probably a broken suit, and hopefully serves as a disruption to the opponents' auction. But we also observe that against good opponents a single jump overcall (1♣ - 2♦, or even 3♦, or 1♦ - 3♣) does little to deter the opponents from finding their proper strain and level.

It frequently takes a 4-level pre-empt to truly cause a problem for the opponents.

So, in “standard” bidding, we are left with (at least) three different levels at which we can overcall a new minor over the opponents’ minor-suit opener. Is this really necessary? Would it not be better to utilize one of these bids to show a two-suited hand with spades and the minor itself?

Consider utilizing the three-level bid of the new minor as describing a hand with that minor and spades (1♣ - 3♦, showing diamonds and spades, or 1♦ - 3♣, showing clubs and spades).

How strong (or weak)? What shape? You should make this call with any hand whose shape and strength you would consider for either a Michaels cuebid or for Unusual Notrump. Clearly, the shape and strength expected are dictated by your particular style of aggressiveness and the prevailing vulnerability.

Because the new minor is a real suit, the jump overcall can be passed, so you might want to consider putting an upper limit on the strength of the hand (and make an initial double with very strong hands...). Incidentally, if partner has a very good hand and wishes to make a forcing response, the appropriate response is to cuebid the opener’s suit (“tell me more”). Bidding notrump in response to the High-Low Overcall is natural and “to-play”; bidding hearts is also natural, denies overcaller’s suits, and is “to-play”.

It should be clear that this call is Alertable, with the explanation (if asked) that it shows a two-suited hand with the suit bid and spades, and also explain any partnership agreements related to the expected minimum strength (if such agreements exist) or maximum strength (if such agreements exist). Additionally, place a notation on your Convention Card (in the section on “Jump Overcalls”) that your 1♣ - 3♦ bid shows diamonds and spades, and that your 1♦ - 3♣ bid shows clubs and spades.