

Overcalls, Takeout Doubles, and Responses (And When to Pass...)

How to Start?

So, you have a good hand and you're eager to bid. But your right-hand opponent sticks an opening bid in front of your call. Should you overcall, make a takeout double, or pass? As always, the correct action depends upon the answer to several questions.

- 1) Is there something you want to *tell* your partner?
- 2) Is there something you want to *ask* your partner?
- 3) Is there something you want to (temporarily) *withhold* from the opponents?
- 4) Is there nothing you have to tell, ask, or withhold?

Clearly, if the answer is the latter, then you should be passing. But when you're holding more than your share of honor cards, there is usually reason to choose between the former three options.

Overcalls make a statement about your hand. Overcalls should be made when a hand contains a good suit. A good suit is loosely defined as one that you would not be embarrassed to have your partner lead or to have your partner raise competitively. That suggests that overcalls are (normally) a five-card or longer suit, and a concentration of high cards in the suit. Jump overcalls, while greater in length, may contain a badly broken suit and are less likely to suggest a defensive strategy.

Primarily, the overcall in a suit (temporarily) suggests a disinterest in other suits. Of course, it is sometimes a prelude to bidding a second suit, but unless and until that happens, the overcaller is not particularly showing any interest in other contracts. An overcall is usually, by partnership agreement, restricted to a hand containing something less than 16 HCPs or so. A normal minimum for an overcall at the one-level might be 8 HCPs or so, but many players will lower that range, particularly at favorable vulnerability. Two-level overcalls should be a bit stronger, and, at unfavorable vulnerability, usually suggest about an opening hand.

Takeout doubles ask a question about your partner's hand. Takeout doubles indicate a stronger hand than an overcall, with support in the unbid suits. If the double is made after the opponents have bid one suit (even if that suit bid elicits a 1NT response), it is assumed to be asking for the three unbid suits. If the double is made after the opponents have bid two suits, it is assumed to be asking for the two unbid suits.

When your partner makes a takeout double, you should picture partner's hand as 4-4-4-1, with the singleton in the suit doubled, and approximately an opening-hand of HCPs. Perhaps something like:

KJxx
KJxx
KJxx
x

Naturally, you won't always have this kind of hand, so it is often desirable to make a takeout double with something less. Perhaps the distribution isn't ideal, perhaps the hand isn't quite that strong. I believe that it is occasionally proper to make a takeout double with that shape, even if the hand is a little lighter (especially if your few honor cards are aces or kings). But the further from that shape the hand varies, the stronger the hand should be. And note that the further from this distribution the hand strays, the more suitable it becomes for a regular overcall. If you take this notion a little further, the hand becomes stronger and less distributional until you reach the plateau where you could/should make a 1NT overcall.

But what do you do with the hand that contains enough strength to open, but lacks a good suit? Perhaps...

9xxxx
AJx
Qxx

AQ?

Your suit is much too pathetic to overcall, and you have no real interest in any other suit. You desperately want to show your partner that you have some points; but stop and think. If opener's partner cannot respond and your partner cannot balance, you have no reason to be in this bidding. Depend upon your partner to balance with any hand that suggests a reasonable play. (More about balancing another time).

There really isn't anything wrong with passing when you have nothing to say, and nothing to ask. Wait for your partner to either make a statement (to which you can happily react), or to ask a question (to which you will enthusiastically respond).

Of course, when you're holding both a strong hand and a strong suit, it is proper to double (asking your partner a question), and following up by bidding your own suit. This indicates a strong suit of 5+ cards, and a minimum of a good 16 HCPs or more. Incidentally, note that all strength discussions deal in HCPs, without regard to distribution. It is extremely unwise to consider any distribution points until you have determined that your side actually has a fit in some trump suit.

Responding to Partner's Takeout Double

All right, so your partner has made a takeout double and the opener's partner has passed. Must you bid? What do you bid?

Your partner has asked you a question (actually two...). Those questions are: "Which of the other suits is best as a trump suit? What kind of strength do you possess?"

You must bid unless you are willing to convert your partner's takeout double into a penalty double. That is not impossible, but getting a good score from this conversion is highly unlikely. In order to do that, you must be holding a stack of trumps (as many as six is desired), and some scattered points.

More likely, you have at least four cards in one of the other suits. If this is the case, bid your longest suit. If you have a four-card major, you may prefer to show that instead of a 5-card minor. This practice leads to mixed results, depending upon the doubling style of your partner. Simply bid your best suit, no matter how weak your hand might be.

In fact, if you're holding 8 HCPs or more, you would be counselled to jump the bidding in your best suit. Some partners like you to possess a 5-card suit for this bid, and it is good to have such, particularly if you're right at that lower limit of 8 points. But with 10 HCPs or more, go ahead and jump the bidding with a 4-card major.

If you're holding a full opening hand, start by cue-bidding the opponent's suit (doesn't say anything about that suit, but announces that your side has sufficient points to be investigating a game contract). This will permit your side to start looking for the best fit with no urgency to stop bidding right away.

One notrump responses to a takeout double should show a hand of 8-11 HCPs, stoppers (ideally, multiple stoppers) in the opponents' suit, and a generally balanced hand.

Now, if the opponents take you off the hot seat by bidding over your partner's takeout double, you are permitted to pass with a trashy hand. To take a free bid in this situation should strongly suggest a 5-card suit and enough points to compete at whatever level you enter the bidding. A minimum hand for a free bid in this situation would probably be 7-8 HCPs, perhaps a little less if not vulnerable, perhaps a little more if vulnerable. And this also depends on the level that you need to enter the bidding.