

When Your Partner Overcalls...

Okay, so I did a very unscientific survey of the Convention Cards of most of my partners. I discovered (not to my surprise) that most of them have written on the back, under "Simple Overcall" (as if there were any such thing), such things as: 7-16, 8-15, 7-17, 10-?, and other similar ranges that approximate the span of the Grand Canyon.

So, I got to thinking (as I am prone to do when the hours of daylight begin to wane) about what kinds of hands I prefer to overcall, and what I would like my partners to do with various hand types.

My overcalls tend to fall into two categories. The more frequent of those are hands where I have a less than opening hand, but a suit that I dearly would like partner to know about. Perhaps partner might like to compete or sacrifice, or perhaps partner would just like a little guidance when faced with an otherwise indecipherable opening lead dilemma.

Less often, but certainly not rarely, I hold a hand worth opening values, and containing a five- or six-card suit of less texture. In this case, I am not enthusiastic about implying that my partner should make that an opening lead, but (because I am an enthusiastic bidder) I am not willing to go quietly.

So how is my poor partner to be able to distinguish between these two scenarios (let's assume the opponents don't clarify the situation by making some unnecessary call)? And what action can partner take when, on one hand, a game might be cold, but, on the other hand, any bid at all could put us beyond the last makeable contract? If partner has support, how much should partner compete, and how does partner show real values?

To start with, partner should be conservative in assessing my overcall. To assume that I have a minimal overcall (perhaps KQJxx in the suit with nothing outside) would be a good start. Then it becomes easy to raise with three trump pieces and little to no defensive values. After all, that's what my overcall was about in the first place.

But if partner has a good hand (an opening hand or better), it's time to take aggressive action. Cuebidding the opponents' suit will force me to reveal the nature of my hand. And a simple rebid of my suit is a red flag that my overcall was lead-directing and we're not missing a slam on this deal.

The difficulty comes when partner has an intermediate hand (something less than an opening hand, perhaps in the "limit raise" range of values). When that is the situation, there is a chance that we might have a game, but there is an equal chance that we cannot play safely above the two-level. I prefer with that type of hand for

partner to either bid a new suit (forcing one round), or to give a single raise. (I know, I know, we might miss a game). But since my overcall might be simply lead-directing, the single raise will likely elicit a new suit from me if I hold "extra values" (an opening hand). In that case, I will bid a new suit (your choice of style of game try) to ask partner about the nature of the raise. Without an upper limit (10-12) hand and useful values (based on the nature of the game try), a return to the suit would be expected. With a maximum raise and well-placed values, take a shot at the game.

But what if my partner raises in competition? What if partner makes a free raise? Since I have only overcalled, partner is not compelled to bid as if I had opened the bidding. My hand is limited to about 16 points (check your Convention Card and hope I remember the range we're playing). So, unless there is a competitive auction, there is no need to raise without extra values (shortness in an unexpected place), an extra trump, maximum honor strength (10+ HCP), or perhaps a second suit of some substance (source of tricks). In a competitive auction, the raise is discretionary, but should still be based on something of value. After all, the range of my overcall (7-16?) is about 5 points less than an opening bid range (12-21?), so it follows that my partner's bids should be based on about 5 points more to have an equivalent meaning. In practice, that is a little unreasonable, but a good rule of thumb is to have about 3 points more than you would have for a similar call opposite an opening hand.

And, as always, remember that all you're doing is playing percentages. There are no guaranteed actions, only those that tend to work out more often than others.