

Competing in the Bidding Pt2 – responding to partner’s suit overcall

Concepts: Level of the Fit, and BOSS

In Lesson 20 we looked at what sort of hands you can compete with, and what bid to make, when the opposition open 1-of-a-suit. We looked at the take-out double, the 1NT overcall, the simple suit overcall, and the Weak Jump Overcall (WJO).

Today we are going to focus on how to respond in the very common situation when partner makes a simple suit overcall (ie an overcall in a suit, at the lowest available level, when the opposition have opened 1-of-a-suit).

How to respond when opposition open 1 of a suit, and partner makes a simple suit overcall.

Let’s look at an example scenario. Say both sides are non-vulnerable, and your LH opponent is dealer and opens 1♦. Your partner overcalls 1♠. What do you know so far?

What you **do** know:

- That LH opponent has an opening hand with at least 4 diamonds, possibly 5 or more.
- That your partner has a spade suit which at least satisfies a Suit Quality Overcall Test, or SQOT, of 7, since the overcall was at the 1 level. He/she has **at least** 5 spades with two honours in spades, though it might be 6 cards with only 1 honour.
- Your partner doesn’t have a “weak two” type hand, or they’d have overcalled 2♠.

What you **don’t** know

- The strength of your partner’s hand. **KEY POINT!** Remember, an overcall is based on the SQOT of the suit, and an overcall at the lowest available level is **unlimited**. The hand might be quite weak, or very strong, or anywhere in between. It could be as few as 6HCP, or could be quite strong, such as a good opening hand, but one unsuitable for a take-out double (eg because it doesn’t have a shortage in the opponents’ suit, and/or it has a short/weak suit other than the opponents’ suit. It could even be a hand of 16+ points, but unsuitable for a 1NT overcall because it doesn’t have a stop in the opponents’ suit.

Let’s say opener’s partner passes, and it’s now you to bid. How might you respond to partner’s 1♠ overcall?

If you are short in your partner’s overcall suit (spades in this example), AND have a very good suit of your own in an unbid suit (6+ cards, in this case either ♣ or ♥), you can consider bidding your good suit. That situation doesn’t crop up very often though, and when it doesn’t (ie most of the time) your priority should be to **try to support your partner’s suit**.

Here, partner’s bid has told you she has a decent spade suit with at least 5 cards. If you have fewer than three spades yourself, and no good suit of your own, you should just pass. However, if you have 3 or more spades, even if they’re little ones, and even if you have a very weak hand, perk up, and compete. With your partner’s (at least) 5 spades, you have at least an 8-card spade fit!

There’s an important concept here, which applies **ONLY** in an overcall situation, called “**level of the fit**”. You add together the number of cards you and your partner hold in the overcall suit and bid for that number of tricks.

For example, if your partner overcalls 1♠, you count her for 5 spades (might be more, but it won't be fewer); if you have three spades, the level of the fit is (at least) 8, and you bid 2♠. If you have four spades, the level of the fit is (at least) 9, and you bid 3♠. If you have five spades, the level of the fit is (at least) 10, and you bid straight to 4♠. Your partner knows how many spades you hold, because you're counting him/her for 5 for their overcall. If partner actually has 6 spades, they can go up a level: eg, if you have bid 3♠ (showing 4 cards in spades), they can bid up to 4♠.

Does that sound complete madness? What if I am weak, and so is my partner? In this example, my partner and I might both have very weak hands, with nothing except the fit in spades. We could go crashing off, doubled.

Well, yes you could, and as you get more experience it will become easier to judge the risks – especially if you are vulnerable and the opposition are not. But on the majority of occasions, it works a treat – especially if you have useful shape such as a void or singleton, as well as the fit in your suit- giving you a lot more good scores than the occasional hand where it earns you a bottom.

If you and partner are both weak and have a big fit, the opposition must be strong, and almost certainly have a big fit of their own, in another suit. Your aggressive bidding will make it much harder for them to find their fit and bid their game (or slam, even), and to chalk up a big plus score.

OK, your contract might go down, but rarely by many tricks, and usually you will get a better score than you would if you took the cautious line, and just passed. In fact, the weaker you are, the more important it is to bid to the level of the fit!

But what if my partner overcalls in a suit I can support, and I have a decent hand?

There's something else you need to bear in mind too, in the overcall situation. Your partner's overcall is **unlimited** (remember, we said that a simple overcall at the lowest available level is unlimited). Yes, they might be weak, but they might have a very good hand; partner's simple suit overcall doesn't tell you either way.

We need a way to handle the possibility that partner has a good hand.

Fortunately, we have exactly such a device, and that's what we're going to come on to now.

If you have some strength of your own, and a fit with partner's suit, the hand might be genuinely yours, and you shouldn't be bidding to mess up the opposition. You should bid to find your own makeable contract.

But how? Your partner has overcalled in a suit, and we've just seen that if you support the suit, you are only showing how many cards you hold in that suit and promise nothing else. How then can you show strength?

I want to introduce a very useful convention, called the UNASSUMING CUE BID (UCB). It crops up quite often, so I recommend you include it in your bidding system. However, it's not a very helpful or memorable name, so we'll call it **BOSS** (Bid Opposition Suit with Support) – you are seeking to “boss” the auction.

If your partner overcalls in a suit, and you have a decent hand (10+ HCP) and at least 3-card support for partner's suit (and therefore a known 8-card or better fit), you can show that! Instead of bidding partner's suit to the level of the fit, bid the **opposition's** opening suit at the lowest available level.

In our example where the opposition open 1♦, and your partner overcalls 1♠, if you have **less than** 10 HCP and 3 or more spades, bid to the level of the fit, ie raise in spades. This is a bid to spoil, ie make the opposition's task harder to find their right contract.

BUT if you have 10 or more HCP, and 3 or more spades, bid the **opposition's** opening suit at the lowest available level – in this case, 2♦. This says to partner “I have at least 3 cards in your suit, ♠, and at least 10 HCP. We might have a genuine contract in ♠.

NOTE:

*The unassuming cue bid, or BOSS, is a **convention**, since you are bidding a suit not to indicate you have strength in that suit, but to convey a different meaning. Therefore, it is alertable.*

When you make the BOSS BID, your partner knows you have at least 3 card support for her overcall suit, and at least 10 points.

If her overcall was based on a weakish hand, and the opposition don't bid on, she will duck out by bidding her overcall suit at the lowest level, and that's the end of the bidding from your side.

But if her overcall was based on a strong hand, she can bid on to a higher level – either bid game herself, or bid her suit at one level above the lowest available, to invite you to go on if you want. In that case, if your BOSS bid was “minimum”, ie just 3 cards and 10 HCP, you will decline the invitation and pass. But if you have extra values, then you can bid on.

See how useful and informative the BOSS bid can be?

Examples:

No-one vulnerable. The opponent on your left is dealer and opens 1♣. Your partner overcalls 1♥. Your RH opponent now bids 1♠. It is now you to bid. What is your call?

a) ♠ 8 7 4 3 ♥ 10 8 7 3 ♦ Q 8 6 2 ♣ 3

You are very weak, so bid to spoil. The level of the fit is 9, so bid 3♥.

b) ♠ A 7 4 3 ♥ Q 8 7 3 ♦ Q 8 6 2 ♣ A

You have support for partner's heart overcall, with 4 cards including an honour, and 12 HCP. This clearly merits the BOSS. Bid 2♣ (Opponent's opening suit)

c) ♠ A 7 4 3 ♥ A 3 ♦ Q 8 6 2 ♣ A 5 2

You have an opening strength hand, with 14 HCP, but only two cards in partner's overcall suit, and no good suit of your own. Pass.

d) ♠ K 4 3 ♥ A 10 9 3 2 ♦ 8 6 3 2 ♣ 2

Here you are weak (7HCP) but have great support for partner's overcall suit. You have a heart fit of at least 10 cards. Bid 4♥

e) ♠ K 4 3 ♥ 2 ♦ A K 10 8 6 3 2 ♣ 4 2

You hate partner's overcall suit but have a lovely 7 card diamond suit. Bid 2♦

Summary

When your partner has overcalled opponents opening 1-of-a-suit bid with a suit of her own, you have the following options

1. With no support for partner's suit, but a good suit of your own (6+ cards), you can bid your suit (bearing in mind your SQOT, vulnerability, and the level you are bidding at).
2. You have no support for partner's suit, and no good suit of your own, pass.
3. You have 3 or more cards in partner's suit and fewer than 10HCP, raise your partner's suit to the "level of the fit". It is important to think seriously about doing this especially when very weak, and especially when you have useful shape, such as a void or singleton! But be a bit more cautious when you are vulnerable, and the opposition are not.
4. You have 3 or more cards in partner's suit and 10HCP or more, bid the opposition's opening suit at the lowest available level (the BOSS Bid). Don't make the mistake of bidding up in partner's suit – she will take you as weak, and you might miss your contract.

