

Defence against two-suited overcalls

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Like all bids which pre-empt the auction to high levels, two-suited overcalls have the potential to generate large swings. But in addition to the deserved gains when the deals suit the methods, rewards often accrue to the overcallers merely because their opponents lack cogent methods for coping with the interference.

A system for handling the overcalls should allow reasonable constructive bidding, should punish the overcaller on occasion, and should avoid disasters. It should be general enough to cope with all varieties of intervention, and should also be easy to remember. Here is an outline of such a system.

The situation addressed here is that North has opened with a natural suit bid, East has shown two suits, and South must call. The two suits may be shown via unusual no trump, Michaels or another cue bid such as top and bottom, or a Roman jump overcall. A primary difficulty for South is to plan a two-step description of the hand, such as bid a new suit first to show values, then later support opener, because too often the fit-showing call will have to be made at an uncomfortably high level. Because the system uses both of East's known suits as cue bids, it does not apply when only one of East's suits is known. A prototype auction is:

WEST	NORTHEAST	SOUTH
1♥	2NT	?

South's possible calls may be classified into three categories: the defensive, the raises, and the constructive.

(1) The defensive calls

(a) Double. Shows at least moderate values, defence against at least one of their suits, and something to do should playing for penalties not work out. Partner should double with three moderate trumps; the opponents will not be allowed to play an undoubled contract. North-South will usually

bid game should they choose not to defend, but may stop in three of opener's suit.

♠K1097 ♥Q8 ♦Q85 ♣KJ73

If West's three clubs comes around, South will double. If West's three diamonds comes around, South will bid three hearts, although an aggressive South might double at pairs.

♠AQ85 ♥A3 ♦105 ♣KJ953

If West's three diamonds comes around, South will bid a forcing three spades, which shows only a four-card suit.

(b) Pass. Of course passing makes no commitment, but it should be used on two types of defensively oriented hands. If South has both of overcaller's suits locked up, then pass and double at the next opportunity. A trump will be led.

♠Q5 ♥732 ♦KJ107 ♣A1092

Alternatively, South may have a relatively weak hand suited for defense against only one suit, but it happens to be the suit they try.

♠Q84 ♥J5 ♦932 ♣AJ1074

South will double three clubs, but will pass if the opponents escape to diamonds. A forcing auction has not been created, and if North doubles it shows good defense.

(2) The raises

(a) Three hearts. The single raise shows a sound normal single raise, such as,

♠AJ64 ♥K109 ♦1054 ♣J72

(b) Four hearts. The raise to game shows a normal pre-emptive game raise, such as,

♠Q98 ♥AQ1053 ♦8 ♣8653

It should not be used with a good hand, as partner would have an impossible guess over the inevitable

competition. This call does not create a forcing situation.

(c) Four clubs, four diamonds. These cue bids show raises of minimal opening bid strength, with the cheaper showing good trumps and the more expensive weaker trumps. This is the inverted trump Swiss convention used in some five-card major systems. Four clubs would suggest at least two honours in a four-card holding, and four diamonds worse support, possibly with only three cards. Examples might be,

♠KJ73 ♥AQ53 ♦QJ5 ♣83,

for four clubs, and,

♠AJ632 ♥A105 ♦7 ♣K732,

for four diamonds.

(d) Three diamonds. The more expensive cue bid is usually a limit raise, although it may conceal a hand which was too powerful for a four-level cue bid. In the latter case South should plan to cue again unless the auction suggests their hand has shrunk in value.

(3) The constructive actions

(a) Three notrumps. A natural call, with ostensibly double stoppers in short holdings in the opponent's suits. For example:

♠Q8543 ♥J72 ♦KJ9 ♣AQ

Two notrumps, if available, shows an invitational hand of the same character.

(b) Four spades. A long suit in a limited hand, such as,

♠AQJ9864 ♥Q5 ♦1032 ♣6

(c) Three spades. The new suit is a natural, forcing call showing at least opening bid strength.

(d) Three clubs. The cheaper cue bid shows at least five of the missing suit (spades in our prototype) in a hand not strong enough to force to game. South will usually

pass North's next call, be it three hearts, three spades, three notrumps, or four spades, and will bid again only if North cue bids. For example:

♠KQ1053 ♥52 ♦A73 ♣653

If the opponent's convention pre-empt North-South too much, some calls will have to be dropped from the structure but all bids will retain their meanings. The most pre-emptive is the Roman jump overcall, which shows the suit bid and the suit above. (Oddly, it seems to have become unfashionable since Belladonna took up Precision). Because the overcaller has bid one of their suits, both cue bids may not be available. For example, suppose North opens one heart and East overcalls three diamonds (showing diamonds and spades). Following the system, South's three spades would show a club suit, but obviously the hand would have to be strong enough to force to game. A four clubs call would be natural, but with sufficient distributional character to bypass three notrumps. The only way to show a strong raise would be with four diamonds, the more expensive cue bid. Four hearts by South would still be a basically pre-emptive call. No new meanings are required, but precise limiting must be surrendered to the pre-emption.

The tricky bids to remember in this system are the cue bids and the natural new suit. Jump cues and the more expensive cue are always raises. For reasons of economy, though, it is necessary to invert the strength definitions of the natural new suit and the cheaper cue bid in some auctions. For example, if one club-two clubs shows the majors, then two diamonds (the natural new suit) would be non-forcing, while two hearts (the cheaper cue bid) would show a forcing diamond hand. The point is to allow the lowest possible contract on minimum misfit hands. The rule to distinguish the two ways to show the missing suit may be summarized as follows: the

lower of the two possible ways (either the cheaper cue bid or the suit itself) shows invitational strength, while the higher of the ways is gameforcing.

The simple mnemonic for the system of cue bids and suits is that in the absence of a known trump suit, higher bids require stronger hands. To remember that the cheaper cue shows the missing suit and the more expensive a raise, consider that in some auctions, one will have to go past three notrumps to make the higher cue. One would want to do that only with a fit in partner's suit. This arrangement makes sense from a theoretical perspective as well. The higher cue bid offers West less freedom of action, in that West cannot express interest in the lower suit without going to a higher level. If North-South have a fit, then East-West are likely to have one as well. Thus it is the hands with known fits where it pays to restrict West's options.

Close decisions about which category a hand falls into should usually be resolved towards exploration of offensive prospects. In my younger days I was more bloodthirsty. Here is a deal from my personal chamber of horrors which illustrates this folly dramatically.

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♠ A 9 5 3 ♥ A K J 9 6 4 ♦ A 6 ♣ 8	♠ J ♥ 3 2 ♦ K 10 9 7 5 ♣ A 10 7 4 2
♠ 8 7 4 ♥ 10 8 7 5 ♦ 3 2 ♣ K J 5 3	♠ K Q 10 6 2 ♥ Q ♦ Q J 8 4 ♣ Q 9 6

My table

WEST	NORTHEAST	SOUTH
	1♥	2NT
5♣(1)	Pass	Pass
All pass		

Other table

WEST	NORTHEAST	SOUTH
	1♥	2NT
5♣(2)	Pass	Pass
Pass	5♦(4)	Pass
All pass		

- (1) Good defence, misfit, slow cards — it was so easy to do the wrong thing. After partner's brilliant trump lead, we managed to get his top winners. Avoiding any trump promotion, we collected 300.
- (2) We were all young then.
- (3) Their South was as dumb as I was, but North saved him with a delicate takeout bid.
- (4) Five diamonds was hailed as a brilliant call, but I thought it smacked of Teltale and Crypto. If North could infer from his hand that it was right to pull the double, why didn't he bid five diamonds immediately?

My sour grapes aside, notice how our task would have been had I begun with a bid of three clubs, showing a non-forcing spade hand. North would have had an obvious five diamonds call if West had again jumped to five clubs, and I could have bid our laydown slam with confidence. True, it might have been tougher if North's minors had been reversed, but at least we would have collected 680.