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## Risk vs Reward in Bridge, Part 2 - The Trouble with Overcalls

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A simple overcall is one of the most common actions that we take after opponents open the bidding. Though these bids are frequently used, they are not our best bidding tools because they are ambiguous in terms of their shape and strength (bids like 1NT overcalls or weak jump overcalls are better defined competitive actions and often make partner's bidding easier).



Robert Todd

**A simple overcall can be used for a variety of different reason:**

- *To win the contract* – most common when we have a good number of HCP for our overcall.
- *To search for a fit* – hoping to find partner with a good fit for our suit so they can compete in the bidding.
- *To make Responder's life more difficult* – Our 1♠ overcalls are most effective at taking away Responder's bidding space. But 1♦ overcalls don't make Responder's life more difficult.
- *As a lead directing bid* – When we have a good suit and not many other values we may make an overcall with fewer HCP. This is most common at the 1-level and when we are non-vulnerable.

No matter what our goal is for making an overcall, we must consider the risks of making an overcall – *every action comes with risk and reward*. The optimist in each of us takes an action and hopes / expects that we'll accomplish our goal. The pessimist in each of us should consider the bad things that could happen when we act – what to fear!

**A simple overcall can get us into trouble. Let's look at the bad things that can happen when we act with a less than a perfect hand:**

- *Making an overcall on a bad suit* – We sometimes overcall with a bad suit, because we have a good hand and feel that passing would be worse. But if we make an overcall, even at the 1-level, with a suit like Jxxxx we may get partner off to a bad opening lead if they are holding Kx for example.
- *Making an overcall on a bad hand* – We make our lead directing overcalls with good suits, with too few HCP – say 7-8. This could get us in to trouble if partner has a good but unpassed hand and competes taking our side too high.
- *Vulnerable Overcalls* – If we make an overcall when are vulnerable and we end up in a contract that goes down 2 tricks then we get the dreaded -200 score. -200 is often called “the death score”

because it's worse than any part-score the opponents could have made.

- *Making an Overcall at the 2-level* – Though 1-level overcalls can be made on a variety of shapes (5+card suits) and a variety of strengths (7 to 18 HCP), we need to be much more careful when it comes to 2-level overcalls. Partner often raises our 2-level overcalls to the 3-level with as little as 3-card support and 7 HCP. That means that to make a 2-level overcall it is best for us to have something close to an opening hand and a 6-card (or good 5-card) suit.

But the biggest overcall disasters occur when we make a simple overcall and find our left-hand opponent has a decent hand and length and strength in our suit.

S	South
♠	KQJ
♥	Qxx
♦	KJxxx
♣	Qx

It's dangerous to make a 2-level overcall on a hand like this (say the opponents open 1♠ and we overcall 2♦). Imagine if Responder is sitting behind us with a hand like this one?

N	North
♠	x
♥	KJx
♦	AQ9xx
♣	xxx

Here we may end up losing a lot of tricks. This could be very expensive if the auction were to go:

W	N	E	S
		1♠	2♦
P	P	X	P
P	P		

If Responder has the discipline to make a trap pass and is fortunate enough to hear their partner reopen with a takeout double they can convert it to penalty and punish us for making such a bad 2-level overcall!

The main thing to remember from all of this is that overcalls are a frequent and useful part of competitive bidding. We use them to accomplish a variety of different goals. But they do come with several different risks, and we should work hard to measure the risk vs. the reward of our actions in different positions and vulnerabilities.

### ***About the Author***

*Robert is a professional player and teacher who you'll find all over North America (and the world). He's the founder of [Adventures in Bridge](#) and you'll find him hosting events, either virtual or in-person, almost every week of the year! Robert's also the president of the [ACBL Educational Foundation](#) where he's working to build an institution to shepherd the long term good of bridge!*

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