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A series on overcalling and the competitive auction. ACOL version

VB#18 Year 1 Overcalls Part 1 ACOL	Contract: 4S
Date: 07/10/2015	By: South
Dealer: East	Board #: 1
<a href="#">Play this hand online!</a>	Vulnerable: None

	North	
	♠ 9642	
	♥ AQ2	
	♦ Q8	
	♣ AQT3	
West		East
♠ T		♠ K83
♥ T65		♥ J974
♦ KJT542		♦ A
♣ 987		♣ KJ654
	South	
	♠ AQJ75	
	♥ K83	
	♦ 9763	
	♣ 2	

This series looks at one of the trickiest areas of bidding – the contested auction.

There are all sorts of traps for the unwary when contesting the auction and the tactics of when you should bid, how much you should bid and when you should keep your mouth shut could fill an entire book. In truth, such topics have indeed filled books... Here we can only introduce you to the basic principles.

Now, *vulnerability* plays an important part in this area of the game as the risks for bidding are high and penalties are greater when vulnerable. So far in V-Blue we have ignored vulnerability – from this issue forward we will include it.

When the North, South, East, West indicators on the table are Red you are vulnerable – when they are green you are not vulnerable. You will note that on Hand 1 both sides are not vulnerable. On Hand 2 North-South are vulnerable, East-West are not. There is a pattern, which is recognised across the world, connecting Hand numbers and vulnerabilities. No, you do not need to remember this pattern...

Hand 1. Beware – lurking close to the surface are some complicated ideas. Here, though, is

West	North	East	South
-	-	1♣	1♠
P	4♠	P	P
P			

Lead: ♣ 8



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This is a relatively straightforward deal.

**Bidding:** East opens 1♣ and you have to decide whether to overcall as South. In fact, it is a clear-cut decision; holding the top suit (Spades) you must try to bid if you can. An overcall (especially at the one-level) does not promise the same values as for opening the bidding. However, it does show a good suit of at least five cards in length.

Here, with ♠A Q J 7 5, an outside King and a nice 5-4-3-1 shape there are few experienced players who would fail to bid 1♠ over 1♣ regardless of the vulnerability.

What is the rationale for bidding on such a lightweight hand?

Here are three reasons.

1. You might be able to bid and make a contract and if you don't bid now you may never get another chance.
2. You might be able to contest the auction and push the opponents about. Sometimes this means getting them out of their comfort zone and one level too high.
3. You make it awkward for the next hand to bid. In this case (bidding 1♠ over 1♣) you take away the chance of West (on your left) of making a natural 1♦ or 1♥ reply. This may cause him some difficulty.

As it is, partner raises you to game immediately so most of the foregoing arguments are, in fact, redundant. No matter – they will reappear in later deals...

a simple deal to start with.

**Play.** West leads a Club in response to his partner's opening bid and you can see a fair number of tricks and not many losers.

To quantify this: You have four or five Spade tricks (depending on the position of the ♠K), you have three Heart tricks, you have no Diamond tricks and you have one Club trick. (That totals at least eight *winners*).

In terms of *losers* you have maybe one Spade, no Hearts, two Diamonds and no Clubs. So only three losers. Eight winners and three losers doesn't add up (many deals are like this). We will need to ruff Diamonds on the table in increase the number of winners.

The correct order of play is to take the ♣A and immediately take the Spade finesse (hoping East – on the right – has the ♠K). He does, so the ♠J holds.

We must cross to the dummy with a Heart to repeat the tactics. Another Spade finesse wins (West showing out) and we can pull the last trump.

A quick recount shows five Spade winners, three Heart winners and the ♣A – nine in total. One Diamond ruff in dummy will do.


So now we have to concede two Diamond tricks and ruff a Diamond on the table. Once that has been done we have our tenth trick.



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VB#18 Year 1 Overcalls Part 1 ACOL	Contract: 3H
Date: 07/10/2015	By: West
Dealer: East	Board #: 2
<a href="#">Play this hand online!</a>	Vulnerable: E / W

	North		
	♠ AK932		
	♥ J5		
	♦ 73		
	♣ K654		
West		East	
♠ Q7		♠ T84	
♥ KQ962		♥ AT73	
♦ A86		♦ QT5	
♣ AJ8		♣ QT2	
	South		
	♠ J65		
	♥ 84		
	♦ KJ942		
	♣ 973		

The competitive auction is often about trying to push the opponents up one level too high. This is a difficult balancing act.

If you get it right you will succeed in getting the opponents playing in a contract that is too difficult for them. If, on the other hand, you get it wrong you may be left holding the baby. You may be the ones forced to play in an unmakeable contract.

West	North	East	South
-	-	P	P
1♥	1♠	2♥	2♠
3♥	P	P	P

Lead: ♠ A

This may seem a lightweight hand but there are some important points here.

**Bidding.** West (on your left) opens 1♥ and partner enters the auction with an overcall of 1♠. East (on your right) raises his partner to 2♥ and you have to consider if your miserable 5 points is worth a bid or not.

The answer – emphatically – is Yes. Passing would be a dereliction of duty. Many players depress themselves into Passing on this type of hand.

The argument runs more or less as follows, “We are clearly outgunned so probably can’t make anything. If I bid 2♠ West will simply outbid us and we will have achieved nothing. If we are allowed to play in 2♠ that will surely fail so bidding is simply pointless”. Such players need therapy – and urgently.

It isn’t possible to pick at all the holes in that argument, it’s only possible to say (politely) that it’s rubbish. You won’t win at bridge if you allow your opponents to steal the hand at a low level. Contesting the auction is an essential part of the game; pushing the opponents about is, simply, winning bridge.

Bidding 2♠ in this auction is a must. When you do, West bids 3♥, something that is Passed out (getting the balance right of knowing exactly how hard to push is a very delicate art! Bidding on to 3♠ would be taking a good principle too far).

**Play.** All you have to do is sit there and act as a spectator. East-West have 24 points between them but the cards do not lie well for them. West (declarer) has to lose two Spades before he starts. Subsequently the Club finesse loses and he finds that he must lose two Diamonds as well (unless you defend foolishly!).

One down, shame. Bad luck, West...






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VB#18 Year 1 Overcalls Part 1 ACOL	Contract: 3N
Date: 07/10/2015	By: East
Dealer: South	Board #: 3
<a href="#">Play this hand online!</a>	Vulnerable: E / W

	North		
	♠ KJ974		
	♥ 52		
	♦ 76		
	♣ A983		
West		East	
♠ 652		♠ AT8	
♥ AQ7		♥ K43	
♦ AK3		♦ 542	
♣ KQ75		♣ JT62	
	South		
	♠ Q3		
	♥ JT986		
	♦ QJT98		
	♣ 4		

There are many reasons to overcall in this game. One is the obvious one of trying to grab the contract.

Another is to attract the right opening lead.

West	North	East	South
-	-	-	P
1♣	1♠	1NT	P
2NT	P	3NT	P
P	P		

Lead: ♠ Q

East plays this one in 3NT and the killing lead is the ♠Q. If we lead anything else the contract succeeds. Why, though, should we fish out the ♠Q on opening lead?

**Bidding.** Partner's 1♠ overcall (note that he is not vulnerable; overcalling 1♠ with those cards vulnerable would be very dubious) is what enables us to defeat the contract. If he hadn't bid Spades, the play would have gone quite differently. We would have probably led the ♦Q or maybe (given that East-West have shown no interest in the majors) the ♥J. Declarer would have been able to set up his Clubs, taking three Club tricks, two Diamonds, three Hearts and one Spade without sweat.

But thanks to North's willingness to get into the auction and mix things up a little, we beat them!

**Play.** We lead the ♠Q for two reasons. Firstly, it gives partner a **count** on the suit. He knows we have two, and declarer three. From three Spades (or four Spades) we would have led a low card (in fact, our lowest card).

The second reason is to **unblock** the suit. 3NT will always make were you to lead the ♠3, whether East takes the ♠A immediately or holds it back for two rounds. It's worth checking out the accuracy of this statement.

As it is, our ♠Q holds. This isn't the declarer's first hand of bridge and he knows he can run us out of Spades. His plan is then to set up the Clubs, praying that we in South hold the ♣A and can't return a Spade.

Sadly for East North has the ♣A and now can cash the rest of his Spades. There's nothing the declarer can do except ride out the storm. When it stops raining Spades, he gets the rest of the tricks.


Too little too late. One off.



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A series on overcalling and the competitive auction. ACOL version

VB#18 Year 1 Overcalls Part 1 ACOL	Contract: 3N
Date: 07/10/2015	By: West
Dealer: West	Board #: 4
<a href="#">Play this hand online!</a>	Vulnerable: All

	North		
	♠ 63		
	♥ KT982		
	♦ 6		
	♣ JT987		
West		East	
♠ AT9		♠ 742	
♥ AQJ		♥ 753	
♦ J93		♦ AQT85	
♣ AQ53		♣ K6	
	South		
	♠ KQJ85		
	♥ 64		
	♦ K742		
	♣ 42		

Here you have to decide whether or not to enter the fray after both opponents have bid.

"What's the point?", you may ask. Ah, well; bidding at this game has some subtle reasons behind it...

West	North	East	South
1♣	P	1♦	1♠
2NT	P	3NT	P
P	P		

Lead: ♠ 6

This is a simple deal with a powerful point.

**Bidding:** West (on your left) opens 1♣. North (your partner) Passes and East responds 1♦. Now, with a mere 9 points, should you be in the auction with a 1♠ overcall?

The answer is Yes, you should. Why? Well, you have the boss suit (Spades) and your suit is very good (♠K Q J × × is not to be sneezed at). Although it is unlikely that the hand belongs to your side it is still possible that it does. If not, you may still be able to force the opponents overboard with some judicious "pushing". Last, but by no means least, a 1♠ overcall alerts your partner to the fact that you would like him to lead a Spade, should West declare the hand.

As a corollary, you shouldn't overcall in these positions with a poor suit because, as sure as eggs is eggs, partner will lead that suit as soon as he can. Bidding a suit for the sole purpose of attracting the right opening lead is an important (and under-appreciated) part of the tactics of the game.

**Play.** East-West brush your 1♠ overcall aside and arrive in the 3NT contract that they were always destined to reach. They have, after all, 27 points between them and two balanced hands. The play is also simple. If North were on lead to an uncontested auction he would probably lead a Heart (second choice, a Club, despite West having bid them). Once South has overcalled 1♠ there is no choice. Well, the only choice is "Which Spade shall I lead?" rather than "Shall I lead a Spade?".

Out comes the ♠6 (top of a doubleton) and down goes the contract. North-South can set up the Spades before West can get the Diamonds going – it's a classic *tempo* hand. A Club lead would give West an easy nine tricks and a Heart lead, you may note, would allow West to make (at least) ten tricks.

As it is, West has no choice but to try the Diamond finesse after the ♠A has been knocked out. It just isn't his lucky day...






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A series on overcalling and the competitive auction. ACOL version

VB#18 Year 1 Overcalls Part 1 ACOL	Contract: 4H
Date: 07/10/2015	By: South
Dealer: North	Board #: 5
<a href="#">Play this hand online!</a>	Vulnerable: N / S

	North	
	♠ 762	
	♥ T95	
	♦ 84	
	♣ AK973	
West		East
♠ J94		♠ AQT83
♥ 83		♥ K2
♦ KT5		♦ QJ92
♣ QJT54		♣ 62
	South	
	♠ K5	
	♥ AQJ764	
	♦ A763	
	♣ 8	

One of the important points to notice about this game is that *shape* often plays a more important role than points. Too many players get hung up on how many high-card points they have in their hands.

Here is simple (and by no means uncommon) example to show you that you can often make a lot of tricks with not much in the way of high cards. What you **do** need, however, is a lot of trumps and what the professionals call "Hard values" – that is: Aces and Kings.

Let's see if this deal makes any sense.

West	North	East	South
-	P	1♠	2♥
2♠	3♥	P	4♥
P	P	P	

Lead: ♠ 4

This hand (by contrast with some others in these two sets of six deals apiece) presents you with an obvious overcall.

**Bidding.** After East has opened 1♠ it must surely be clear to get in there and contest the auction with 2♥. As usual, this starts a free-for-all with West supporting his partner's Spades (what else could he bid? Pass? – That's craven) and North supporting your Hearts. When East Passes you have to decide whether or not to advance to game. These are often difficult decisions as partner's 3♥ bid – made under pressure – is not really inviting you to bid on.

However, you have a number of features that should make you take an optimistic view of your hand.

- 1) You have a robust six-card trump suit.
- 2) You have an attractive shape – 6-4-2-1 hands normally play for more tricks than, say, 6-3-2-2 hands or (ugh!) 5-3-3-2 hands.
- 3) Your high cards are likely to be well-placed. The player on your right opened the bidding so your ♠K is likely to be over the ♠A and the ♥A Q J may well lie over the ♥K.
- 4) Your points are largely in aces and kings rather than queens and jacks. This is general a good thing. (The ♥Q J are not wasted as they are trumps).

Anyway, you bid 4♥ and await the dummy with interest.

**Play.** West leads a Spade and dummy is no better or worse than you might have expected. The trump support is perfectly adequate for supporting your Hearts (you wouldn't have overcalled at the two-level on a poor suit).

Firstly, you count your tricks of course, and note that you have nine (one Spade after the lead, at least five Hearts, one Diamond and two Clubs). You must lose a Spade and a Diamond and might lose a Heart. Nine winners, three losers. *'Twas ever thus...*



The way to make ten tricks (or more) is to aim to ruff a Diamond loser on the table. If you draw trumps first (and they are 3-1) you may denude dummy of trumps. **Bad** idea. So it's best to get the Diamond ruff in first.

So... Win the ♠K at trick 2, cash the top Clubs, pitching a Diamond. Play off the ♦A and another (preparing for a Diamond ruff in dummy – the *short trump hand*).

When the defence play a Spade you can ruff that before ruffing a Diamond on the table (with the ♥9 for safety). Now 4♥ cannot fail – and, in fact, makes an overtrick when East turns up with the ♥K.


Game on 21 points – whatever next?



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VB#18 Year 1 Overcalls Part 1 ACOL	Contract: 3S By: South
Date: 07/10/2015	Board #: 6
Dealer: East	Vulnerable: E / W
<a href="#">Play this hand online!</a>	

	North	
	♠ AT53	
	♥ AJT	
	♦ 963	
	♣ 864	
West		East
♠ 82		♠ 76
♥ 92		♥ Q864
♦ AKJ74		♦ QT52
♣ KJ52		♣ AQ3
	South	
	♠ KQJ94	
	♥ K753	
	♦ 8	
	♣ T97	

One of the hardest questions to answer (especially during the auction when you can only see 13 cards) is "Whose hand is this?"

In other words, which side can make the highest scoring contract? Some hands clearly belong to one side and not the other but there are many deals where one side can make, say, 3♣ and the other side can make, say, 3♥.

Ensuring that you bid the full value of your cards (and trying to make the opponents fail to get the full value out of theirs) is what competitive auctions are all about.

So then, whose hand is this?

West	North	East	South
-	-	P	P
1♦	P	1♥	1♠
P	2♠	3♦	P
P	3♠	P	P
P			

Lead: ♦ A

The question "whose hand is this?" is often a difficult one to answer. Here it is surprising that North-South can make the higher scoring contract. North-South can make 3♠, while East-West, with more points than North-South, can only make 3♦. *This hand belongs to North-South.*

**Bidding.** There are two Passes to West (on your left) who opens 1♦. East responds 1♥ and you have to decide whether to intervene with 1♠ or not. Well, you certainly should, holding a fine Spade suit and a 5-4-3-1 hand. This hand is very similar in nature to the South hand of Hand 4 and the arguments are similar. Let's remind you of them... You have the boss suit (Spades) and your suit is very good (♠K Q J × × is not to be sneezed at). Although unlikely that the hand belongs to your side it is still possible that it does. If not, you may still be able to force the opponents overboard with some judicious "pushing". Last, but by no means least, a 1♠ overcall alerts your partner to the fact that you would like him to lead a Spade, should West declare the hand.

West Passes 1♠ (some might bid 2♣ – it is a moot point) and North raises Spades. East competes with 3♦ (high enough for you!) and that is Passed to North. Holding decent trumps North is undeterred by the fact that you are a Passed hand and he competes to 3♣, a bid which ends the auction.

It is certainly surprising that you are able to buy the hand in 3♣ when you are heavily outgunned in the high-card department but these things do happen.

**Play.** The appearance of dummy is pleasurable. You have four obvious minor suit losers but might get away with losing nothing in Hearts or Spades. Everything, in fact, depends on locating the ♥Q; a classic *two-way finesse*.

West cashes the ♦A and astutely switches to a Club, picking three tricks up there. You ruff the Diamond continuation and have to take stock.

Drawing trumps takes just two rounds so you have to determine the location of her ladyship, the ♥Q.

Well, East has bid 1♥, of course, and has only turned up with the ♣A Q and (probably) the ♦Q. Deciding that the ♥Q must be the reason for the raise to 3♦ you cash the ♥A and run the ♥10 through East (on your right). When that holds you are home and dry – all that remains is to cash the ♥K and to ruff the last Heart on table.