

I ran a series of these articles about a year ago and with the increasing number of beginners we now have it's about time I started again. The issue number is simply the number of the news-sheet written in the same week. Some of our more experienced players may also like to read this one – especially what I say about some player's opinion that one should double with any opening hand! Or the opinion that an overcall promises opening values! (that's only true at the 2-level).

Overcalls, take-out doubles and opening bids

An opening bid is generally 12+ points and any shape. In Standard American there is a restriction that an opening of 1♥/♠ must be 5+ cards.

Overcalls and take-out doubles are different. The reason is that an opponent has already advertised that he has at least around $\frac{1}{3}$ of the deck's high cards, and so we do not compete with weakish flat hands (you learn this the hard way when you go for 800 a few times with nowhere to run to). We usually need a distributional hand to compete over a normal opening bid. There are two options; an overcall or a take-out double.

Now in the early days of bridge a double always meant just that – that you thought that the contract would go down (because you had a stack in the suit opened) and so wanted to double it. It was soon realised that this situation rarely happened at the low levels and so they decided upon another use. Initially the double was used to say 'I too have an opening hand'. But it was soon discovered that that too was unsatisfactory and then the 'take-out' double was born – whereby a double of the opening bid indicated shortage in the suit bid and asks partner to bid another suit. So there is often a difference between an opening hand and a hand that can double an opening bid. Thus these days we have:

A take-out double. Generally short in the suit opened and playable in the other 3 suits. Take out doubles should be close to an opening hand in values. There are also other meanings for the take-out double and I'll cover them in future weeks. But responder should assume that a take-out double is short in the suit bid unless doubler says differently subsequently.

An overcall. At least a 5 card suit (usually 6 or a very robust suit if at the two level). As few as 7 points are allowed, but with a minimum hand like this then the suit should be a good one. If the overcall is at the two level then it should be equivalent to opening values (around 11+ points). So at the 1 level it's 7-16 and at the 2 level it's around 11-16. With more than 16 you have to double first – I'll cover this in a later article.

Hand 1

♠ K7
♥ K653
♦ AJ2
♣ Q754

This hand 1 is a clear opener (1♣).

If RHO had opened anything in front of you then you should pass.

You cannot overcall without a 5 card suit and cannot double with just 2 ♠'s.
A 1NT overcall would be 15-18 points and I'll cover that next week.

Hand 2

♠ 87
♥ KQJ53
♦ Q2
♣ 9754

This hand 2 is clearly not good enough to open.

If RHO had opened in front of you with either 1♣ or 1♦ then an overcall of 1♥ is perfectly acceptable

If RHO had opened the bidding with 1♠ then you have to pass as it's not good enough for a two level overcall.

And if RHO had opened 1♥ in front of you then you have to pass. You cannot bid 2♥ (bidding the opponent's suit is never natural these days) and a double would be for take-out.

Hand 3

♠ A874
♥ KQ95
♦ 8
♣ Q754

This hand is not quite good enough to open by most people's standards.

But if RHO had opened the bidding with 1♦ then I think that a double is acceptable – it's close enough to opening values and ♦'s with the opponents improves this hand.

Hand 4

♠ AQ74
♥ KQ95
♦ 8
♣ QJ54

This hand is obviously a clear 1♣ opener.

If RHO had opened the bidding with 1♦ then that actually enables you to show your hand in one go with a classic take-out double.

If RHO had opened the bidding with either 1♥ or 1♠ then you have to pass, if you double (take-out) you cannot cope if partner responds with a likely 2♦.

As you see, there are hands which you cannot open but may overcall, and there are also hands worth an opening but are not suitable for an overcall or double.
Fine. I'll come on to what you do with stronger hands at a later date, but for now let's see how you do with these questions: -

Hand 5

♠ K743
♥ K653
♦ 2
♣ J754

Hand 6

♠ J109
♥ 98
♦ KQJ85
♣ J102

Hand 5: (a) What would you open?

(b) What would you bid if RHO opened 1♦?

Hand 7

♠ KQ43
♥ KQ53
♦ 42
♣ Q74

Hand 8

♠ A109
♥ Q106
♦ KJ5
♣ QJ72

Hand 7: (a) What would you open?

(b) What would you bid if RHO opened 1♦?

(c) What would you bid if RHO opened 1♥?

Hand 8: (a) What do you open?

(b) What would you bid if RHO opened 1♣?

Hand 9

♠ J43
♥ KQJ53
♦ A2
♣ Q74

Hand 10

♠ AK98
♥ Q106
♦ 5
♣ QJ972

Hand 9: (a) What would you open?

(b) What would you bid if RHO opened 1♦?

(c) What would you bid if RHO opened 1♥?

Hand 10: (a) What do you open?

(b) What would you bid if RHO opened 1♣?

(c) What would you bid if RHO opened 1♦?

Quiz Answers

- Hand 5: (a) Pass.
(b) Pass, it's not strong enough for a take-out double and you need a 5 card suit to overcall.
- Hand 6: (a) Pass.
(b) 1♦. 7 points is good enough for a 1 level overcall with a decent suit.
(c) Pass. You cannot bid the opponent's suit (so 2♦) naturally, double would be for take-out and you are nowhere near strong enough for 1NT (15-18).
(d) Pass. It's not strong enough for a two level overcall.
- Hand 7: (a) 1♣
(b) Double, a take-out double
(c) Pass. You need 5 ♠'s to overcall 1♠ and if you double then you will be in problems if partner responds 2♦
- Hand 8: (a) 1♣
(b) Pass, it's not strong enough for 1NT and not suitable for a take-out double or overcall.
- Hand 9: (a) 1♥
(b) 1♥. Do not double if you have a 5 card major.
(d) Pass. You cannot bid the opponent's suit (that virtually always has a conventional meaning) and double would be take-out.
- Hand 10: (a) 1♣
(b) Pass. You cannot cope with a 1♦ bid from partner if you double. A take-out double needs to be short in the suit bid.
(c) Double. It's nice to have both majors when you double a minor, but 4 in one and 3 in the other is acceptable – you don't always have the perfect hand.