

NATURAL JUMP OVERCALLS

In theory you could play a strong jump overcall that carries no upper limit on values and would therefore be forcing. This may indeed have been the prevailing practice in the very early days of the game. In practice, these days a jump overcall is always limited in strength by partnership agreement and is therefore non-forcing. A variety of limits is possible.

Whichever method you decide upon, your problems are effectively solved on those hands which you are dealt that happen to qualify for the jump overcall. Your problems start when you are dealt hands of similar distribution that do NOT qualify for the jump overcall because, unfortunately, you have to decide on your jump overcall definition before the hand is dealt, and you have no control over the latter.

Weak jump overcall hand types

(when not playing weak jump overcalls)

Bidding a weak jump overcall hand type when not playing weak jump overcalls will require that you pass on a lot of these hands. You may get a chance to bid the suit later, but losing the pre-emptive effect. If you can overcall at the 1 level then you might do so, especially if you are close to a normal 1-suit overcall in strength. But you would not bid the suit twice unless forced or supported, and so you may never get the length of the suit across to partner. The principal purpose of the bid would be for lead direction, although you may get lucky and hit partner with enough to support. If you have additional length, a double-jump overcall would be unambiguously pre-emptive. However a 2 level overcall is generally out of the question (with the possible exception where partner is a passed hand).

Intermediate jump overcall hand types

(when not playing intermediate jump overcalls)

Bidding an intermediate jump overcall hand type when not playing intermediate jump overcalls will require that you start by making a simple overcall in the suit, and then rebid the suit if convenient and safe to do so. You might even jump rebid the suit if partner shows values. However it is not always convenient and safe to rebid the suit. Opponents have a nasty habit of removing bidding space, and if too much space is consumed you may have to live without describing to partner the full potential of the hand.

Strong jump overcall hand types

(when not playing strong jump overcalls)

Bidding a strong jump overcall hand type when not playing strong jump overcalls normally requires you to start with a double and then clarify on the next round of bidding. Indeed, even when playing strong (but limited, non-forcing) jump overcalls you would have to revert to this method if your hand is too strong even for the jump overcall. In the very early days of bridge you could cue bid the opponent's suit to show a super-strong hand, but that bid is now more commonly used to show a 2-suited hand type as with the Michaels, Ghestem, Quantum etc family of conventions.

There is a good case for making a simple overcall on quite strong hands, in the hope that the auction will not die before you get a chance to clarify. To show your suit first and then show additional strength often affords greater control than to start with a double that promises not a great deal either in strength or shape, only providing clarification on the next round (assuming you get the chance). You are however perhaps less concerned about the likelihood of, and less inconvenienced by, further opposition intervention in the auction when you hold such strength and shape.

Comparison

Which is best? I really don't know, and I doubt that there is much in it. All I know is that partnership agreement on the matter is crucial. Disagreement at the table is the surest way to a large negative swing. Each method has its own merits and drawbacks. Disagreement as to the style of jump overcall is unlikely with any but a pick-up partnership, as this is a high priority for agreement and the adopted style normally requires disclosure on convention cards. Disagreement about how to treat hands that do not qualify for the jump overcall is more commonplace.

Weak jump overcalls

It is my impression that most players adopt weak jump overcalls by choice, and this is the safest assumption playing with a pickup partner on BBO or in an "individual" tournament, particularly if your partner comes from west of the Atlantic. If empirical evidence means anything, this is probably the best method. Certainly you get to bid more, and pre-empt more. You do have to have an eye on the vulnerability. There are some hands on which you would make a weak jump overcall at favourable vulnerability but would pass at red. The same principles apply as with any pre-emption. You might also be less disciplined about the requirements of the bid opposite a passed-hand partner than opposite one who is yet unlimited. Finally, your jump overcalls in protective seat after LHO's 1-suit opener is passed round to you should not be weak, even if your direct seat jump overcalls are.

By definition, however, there must be some cost in terms of accuracy of bidding the non-weak hands, as a price to pay for the availability of pre-emption. The population of intermediate and strong hand types does not change just because of the methods that you adopt, so if you have to cram that same population of hands into a narrower population of available bids, then some accuracy has to give.

Intermediate jump overcalls

Since about 2001, Sandra Landy has been commissioned by the English Bridge Union to document the "Standard English" Acol bidding system by way of a series of articles published initially in their bimonthly magazine English Bridge, but reproduced on the EBU website, here:

<http://www.ebu.co.uk/education/learning/landyfiles.htm>

The system is designed with simplicity in mind, without having to compromise on critical matters. In that system the decision was made to play jump overcalls at intermediate strength, and these are discussed in detail here:

<http://www.ebu.co.uk/publications/Education%20and%20Teaching/Sandra%20Landy%20Articles/aug03.pdf>

There are other articles in the series that touch on the fringes of the jump overcalls,

<http://www.ebu.co.uk/publications/Education%20and%20Teaching/Sandra%20Landy%20Articles/feb01.pdf>

<http://www.ebu.co.uk/publications/Education%20and%20Teaching/Sandra%20Landy%20Articles/aug01.pdf>

For those with limited interest in or capacity for learning complex methods the Intermediate jump overcall has a certain elegance: You don't have to worry about the vulnerability, and you can apply the method in protective position after LHO's 1-suit opener has been passed around to you, without varying the method compared with the direct seat overcall. And, as mentioned earlier, a simple overcall carries no guarantee of being able to describe the hand fully, should the opponents continue to bid, while a jump overcall is not so strong as to be wholly devoid of pre-emptive effect, as well as being reasonably frequent and having good prospects of being outbid by the opponents. (You might regret making a weak jump overcall if you end up as defender having given declarer an accurate picture of your hand.)

Strong jump overcalls (and thoughts on the take-out double)

The principal merit of the strong jump overcall is that it removes pressure from the take-out double.

Classically, when not playing strong jump overcalls, a take-out double may be on one of three hand types:

- 1) An opening hand with tolerance for all of the other suits. Typically you would have at most 2 cards in the opened suit, at least 3 cards in each of the other suits, and without marked preference for any one specific suit.
- 2) A balanced hand with a guard in the opponent's suit, too strong for an immediate 1NT overcall (the latter being normally about 15-18 points in direct seat)
- 3) A strong jump overcall hand type

These hands are quite diverse. Not only does it make your side vulnerable to pre-emptive action by the opponents, but it also requires advancer (partner to the doubler) to be circumspect about jumping to conclusions (and to an inappropriate high level contract) until doubler is clarified. A common error is to assume that doubler has hand type 1 and then jump to (eg) 4-Major on a 4 card suit in the expectation of trump support, which might not be the case if he has either of the other possible hand types.

If you did away with 2-suited overcalls contained in the cue bid and ("Unusual") 2NT overcall then you could put hand type 2 in 2NT and hand type 3 in the cue bid. You would lose the 2-suited overcalls but gain some ground in that the takeout double would then be strictly limited to hand type 1, with the additional accuracy that would inevitably ensue. Dream on, however. 2-suited overcalls are too valuable to lose.

Even if playing strong (but limited) jump overcalls, if you have a 2-suited overcall structure in the cue bid and 2NT overcalls, you still cannot escape having to start with a double on hands that are too strong even for the jump overcall, so you would still have 3 hand types contained in the double (although you are perhaps better prepared to cope with possible outcomes). And you would have to cut the "double" hand types down to 1 type in order to get appreciable benefit from the reduction. Cutting it down to 2 types does not gain you heaps.

So, in response to a take-out double, with a minimum hand you just bid a new suit at the lowest level (or 1NT if appropriate). With a limited hand that has game interest but lacking sufficient strength to game force, you make a non-forcing jump response, but that is OK (assuming no further intervention by the opponents) as there remains bidding space for doubler to clarify. But if advancer has a GF hand, then unless holding a self-supporting suit, start with a cue bid of the opponent's suit and let doubler clarify before leaping to game. If advancer has a balanced hand he will rebid NT, or will jump in a new suit to show the strong jump overcall.

For the adventurous, you might consider playing transfer jump responses to a take-out double. I thoroughly recommend this method. Opposite a take-out double, bids in notrumps are natural, as are simple changes of suit. But suit bids of the cue bid upward are transfers showing the suit above and at least invitational values (no upper limit). Doubler accepts the transfer with a minimum double of hand type 1, or otherwise makes a natural bid, in NT with hand type 2, or a suit (forcing) with hand type 3.

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