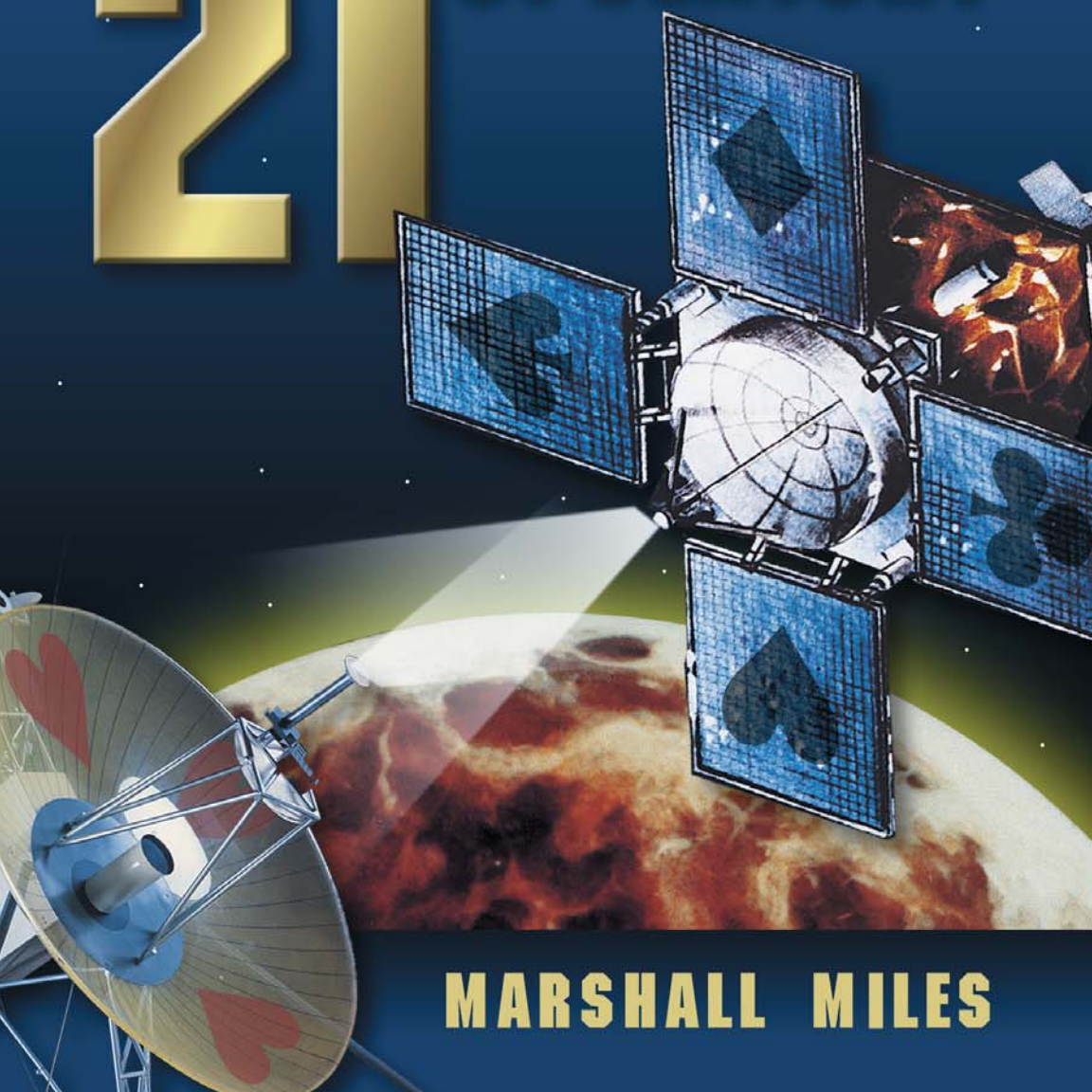


COMPETITIVE BIDDING IN THE 21ST CENTURY



MARSHALL MILES

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INTRODUCTION

When I started to play bridge in the 1940s, the authorities stated that there was little to be gained by competing after the opponents opened the bidding unless your hand was so strong that a game was likely (or, when you had a long suit and a weak hand, you were within two tricks of making your bid when vulnerable and within three tricks not vulnerable). Why risk a sizable penalty just to compete for a mere partscore? And (inconsistently) if your side opened the bidding and the opponents competed, any bid made by responder showed a strong interest in getting to game. No ‘free bids’ were allowed, even at the one-level, with fewer than nine points, and no ‘free’ single raises with less than limit raise values. Now the tendency is to compete vigorously for partscores and to enter the bidding whenever it is reasonably safe (and often when it isn’t). I estimate that there are at least 50% more competitive auctions than there used to be, and that percentage is still increasing. Consequently, it is important to find ways to compete effectively, yourself, and ways to minimize the advantage the opponents gain by their competitive bidding.

There are three basic principles which should be considered when making competitive decisions:

1) You should compete aggressively at the partscore level.

It is as costly at IMPs (and probably more costly at matchpoints) to let the opponents make a partscore when you can make a partscore as it is to miss a non-vulnerable game. Many players think that at IMP scoring they should not compete as vigorously as at matchpoints because the risks are greater. That’s not true! It

is safer to compete at IMPs because the opponents are more afraid of doubling you into game. Even if you go down two, it probably won't cost much, if anything. What will cost is letting the opponents make 2♥ when you could make 2♠ or 3♣ your way.

2) *The earlier in the auction you make a bid, the safer it is.*

Suppose RHO opens 1♦ and you overcall 1♥. LHO holds:

♠ A J 9 5 4 ♥ A 10 8 6 ♦ 8 ♣ J 4 3

He couldn't double you for penalties, even if he wanted to, since it would be a negative double. So, if he wants to try to penalize you, he must pass and hope his partner will reopen with a double, which he may or may not do. But suppose his partner does double (quite likely with a singleton heart). The opponents won't set you badly at the one-level when you and partner have a combined total of eight trumps, and they could almost surely get a better score by bidding and making 4♠. So LHO will bid 1♠ rather than pass and hope for a penalty. But suppose LHO has the same hand, but the bidding goes:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♦	pass	1♠	pass
2♦	2♥	?	

Now LHO will be delighted to double. Having already shown his spade suit, he isn't forced to choose between showing spades and trying for a penalty. Or suppose the bidding goes:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♦	2♣	2♦	pass
pass	2♥	?	

and LHO holds:

♠ A 7 5 ♥ Q J 8 ♦ 10 6 4 2 ♣ Q 8 5

Having already limited his hand, he can make a cooperative penalty double (and double again if you or partner returns to 3♣). RHO doesn't have to leave the double(s) in, but if he has a somewhat balanced hand, he will be delighted to do so. Once the opponents have partially described their strength and/or distribution, they can make cooperative penalty doubles.

Here is a hand from Al Roth's column in *Bridge Today*.

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		2♦ ¹	pass
4♥	pass	pass	?

1. Weak.

♠ K J 5 4 3 ♥ — ♦ 7 6 4 2 ♣ A 10 9 5

What action would you take? Al says you should double. Partner has

♠ A Q 10 2 ♥ 8 5 3 2 ♦ — ♣ K Q 7 4 2

and you are cold for a slam in spades (while the opponents are cold for 4♥). Perhaps Al is right about doubling, but I prefer bidding 2♠ right away over 2♦. Admittedly you are rather weak for a two-level overcall, but this hand can make a lot of spades opposite a fit (I was thinking of 4♠, not a slam), and I still think it is safer to bid 2♠ than to pass and have to guess what to do next round at a much higher level.

A corollary to the rule about making your bid early is that when partner bids a suit (especially a major suit) and you have trump support, you should tend to raise whenever you have a close decision. In the old days, you could pass with a minimum or average raise, then give partner a jump raise if he could reopen the bidding. But now, because preemptive raises are so popular, if you don't raise when you safely can, you may have to guess whether to give partner a belated raise at a much higher level.

<i>WEST</i>	<i>NORTH</i>	<i>EAST</i>	<i>SOUTH</i>
	1♥	1♠	?

♠ 8 6 ♥ Q 7 4 ♦ K 8 7 5 2 ♣ 7 4 2

In this auction, regardless of vulnerability, you should bid 2♥. If you pass, West may bid 4♠, and partner will have no idea what to do with

♠ 4 ♥ A K 9 8 6 3 2 ♦ Q J 4 ♣ A 5

but if you had raised him, he would have an easy 5♥ bid (making if you had a better hand, a cheap sacrifice opposite your minimum). The same consideration applies to opener's rebid:

<i>WEST</i>	<i>NORTH</i>	<i>EAST</i>	<i>SOUTH</i>
1♠	2♥	2♠	1♣
			?

♠ 9 8 7 ♥ A 5 4 ♦ K Q 5 ♣ K 10 9 6

Do you pass to show a minimum opening? You shouldn't. If you pass, West may bid 3♠, and neither you nor partner will know what to do when partner holds:

♠ J ♥ K J 8 7 3 ♦ A 10 7 6 4 ♣ Q 3

I am embarrassed to admit that I failed to follow my own advice with the following hand:

♠ K 10 2 ♥ J 5 4 3 ♦ K 10 7 ♣ 8 7 6

We were vulnerable and the opponents were not. LHO opened 2♣, strong and artificial. Partner overcalled 2♠. RHO passed and I passed also, thinking that

with a strong hand on my left and at unfavorable vulnerability, it was too risky to raise. LHO, with

♠ J ♥ A K Q 10 9 6 ♦ 5 ♣ A K Q 10 5

bid 4♥, which ended the bidding. Partner held:

♠ A Q 8 7 5 3 ♥ — ♦ A J 6 4 2 ♣ J 4

The opponents were cold for 4♥ and we were cold for 4♠ (actually for 5♠ if partner played double dummy). Partner would have bid 4♠ if I had raised to 3♠. Do you see what my cowardice cost?

3) *Since four of a major is the easiest game to bid and make, you should usually plan to show your major if you bid at all.*

Approximately two-thirds of the games bid and made are in a major suit. It is obvious why these games are the easiest to make — game in a minor requires eleven tricks while a major suit game requires only ten. With a major-suit fit you need fewer high cards to make game than you would to make three notrump, and you don't need stoppers in every suit. Furthermore, game in a major is the easiest to bid. Once you find a major fit, the bidding is straight-forward. Degree of fit is important, but not nearly as crucial as it is when you are contemplating a slam or a game in a minor. As a consequence, if you are only strong enough to make one bid (without strong encouragement from partner to bid again), or if you have no assurance of another chance to bid, you should usually show your major.

For example, when partner opens 1♣ and you hold

♠ 7 6 ♥ K J 9 5 ♦ J 8 7 5 2 ♣ K 8

it is better to respond 1♥ than to bid 1♦. If you have a game, it is probably 3NT or 4♥. Either response will get you to 3NT if partner can rebid 2NT (and probably if he can rebid 3♣), but the best chance to get to 4♥ is to respond 1♥. Some players always bid 'up the line' and cannot see any reason to skip over the diamond suit. It usually won't matter which bid you make if the opponents remain quiet, but suppose you do bid 1♦ and LHO bids 2♠. Partner will be stymied if he holds

♠ K 4 3 ♥ A Q 10 3 ♦ 9 ♣ A J 6 5 3

while if you had responded 1♥, you would get to a good game. Later, you will discover that partner has a way of showing whether he has a real raise to 3♥ in this kind of auction or a hand worth only a good raise to 2♥ with which he preferred to show his support rather than pass. This time he would show a real raise to 3♥, and you would bid 4♥.

It may seem inconsistent, my always talking about getting to game — after telling you that partscores are important. However, the side that has (and finds) a major-suit fit will probably outbid the opponents when the strength is fairly

evenly divided. So it is just a bonus that the same bidding that gets you to the most likely games also allows you to outbid the opponents at the partscore level. If you know (or are reasonably sure) that you will have another chance to bid, it is better to bid something else the first time and your four-card major suit later. That way partner will expect you to hold only four cards in your major, and you will avoid contracts with Q743 of trumps opposite 865. That is the theory behind requiring a five-card suit to open a major. Your minor-suit opening will be kept open by someone, usually partner, at least 95% of the time. However, in competition, things are a little different. When partner makes a takeout double, for example, he doesn't promise another bid, so when you respond to his double by bidding a minor suit, you practically deny a four-card major. The question in almost every bidding sequence, when you hold a four-card major plus another suit, is whether you are likely to be able to show your major later if you don't bid it immediately. If not, you should show it right away.

Nothing I have said so far is new or controversial. What puzzles me is why so many players fail to consider these factors when they overcall.

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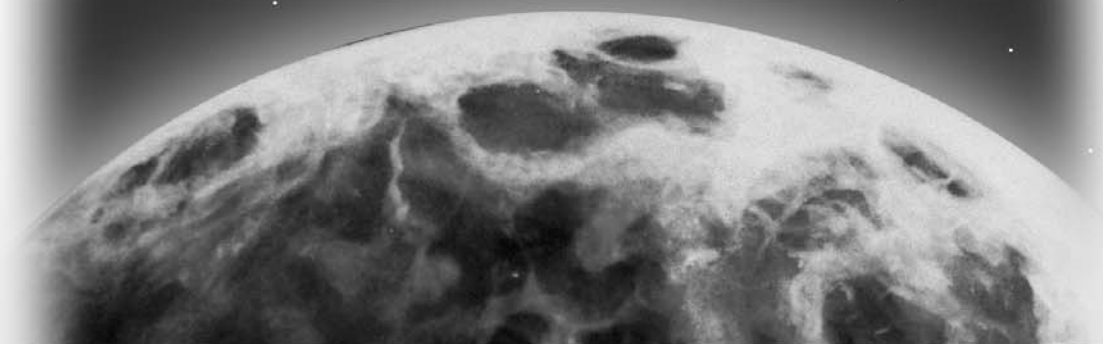
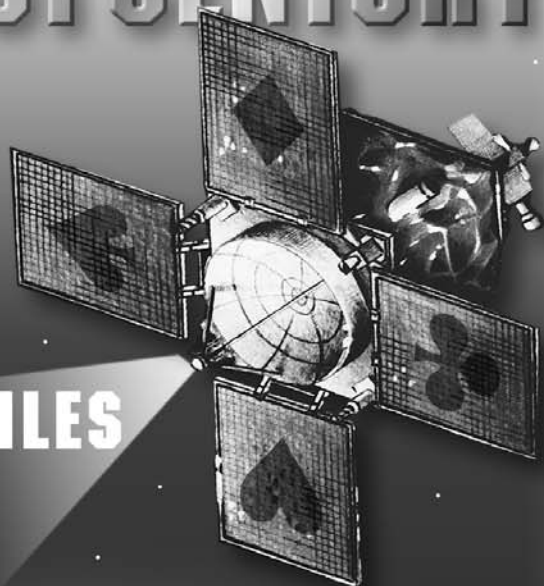
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C H A P T E R 1

MAJOR-SUIT OVERCALLS

THE FOUR-CARD MAJOR-SUIT OVERCALL

Suppose RHO bids 1♦ and you hold:

♠ A Q 5 2 ♥ 6 ♦ K 7 6 ♣ A J 9 6 5

Many players would overcall 2♣, hoping to bid spades later. But in this case, the whole hand is as follows:

	♠ K 10 8 7 3										
	♥ 8 7 4										
	♦ 8 3 2										
	♣ Q 10										
♠ J 9 4	<table style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;"><i>N</i></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;"><i>W</i></td><td></td><td style="text-align: center;"><i>E</i></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;"><i>S</i></td><td></td></tr> </table>		<i>N</i>		<i>W</i>		<i>E</i>		<i>S</i>		♠ 6
	<i>N</i>										
<i>W</i>		<i>E</i>									
	<i>S</i>										
♥ A Q J 10 2		♥ K 9 5 3									
♦ Q 5		♦ A J 10 9 4									
♣ 8 3 2		♣ K 7 4									
	♠ A Q 5 2										
	♥ 6										
	♦ K 7 6										
	♣ A J 9 6 5										

If you overcall 2♣ the bidding will go:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
2♥	pass	1♦ 3♥	2♣ all pass

Yes, West will bid 2♥ — in competition this doesn't promise the world (or even a rebid). East, with a minimum opening and a poorly placed ♣K, should only raise to 3♥, and West will probably pass. Perhaps the opponents won't bid so accurately and they will get all the way to 4♥, which is down two — undoubled, of course. Big deal! As the cards lie, you are cold for 5♠ despite the fact that you couldn't safely bid again. But if instead you had overcalled 1♠, partner would have bid 3♠ preemptively whether West bid or passed, and you would have bid 4♠ since you would usually have some sort of play for game opposite four- or five-card spade support.

Your reaction to this example may be skeptical. Of course, you may say, if the cards are laid out this way, a spade overcall would work best. But why should you find such a fine fit? You're right — most of the time you won't, but no harm is done either! The opponents will simply disregard your bid and get to the same contract they were going to get to anyway, since without a good fit, you would be unable to outbid them. Let's look at a deal where things do not flow quite so smoothly. What if partner's and West's hands were interchanged, for instance?

	♠ J 9 4				
	♥ A Q J 10 2				
	♦ Q 5				
	♣ 8 3 2				
♠ K 10 8 7 3 ♥ 8 7 4 ♦ 8 3 2 ♣ Q 10	<table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	♠ 6 ♥ K 9 5 3 ♦ A J 10 9 4 ♣ K 7 4
N					
W E					
S					
	♠ A Q 5 2				
	♥ 6				
	♦ K 7 6				
	♣ A J 9 6 5				

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
?		1♦	1♠

What would happen on this layout? West would pass your 1♠ overcall, and partner would bid 2♠, which is a reasonable contract despite the bad trump split. Partner wouldn't bid more because he has a poorly placed ♦Q and only three-card trump support. You wouldn't bid more because, as you will see in the

next chapter, a single raise is usually made with three-card trump support, and you need a much stronger hand to bid game on a 4-3 fit.

Incidentally, I should at least mention that many experts would choose a third alternative with the South hand; rather than bid either black suit, they would pass, hoping the bidding would go something like

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♦	pass
1♥	pass	2♥	?

or

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♦	pass
1♥	pass	1NT	?

and in either case they would make a reopening double. I certainly like this sequence better than an immediate club overcall. However, the bidding does not always go the way you hope. If it goes

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♦	pass
1NT	pass	pass	?

or

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♦	pass
1NT	pass	2♦	?

you will not dare to double since partner would surely bid hearts. Furthermore, even if you avoid that hazard (perhaps by bidding 2♣ instead of doubling in the first case), you won't get to game since partner will play you for a weaker hand, thinking you are just contesting the partscore. My contention is that a 1♠ overcall is quite safe, so why risk a pass? When I say 'safe', I don't mean that you can't go down in 1♠. What I mean is that you will seldom be forced to play it there, either doubled or undoubled. There will usually be more bidding.

There is another good argument in favor of overcalling four-card majors. Once an opponent opens the bidding, showing about fourteen points on average, and leaving twenty-six points to be split among the other three hands, it is unlikely that you can make a game on sheer power or even outbid the opponents at all. If, in fact, you can outbid the opponents in a partscore or make a game, it will usually be when you find a good major-suit fit. In the unlikely event that you can make game on sheer power, you have a better chance of getting there when you bid your four-card major.