

MIKE LAWRENCE



# BRIDGE TIPS

tips on

# COMPETITIVE BIDDING



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**COMPETITIVE  
BIDDING**

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# PUBLISHER'S FOREWORD

When Mike Lawrence first suggested updating his 'Topics' series and republishing it, my first reaction was to search the bookshelf to see how many of the books I could get my hands on. The answer was five out of the original thirty-odd. Even Mike didn't really have a full set, but eventually he was able to scrounge the last few from a friend. The digital files, where they existed, were in pretty bad shape, so the next step was scanning and reviewing — and finally, we were in a position to start the project.

Much of the advice was as fresh as it was when first written over twenty years ago. But bridge has changed, and even some of Mike's own views have changed. As well, there were topics that were intended to be included in the original series but that somehow never got written. There were also some obvious gaps — for example, passed hand bidding and Drury — a convention on which Mike has some new and useful ideas.

Organization of the topics into books was another problem, since they had been intended as stand-alone booklets. Mike and I eventually decided on three books, broadly divided into the themes of constructive bidding, competitive bidding, and play and defense. (I say 'broadly', because, as you'll see, the topics didn't arrange themselves quite as neatly as this.)

Treat each chapter in this book as though you were taking a lesson from Mike — in particular, study the examples, and whether or not you come up with the same answer as the author, study his reasoning. No one writes more clearly than Mike Lawrence, and that makes it very easy to understand what he is trying to get across.

If you just pick up one key idea from each chapter, and remember to apply it when you're at the table, your results will improve noticeably.

Ray Lee  
Master Point Press  
July, 2015

In memory of Pat Golden

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# 1. OVERCALLS

Overcalling is not about counting up your points and bidding a suit over their opening bid. There's a lot more to it than that.

Before answering specific questions, a general question I am often asked is what you need to make an overcall. Roughly speaking, this is my answer:

## *Not vulnerable*

At the one-level, you can overcall with a solid 9-point hand with a fairly good suit.

At the two-level, there are serious dangers lurking so you need in the neighborhood of 11 HCP. You also need a good suit. Avoid two-level overcalls with balanced hands unless you have extra values.

## *Vulnerable*

At the one-level, you can overcall with a solid 10-point hand with a fairly good suit.

At the two-level, the dangers are even more significant. You should treat two-level overcalls with respect. I suggest 12 good HCP, with an excellent five-card suit or a good six-card suit.

Having said all of this, you can and should use your judgment. These are all important considerations:

- Quality of your suit.
- Spot cards in your suits. QJ1095 is quite a bit better than QJ854.
- Distribution. Shape matters. Balanced hands are not as useful in a suit contract as shapely hands. If your hand is minimum with balanced shape, passing is a consideration.
- Length of your suit. You can (rarely) overcall at the one-level with a four-card suit, but five or six cards are usually needed. At the two-level, five- or six-card suits are mandatory.



Here are some questions that you need to know the answers to:

1. Why do you overcall?
2. What is a 'safe' auction?
3. What is a 'dangerous' auction?
4. What is a 'safe' suit?
5. What is a 'dangerous' suit?
6. What is the significance of your holding in their suit(s)?
7. Are your considerations the same when:
  - a. You overcall after your RHO's opening bid?
  - b. You overcall when LHO opens and RHO responds?
8. Can you overcall on a four-card suit:
  - a. At the one-level?
  - b. At the two-level?What conditions must exist?

## Answers

### 1. *Why do you overcall?*

You overcall for a number of reasons. Listed in their approximate order of importance:

- 1) You obstruct the opponents' auction. By bidding, you may cause the opponents to lose their best suit or you may cause them to misjudge their values. Sometimes they can resort to the negative double, but I assure you it will be an imperfect solution.

Note these sequences. RHO opens and you overcall.

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
		1♣	1♠

Your LHO can't bid 1♦ or 1♥. You have deprived him of an entire level of bidding and he may or may not be able to cope.

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
		1♦	2♣

LHO can no longer respond 1♥ or 1♠ or 1NT.

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
		1♣	1♦

Your overcall does nothing to hinder LHO's bidding. Whatever LHO wishes to do, he can do.

- 2) You may have a good enough hand that you expect to make something. Why let the opponents buy the hand when it belongs to your side?
- 3) You may be able to harass the opponents. Even if they find their best fit, you may be able to push them too high.
- 4) You may have a save. If you can play in 4♠ doubled down one against a making 4♥, you show a nice gain.
- 5) Lead value. It may be surprising to find lead value so far down the list of priorities. Telling partner what to lead is only important if partner is on lead. Your overcall won't have any lead value if you end up on lead. Note that when you overcall, you make it hard for your LHO to declare the hand. If he makes a negative double your RHO will play a lot of hands, thus keeping your partner off lead.

## 2. What is a safe auction?

A safe auction (fit auction) occurs when responder raises opener's suit.

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1♣	pass	2♣	?

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1♥	pass	2♥	?

A raise shows about 6 to 9 support points, but often some of the points are distributional. Responder would raise 1♥ to 2♥ with either of the following hands:

- 1)                    ♠ 8 3   ♥ J 10 8 4   ♦ K 10 8 6 4   ♣ 9 5  
 2)                    ♠ A 7 4 3   ♥ K J 3   ♦ J 9 8   ♣ 10 6 4

Hand 1 has only 4 HCP but is worth a raise to 2♥ because of its distribution. Hand 2 has 9 HCP, but since it doesn't have any distributional points it is also worth only a raise to 2♥. The point of this comparison is that a raise *may* be made on a weak hand, which means your partner *may* have some points. You can afford to be optimistic when your RHO raises opener's suit.

**3. What is a dangerous auction?**

A dangerous auction occurs when RHO makes a two-over-one response. This is especially true if they are playing the Two Over One system. When this happens, you know they have at least 24 HCP. Also, they don't yet have a proven fit. Nothing could be worse for you than to wander into their strong and tentatively misfit sequence with a mediocre suit and a so-so hand. These two hands show the difference between safe auctions and dangerous auctions.

**Hand 1**

	♠ K 7 3					
	♥ J 7					
	♦ A 5 4 3 2					
	♣ J 9 2					
♠ Q 2	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W     E</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W     E	S	♠ J 9 4	
N						
W     E						
S						
♥ K Q 8 4 2		♥ A 10 3				
♦ Q 10 8		♦ 9 6				
♣ A 10 8		♣ Q 7 6 5 3				
	♠ A 10 8 6 5					
	♥ 9 6 5					
	♦ K J 7					
	♣ K 4					

## Hand 2

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

You will notice that the South and West hands are identical in both cases.

On Hand 1, North and East have hands that might exist when West opens 1♥ and East raises to 2♥. North has enough points that South can make 2♠.

On Hand 2, North and East have hands that might exist when West opens 1♥ and East bids 2♣. South finds only 4 points in dummy and even though North has three-card spade support, South will go down three or four tricks. After East's two-over-one response, South was actually lucky to find an ace in dummy. East has 12 points on Hand 2, but he could have more and will seldom have less.

Does this mean that you will never overcall when the opponents respond with a two-over-one? Not at all. It means that when you do overcall after a two-over-one response, you are bidding because you have a good suit with proven tricks, and not with high-card values that may be worthless. For instance, the bidding begins:

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1♦	pass	2♣	?

<b>Hand 1</b>	♠ K Q 8 6 5	♥ Q J 7	♦ K 8 6	♣ Q 8
<b>Hand 2</b>	♠ K Q J 9 5 4	♥ 7 5	♦ 10 8 6 4	♣ 7

On Hand 1, your 13 HCP are a trap. You should pass with no regrets. You have one or two tricks in spades and that may be all. Your high cards could be useless.

On Hand 2, you have only 6 points but you have tricks. This is the kind of hand partner should expect from you when you overcall after a two-over-one response.

#### 4. What is a safe suit?

A safe suit occurs when an opponent *both* limits his hand and doesn't bid a suit when he had the opportunity to do so. There are two auctions where an opponent's failure to bid a suit is reason to assume he doesn't have it. *Note that the concepts of safe suits and of dangerous suits apply only when the opponents have opened and responded.*

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1♦	pass	2♦ <sup>1</sup>	?

1. 6-9 support points.

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1♦	pass	1NT	?

When responder raises opener's suit he is making a non-forcing bid that may end the auction. Responder may have as few as 4 HCP plus some distribution. When responder bids 1NT in response to a major, it may or may not be forcing. Usually responder has 6 to 9 HCP. In both cases, if responder had a suit higher-ranking than opener's suit, he would have shown it because he won't be getting another chance to do so. On these two sequences, responder should not hold a major suit.

If the bidding goes:

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1♥	pass	2♥	?

or

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1♥	pass	1NT	?

RHO is unlikely to have spades (the only suit higher-ranking than hearts), but it is possible. I would still treat these sequences as denying spades and will pay the price on the rare occasion that I am wrong. If your opponents are playing a forcing notrump response to 1♥, you should treat the auction as if the 1NT bid were normal. 90% of the time responder will have a 6- to 9-point hand. If you can bid now, you should do so.

Here are three example hands showing how RHO would respond to 1♦:

	LHO	Partner	RHO	You
	1♦	pass	?	
Hand 1	♠ K J 7 5 3	♥ J 10	♦ Q 10 7 5	♣ 6 4
Hand 2	♠ 6 4	♥ J 10	♦ Q 10 7 5	♣ K J 7 5 3
Hand 3	♠ J 8 6	♥ K 3	♦ J 9 7	♣ A 10 6 3 2

On Hand 1, responder would bid 1♠ in response to 1♦ in preference to raising diamonds.

On Hand 2, responder doesn't have the strength to respond 2♣ but he can raise to 2♦. The point here is that if responder raises opener's suit, he won't have a higher-ranking suit to bid, but he may have a very good holding in a lower-ranking suit that wasn't biddable because of insufficient values.

On Hand 3 responder would bid 1NT. This response also denies a major suit.

Remember these two sequences: When responder raises opener's suit *or* responds 1NT, he is denying a good hand *and* he is denying a major suit. This means that *relatively speaking*, it is safe to compete in a suit higher-ranking than the one they are bidding.

Note that when responder makes an *unlimited* bid, he is not denying an unmentioned suit. For example, the auction goes as follows:

	LHO	Partner	RHO	You
	1♦	pass	1♠	?

Your RHO would bid 1♠ with all of the following hands:

♠ A K 8 6 4   ♥ K J 9 7   ♦ K 3   ♣ Q 3  
 ♠ K J 9 3 2   ♥ Q 10 6 4 2   ♦ A 7   ♣ J  
 ♠ J 7 5 3 2   ♥ 10 8 4 3   ♦ Q 8   ♣ K 3

Responder has from 6 to 16 HCP and in each case he has four or five hearts. There's nothing about the 1♠ bid that denies a heart suit.

When a suit is truly defined as being a *safe* suit, it means you may bid it with relative optimism. Say the bidding starts as follows:

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1♦	pass	2♦	?

You can compete in hearts or spades with greater safety than you can compete in clubs. It's always possible that opener will double you, but when you compete in a safe suit, you should be safe from a double by responder.

### 5. What is a dangerous suit?

A *dangerous* suit occurs coincidentally on the original two auctions, repeated below.

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1♦	pass	2♦	?

  

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1♦	pass	1NT	?

When responder *raises opener's suit* or when he *responds 1NT*, he is, as we have just seen, denying a suit higher-ranking than the one his partner opened. Responder does not have hearts or spades on either of these auctions, so they are defined as safe suits. The converse of this is that if responder doesn't have a major suit, then he probably has length in the lower-ranking suit, in this case clubs. When opener bids 1♦, responder would answer thusly:

♠ 9 4   ♥ A 5 3   ♦ J 10 8 7   ♣ K J 7 5

You could respond with 2♦ or 1NT depending on your mood. The important feature of this hand is that responder has good clubs. Responder doesn't have the strength to bid them so he has to make a weaker bid.

♠ J 5 3   ♥ K 8   ♦ 10 5   ♣ K Q 8 6 4 2

This hand can't bid 2♣ and it doesn't have a major suit to bid. The only sensible bid is 1NT. The key, once again, is that if responder bids 1NT or raises his partner, he will probably have length and strength in the suit or suits lower-ranking than the one partner opened in. Lower-ranking suits are defined as *dangerous* suits because the auction tells you they aren't going to split well for you.

Here is a good rule to know about. The bidding goes as follows:

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1♦	pass	2♦	?

Here are two different hands to consider.

Hand 1      ♠ A Q 10 7 6   ♥ 6 4   ♦ 4 2   ♣ A 10 9 6

Spades is a safe suit in that RHO did not bid it. RHO does not have four spades. I would bid 2♠ without much concern. But ...

Hand 2      ♠ 6 4   ♥ K 5 3   ♦ A 4 3   ♣ A Q 8 6 3

This hand has 3 more HCP than the previous hand, yet I would be afraid to bid 3♣. The 2♦ raise on my right denied hearts or spades so there is a nearly foregone conclusion that my RHO has some clubs. Clubs is defined as a dangerous suit because RHO rates to have four or more of them. Note that if I do bid clubs, I must do it at the three-level. I would rather bid 2♠ on the first hand than bid 2♣ on the second hand even if 2♣ was a legal bid. I expect Hand 1 to make a trick or two more in spades than Hand 2 will make in clubs.



## Rule

If RHO could have bid a suit at the one-level and didn't, it is considered to be a safe suit.

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If RHO could not have bid a suit at the one-level, it is considered to be a dangerous suit.

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## 6. If you have length in opener's suit

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
		1♥	?

The length you hold in opener's suit, in this case hearts, will tell you whether you can hope for a fit.

♠ K J 9 6 4   ♥ A J 7 5 3   ♦ K 3   ♣ 9

Your five hearts tell you that partner is *likely* to be short in hearts. If he is short in hearts, he has more room in his hand for some spade support. Note that this theory is not guaranteed. It allows you to hope for a fit. No promises. Some books suggest you pass with this hand. This is not wise. If your side has a fit, you need to find it right away. If you find a fit your hand is so good that game is worth thinking about. This is too worthy a target to give up on it.

This theory about overcalling with length in the opponent's suit works well for me, but there are still players who say that it is wrong to overcall with length in the opponent's suit. I do it because when it works, it works extremely well. Remember, I don't get higher unless my partner raises, which means I have found a fit.

## 7. When your RHO has responded

When your RHO has responded and you decide to overcall, consider that they have started a dialogue. Your bid will be less obstructive than if you were bidding after an opening bid on your right. Also note that the opening bid strength is over you, which lessens the value of your high cards. Here are some auctions showing which overcalls are still obstructive and which are not.

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1♣	pass	1♥	1♠

This overcall does nothing to bother their bidding.

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1♣	pass	1♦	1♠

This overcall makes it harder for opener to show hearts if he had wished to.

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1♣	pass	1♥	2♦

This sequence is excellent for annoying their bidding. Opener may have four spades. Your overcall has taken away his 1♠ rebid.

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1♦	pass	1NT	2♣

Opener won't be bothered by this overcall at all.

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1♥	pass	1NT	2♠

This sequence will often cause opener grief. He may have wished to bid 2♣, 2♦, or 2♥ and he can't make any of these bids.

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1♣	pass	1♥	2♥

I have mentioned this one in a number of times in my writings. When your RHO responds in a suit at the one-level, it's very likely that he has a poor holding in the suit. ♥J643 is a possible holding. You should adopt the agreement that a bid in RHO's suit is natural, showing an excellent five- or six-card suit with opening bid values. Your 2♥ bid will make life difficult for opener.

### 8. Can you overcall in a four-card suit?

One of the chapters in this book discusses overcalling in four-card suits. It is an excellent tactic when done properly. Here are the four rules that apply. The rest of the discussion on overcalling with four-card suits can be found in that chapter.

It is possible to overcall with a four-card suit, but it must be done only when four conditions are met.

- 1) You must have a good suit. The worst suit I would overcall on is KJ10x. You need a good suit because you have only four of them. Your partner is allowed to raise your overcalls with any three cards so you have to be prepared to play with three small cards as trump support.
- 2) You may overcall with a four-card suit *at the one-level only*. Two-level overcalls must be five cards or longer. Many rules are made to be broken. This isn't one of them. Don't experiment with this rule.
- 3) If your hand is suited to a takeout double, you should prefer a double to an overcall.

♠ A Q J 8   ♥ 10 4 2   ♦ K 3   ♣ K J 6 2

If your RHO opens with 1♦, you should double for takeout. Your three little hearts aren't perfect, but it's still better to double. Double may get you to spades, clubs or hearts. Bidding 1♠ is less flexible.

- 4) You must have nearly an opening bid. If you overcall with a four-card suit, you will need extra values to make up for the short suit.

# TIPS FOR BETTER COMPETITIVE BIDDING

Twenty years ago, Mike Lawrence published a series of short booklets entitled *Topics on Bridge*, offering tips on various aspects of cardplay and bidding for intermediate players. Now this material is being republished as a three-book series — revised, updated, and with new topics added. Topics covered in this volume:

- ◇ Overcalls
- ◇ Overcalling in a Four-card Suit at the One-level
- ◇ Responding to an Overcall
- ◇ Responsive Doubles
- ◇ The Takeout Double
- ◇ Responding to a Takeout Double
- ◇ Bidding Against an Opening 1NT
- ◇ Bidding over Preempts
- ◇ Balancing
- ◇ Penalty Doubles

**MIKE LAWRENCE** (Tennessee) has Hall of Fame credentials both as a player and a writer. An original member of the Dallas Aces, he has won three world titles and eighteen national titles. Several of his books are widely regarded as classics of the game.

