

Revised and updated for the first time in 25 years



THE COMPLETE BOOK ON
OVERCALLS

A MIKE LAWRENCE
BRIDGE CLASSIC

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For Karen, who made sure I said what I meant and said it correctly.
“Thanks.”

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FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION

Introducing a bridge book by Mike Lawrence is like introducing a horn solo by the Angel Gabriel. Understandably, therefore, I'm a bit embarrassed at writing these words; and I do so only to please the author and the publisher, good friends and modest men. So let me begin by saying that it is an honor and a privilege to be bringing this book to your attention.

Of course you know that Mike Lawrence was a charter member of the Aces, that he has won two world championships, about a dozen North American championships, and more than ten thousand master points.

Obviously he is a performer. But can he pass on something that will improve *your* performance?

You would not ask this question if you had read his first book, *How to Read Your Opponents' Cards*, or his second, *Judgment at Bridge*. Both were practical, down-to-earth, helpful and instructive. This is in the same tradition. We're just beginning 1980, and already I am convinced that this will be Bridge Book of the Year in the annual listing of one widely-read bridge columnist.

How good a bridge player must you be to get your money's worth out of this book? You should be breathing, you should know enough about the English language to understand a bridge book, and you should be in the habit of playing bridge at least once or twice per month. This book will help a rubber bridge player. It will help you more if you play in club duplicate games. It will help most of all if you chase master points in important tournaments.

Why will this book help you?

Nobody else has written anything at all about overcalling on a four-card suit, about the difference between safe and dangerous overcalls on weak suits, about the jump response to an overcall and when it should be strong and when weak. You won't find much else in the literature about responsive doubles or about how the bidding develops after an overcall.

Much of the material in this book will be useful even if you're just an individualistic rubber bridge player who wants to get better results in a pivot game. Even more of the book will be useful if you spend endless hours discussing bidding with your favorite partner, as all "serious" players do. And the best serious players always use Lawrence's method of illustrative hands, varying the bid after changing just a card or two.

One word of warning: this book is deceptively easy and enjoyable to read. Don't think you've mastered it after just one reading. Read it a second time. Then make your favorite partner buy a copy; and lock him up until he also has read it.

A strange thing will happen. Your overcalls and your partnership will improve, but that's not strange. You'll even play the cards better. The reason for this strange development is that any influence that gets you into the habit of thinking when you're at the bridge table will improve your performance in all departments of the game.

But enough. I mustn't keep you from the book. If you read several bridge books per year, you're already on your way to the cash register. If you read only one bridge book per year, this should be it.

—Alfred Sheinwold
1979

INTRODUCTION

Playing matchpoints with your favorite partner, you pick up some hand like the following, an ordinary eleven-count.

♠ J 10 7
♥ K J 9 8
♦ Q 8 6 3
♣ A 2

Vulnerable versus not, your partner opens with 1♣ and RHO passes. You respond 1♥ and partner raises to 2♥. Deciding your hand is not quite worth a game, but certainly worth a try, you bid 2NT. Over this, partner signs off in 3♥, showing a minimum but confirming four-card support. Having nothing extra, you pass on the theory that it is not necessary to push to questionable games at matchpoints.

An easy hand to bid? Yes. At every stage you were able to make a useful and convenient bid. Both you and your partner had ample time to describe your hands and your final decision was well judged. Nicely bid.

Now, let's start over. Partner bids 1♣, as before, and RHO bids 1♠.

What now?

Let's assume for the moment that you don't play negative doubles. What are your options?

Well, you can't double for penalty; your spades aren't good enough.

Nor can you bid notrump without a spade stopper.

This leaves you with either 2♥ or 2♦. But they both have imperfections. Partner will tend to play you for a five-card suit, or at least a better four-card suit. But assuming you are happy with either of these choices, how happy are you going to be when partner raises to three? Do you know what to do next? Very difficult.

How about a weaker hand such as the following?

♠ Q 10 3
♥ K 8 7 6 5
♦ Q 9 2
♣ 4 3

With neither side vulnerable, partner deals and bids 1♦. When RHO passes you respond 1♥. This hand is no bargain, and if partner shows no ambitions you will be happy to make a partscore. But if partner has a good hand game is possible. 1♥ is a fine start toward whatever contract you will eventually hope to declare. Again, an easy hand.

1♦ - 2♣ - ?

But what if RHO, instead of passing, overcalls 2♣?

You are stuck.

If you pass, you have misgivings about the heart suit or perhaps the marginal diamond support. A 2♥ bid seriously overstates the hand, and 2♦ would overstate the diamond support and would probably lose the heart suit. Awful.

Is there a solution?

If you use the negative double, you can attempt to solve the two hands in this fashion:

1♣ – 1♠ – ?

♠ J 10 7

♥ K J 9 8

♦ Q 8 6 3

♣ A 2

An ideal hand for the negative double. You have four cards in the unbid suits and sufficient values to protect against mishap.

With this hand, not much can go wrong because of your extra high cards. But partner may have doubts about introducing hearts on ♥7642, and there may be some difficulty in working out whether you have a spade stopper for notrump. And even if you do have a spade stopper, you have to decide how high to go. It is not that easy. But the negative double did help, and it's certainly better than nothing.

How does it work on the second hand where RHO overcalls 2♣?

1♦ – 2♣ – ?

♠ Q 10 3

♥ K 8 7 6 5

♦ Q 9 2

♣ 4 3

It doesn't work very well, does it? You won't like it if partner bids 2♠. And you will like it even less if he bids them at the three- or four-level.

You hope partner will bid hearts or rebid diamonds. But you know as well as I do he's going to bid spades far too often to make a negative double work with this hand. The answer? There is no perfect answer. The 2♣ overcall has put you in a difficult bind.

Am I trying to talk you out of the negative double? No, not at all.

What I am trying to do is show you how hard a simple hand becomes when your opponents get into your auction.

If you look at both hands you will note that in each case the overcall took away the one-level response you would have had available. This effectively cut the amount of information you would like to have exchanged by half or more. Very simple and very effective.

Now, if you find that you have trouble with these rather ordinary hands for the simple reason that an opponent has overcalled, is there any reason to believe that your opponents will not have the same problems if they open and you overcall?

I assure you they will have problems.

WHY SHOULD YOU OVERCALL?

There are actually quite a few reasons for overcalling.

1. You may buy the contract for a successful game or partscore.
2. You may get partner off to a good lead.
3. You may push the opponents too high; perhaps, on occasion, at considerable expense to them.
4. You may find a successful sacrifice.
5. You may cause the opponents to misjudge their hands and either miss a game or slam or get to the wrong game or slam. Or for that matter, the wrong suit, period.

Most of these reasons are well known. They do not need elaborating. The reason I spent so much time on the two example hands was because I wanted to emphasize as strongly as possible this one aspect of overcalling. It makes life difficult for the side that opened.

I intend to cover the range of hands on which I believe you should overcall. This will be done by way of examples for the reason that general rules just don't make it in an area such as defensive bidding. Not to say that I don't believe in them. I just don't think they do the job.

Later, I intend to get into a structure of responding to partner's overcall. Occasionally I will make a distinction between matchpoints and IMPs.

SOMETHING ABOUT THIS BOOK

As you probably know, *Overcalls* was published in the eighties, and it was a first. No one had written about overcalls other than to give them a token mention. Discussing responding to overcalls was not heard of. *Overcalls* broke new ground and now, after quite a few years, this version will do the same. Much of what was included in the original was correct but there were some errors in judgment and the tools were more limited than they are today. In this version of *Overcalls* I have changed the answers to some of the example hands, have added new hands, and have introduced something that is completely new. In much of this book I will focus on basic methods. The new methods will have a section of their own. At the end of the book there will be a large quiz that will look at traditional methods and which will touch on modern methods, something I will address in its own section. There will also be additional quizzes along the way.

INTERMEDIATE/ADVANCED

IF YOU READ ONLY ONE BRIDGE BOOK THIS YEAR THIS SHOULD BE IT!

That was Alfred Sheinwold's review of the first edition of this book in 1980, and *Overcalls* quickly became recognized as a 'must-read' for any would-be bridge expert. Since that time, it has never been out of print. Now, almost thirty years later, Mike Lawrence has revised, updated and expanded the book to take into account developments in the theory and practice of competitive bidding. Every problem and comment in the book (and there are hundreds of them) has been revisited and revised if necessary, to take into account the ways that doubles and cuebids are used today. New conventions are discussed and incorporated into the bidding structure, and there is a major new section on modern methods in competitive bidding.

Anyone who is at all serious about improving their game needs to own a copy of this book.

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 on the game.



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