



Ask Jerry

Well-known teacher and player **Jerry Helms** answers your bridge questions.
Send your questions to askjerry@jerryhelms.com.

Dear Jerry: Recently, my partner has begun overcalling four-card suits. I'm having difficulty with this because I was taught that an overcall guarantees a good five-card or longer suit. I have raised with three-card support, sometimes with disastrous results.

We've both agreed to ask you to adjudicate our disagreement.

—U. C., Fairhope, AL

Dear U. C.: The first acronym that I ever created as a teaching aid is clearly applicable here:

WIRDI

Whatever Is Right, Do It!

The purpose of any overcall is three-fold:

- 1) It suggests a desire to compete for the opportunity to declare, despite an opponent's opening bid.
- 2) It suggests that if partner is called upon to make the opening lead, you have a strong suggestion of which suit should be led.
- 3) An old friend of mine, Skinner Williams, said the third factor was the "mess 'em up function."

Based on the above, consider this situation. Right hand opponent opens 1♣, and you hold this hand:

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

For starters, with your 12 high-card points, some form of action feels appropriate. If your opponents buy the contract, which suit would you like partner to lead?

Bridge expert David Berkowitz once said, "When you pass, you never give the opponents a problem." Based on all the relevant factors, I cannot imagine not overcalling 1♠ with this hand!

If partner holds values plus spade support, good news! If partner holds values without spade support, at least we have announced our competitive desires. Should we pass, and the opponents end up declaring, clearly a spade lead is highly desirable.

By overcalling 1♠, we have made it impossible for West to respond either 1♦ or 1♥, and we may have prevented West from responding 1NT with a balanced 7–10 points but no spade stopper.

Years ago, some experts would have advised passing with this hand, not just because of holding only four spades, but also because of the opponents' looming misfit based on your length in clubs. In reality, this reasoning is exactly backwards.

Assuming that East has three or more clubs, that leaves at most five clubs left between West and partner. Assuming that West and partner share equally, both of them must hold approximately ten cards *that are not clubs!* There is a very strong likelihood based on your club length that partner will hold spade tolerance if not outright support.

If East had opened with 1♦, assuming East has at least four diamonds, West and partner could share approximately nine diamonds. This leaves each of them with eight cards *that are not spades!*

The reality is that the greater length you hold in a suit opened by your right-hand opponent, the greater the chance of finding help for your suit in partner's hand.

In summation, with a strong four-card suit and reasonable values, a one-level overcall announces your desire to compete, suggests a good opening lead, and may fulfill the "mess 'em up" function.

As advancer when partner makes an overcall, you should always assume that partner has a five-card or longer suit and act accordingly. I think you should be slightly more conservative when holding only three-card support but slightly more aggressive when holding four-card or longer support for partner's overcalled suit.

If you do end up playing in a 4–3 fit, the person who overcalled the four-card suit should play very hard! If your previous 4–3 fits have led to disaster, determine whether the suit and values were appropriate for the overcall, whether advancer's raise had appropriate support and values, or whether declarer underplayed. It's good practice to occasionally have to play in a 4–3 fit.

In all cases, from your perspective, simply bid your hand as you feel it should be bid and, most importantly, learn from your results. —JH ♠

For information on Jerry's upcoming festivals and cruises visit:
www.jerryhelms.com

Good Advice

"Keep your bidding simple...never feel compelled to use a convention, where it cannot help you, merely because you happen to be playing it... You will lose many fewer points during the year if you stop trying to be 'scientific' all the time."

—S. J. SIMON, *Why You Lose at Bridge*, 1946