

Intervene over an Opening Bid with a Strong Hand

[Pete Matthews Jr](https://3nt.xyz) – <https://3nt.xyz> – © May 15, 2020

For our purposes, a *strong hand* contains at least 18 high card points (HCP), or compensating values. Our initial action with a strong hand, directly over an opening bid, might be:

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| two-suited bid | best with two suits of at least five cards. |
| 3NT | with a long, running suit and a stopper in at least opener's suit. |
| jump cue-bid | in opener's major suit, with a long, running suit, to ask for a stopper in opener's suit. |
| takeout double | unlimited strength and: <ol style="list-style-type: none">at least three-card support for all three unbid suits – a normal takeout double with extra strength;a <i>good, one-suited hand</i> (I'll follow Andrew Robson and Oliver Segal and call this a GOSH);a balanced hand with a stopper, too strong to overcall 1 NT; ora hand so strong that game or even slam is likely, but no other action is appropriate. |
| overcall | sometimes it's correct to overcall with a strong hand: with a two-suiter, but no corresponding two-suited bid available; or when shortness in a major suit makes a double unattractive. |
| trap pass | with no better action, usually with length in opener's suit. |

The focus of this article is the takeout double, but first we need to discuss one- and two-suited overcalls.

Two-Suited Overcalls

Tournament bridge partnerships commonly play these two-suited overcalls:

Michaels cue-bid: over the opening bid of a minor suit, the bid two of opener's suit shows both majors; over a major suit, the cue-bid shows the other major and either minor.

Unusual notrump: a jump to 2 NT over any opening bid shows the two lowest unbid suits.

Some bidders use these bids wildly, but I suggest they be reserved for hands where your side may actually declare the hand. (After you make such a bid, declaring a hand against you will be easier.) Consider these hands, after your right-hand opponent (RHO) opens 1 \diamond :

- a. \spadesuit Q J 8 4 2 \heartsuit A J 9 7 3 \diamond 8 4 \clubsuit 8 [7 losers]
- b. \spadesuit K Q J 8 2 \heartsuit A J 9 7 3 \diamond 8 4 \clubsuit 8 [6 losers]
- c. \spadesuit K Q J 8 2 \heartsuit A K J 9 3 \diamond 8 4 \clubsuit 8 [5 losers]
- d. \spadesuit K Q J 8 2 \heartsuit A K J 9 3 \diamond A 4 \clubsuit 8 [4 losers]

Losing trick count only applies when an eight-card fit has been found, so the counts above are preliminary. A normal opening bid often has seven losers; clearly, two-suiters have extra playing strength when a fit is found.

Hand (a) would be a minimum non-vulnerable Michaels cue-bid of 2 \diamond . (Mike Lawrence recommends a minimum of eight working HCP non-vulnerable; ten when vulnerable.) This bid will let partner get out at the two level. Vulnerable, or when your bid is higher, you should have more length, strength and/or texture to your suits. Over a 1 \heartsuit opening, a Michaels cue-bid would let partner bid 2 \spadesuit , but you might reach three of your minor. An Unusual 2 NT bid or a Michaels cue-bid of 2 \spadesuit will always commit you to the three level.

Most people would consider hands (b) and (c) to be normal opening bids, minimum and maximum within that range. Mike Lawrence would bid Michaels on these hands as well. I'm with lots of other folks, including Marty Bergen, excluding these normal opening bids from Michaels. I would overcall 1 \spadesuit with these hands, planning to bid hearts next, if it makes sense to do so. However, hand (b) could be a vulnerable Michaels cue-bid of 2 \diamond , since it has only a point more than the recommended working minimum HCP.

Hand (d) is a Michaels cue-bid of 2 \diamond , planning a jump to game or take another cue-bid. When your suits are even longer, you don't need as many high cards, to bid this way. It's playing strength that counts.

Coverage for Possible Two-Suiters

When the opening bid on your right is one of your long suits, strain to overcall in your second suit. Your high cards should be well-placed, and partner [with a fit] should be able to ruff RHO's suit after LHO. There is no special bid for this situation.

When RHO opens one of a major suit, your Michaels cue-bid is ambiguous: your minor suit is not yet known. However, from a coverage perspective, this is the *good* case: all three possible two-suiters are covered. A jump to 2 NT shows

both minors and Michaels shows either of the two major-minor hands.

When the opening bid is one of a minor, the Michaels cue-bid shows both majors, excellent when it comes up, but not so good for coverage. The unusual 2 NT covers hearts and the other minor. With spades and the other minor, overcall in one suit and hope to get a chance to bid the other.

Doubling and bidding one of two long suits is asking for trouble. Never double and follow up with a cue-bid, when holding a two-suiter.

Leaping Michaels

This form of Michaels is a winner, when it comes up. See the references at the end of the article.

The Normal Overcall of an Opening Bid

Without going into too much detail, the typical non-vulnerable overcall at the one level is made with 8 to 17 HCP. It may be made on a chunky four-card suit in an opening hand or better. A vulnerable overcall should have something like opening bid values, since partner is expected to raise normally.

The gold standard for a two level overcall is a six-card suit – a standard often violated – but have a good reason for doing so. Again, partner should raise normally, so have good values.

With the right shape, overcaller may follow up with a takeout double. With this hand, overcall 1 ♠ with 1 ♠, planning to double 2 ♠ for takeout:

♠ A Q J 3 2 ♡ 4 ♦ K J 3 ♣ Q J 7 4

Don't make a takeout double holding a 5-card major that you could overcall at the one level, unless you are strong enough to bid the suit later. With this hand, also overcall 1 ♠, planning to double 2 ♠ for takeout:

♠ J 7 5 3 2 ♡ 4 ♦ A Q 3 ♣ A Q J 4

With a lesser hand, still overcall, but don't back into the auction.

After a 1 ♠ opening bid, the holder of a modest heart suit can have a tough decision. Make a takeout double with:

♠ 4 ♡ J 7 5 3 2 ♦ A Q 3 ♣ A Q J 4

But don't lose a decent heart suit; overcall 2 ♠ with:

♠ 4 ♡ A Q J 3 2 ♦ K J 3 ♣ Q J 7 4

Avoid making the secondary double with a void. Double a 1 ♠ opening with hands such as these, despite holding five decent hearts:

♠ – ♥ K Q 9 7 4 ♦ A K 10 3 ♣ A K 9 7

♠ – ♥ K Q 9 7 4 ♦ K 10 7 3 ♣ A J 9 7

The Typical Takeout Double of an Opening Bid

The typical takeout double contains at least three-card support for all three unbid suits. Advancer (the partner of the doubler) acts accordingly. Advancer's cue-bid is at least invitational to game, often with doubt as to strain, such as two four-card majors.

Advancer Plans to Draw Trump

Advancer only passes when planning to draw trump and set the opening bid. Doubler is required to lead a trump – and borrow one, if necessary! Pass a takeout double of a 1 ♠ opening with a hand such as:

♠ K Q J 10 8 ♥ A 7 2 ♦ 4 2 ♣ 8 7 6

Advancer Has Encouraging Values

Advancer should make a jump response with a hand of nine to eleven points and at least a four-card suit. Advancer discounts honors in opener's suit, adds a point for a fifth trump, and another two for a decent six-card suit. For example, after partner doubles 1 ♠, jump to 3 ♥ on any of these hands:

♠ 9 7 3 ♥ Q 9 7 4 ♦ A K 9 3 ♣ J 7

♠ 9 7 3 ♥ Q 9 7 4 2 ♦ A Q 9 ♣ 7 4

♠ 9 7 3 ♥ Q 10 9 7 4 2 ♦ A 9 ♣ 7 4

A jump advance is not forcing, and doubler's raise below game (if available) is invitational. A new suit by doubler shows a GOSH and is forcing to game. A cue-bid is also forcing to game; it works about the same as a cue-bid after a non-jump advance, discussed below.

Advancer's jump to 2 NT shows about 12 HCP with the enemy suit stopped. 3 NT shows a game-going hand of the same nature.

Typical Advances

The top priority for advancer is to bid a major suit. With these hands, advancer bids 2 ♥ over the takeout double of 1 ♠:

♠ 9 7 3 ♥ Q 9 7 4 2 ♦ A 6 3 ♣ 7 4

♠ 9 7 3 2 ♥ 9 7 4 2 ♦ 10 3 2 ♣ J 7

♠ 9 7 3 2 ♥ 9 7 4 2 ♦ Q J 10 9 ♣ 7

If advancer does not have a major suit to bid, then notrump is the next target. With my tournament partner, I have the agreement that the 1 NT advance shows the same values as a free bid of 1 NT: a stopper and about 8 to 10 HCP. Advance 1 NT with this hand over a double of 1 ♠:

♠ K 9 3 ♥ Q 7 4 ♦ K 10 3 2 ♣ 7 4 3

However, the higher the opening bid, the more likely responder will be in a bind. Lacking an unbid 4-card suit, advancer should bid 1 ♦ or perhaps 1 ♥ on any three cards. Mike Lawrence says to advance 1 NT over a double of 1 ♠ with as few as four HCP, perhaps:

♠ Q 9 7 2 ♥ Q 7 4 ♦ 9 3 2 ♣ J 7 4

Advancer's third choice is a minor suit, 2 ♣ on this hand:

♠ 9 7 3 2 ♥ Q 7 4 ♦ K 3 ♣ J 7 4 3

Since you might wish (or be forced) to bid again, usually choose the *higher* suit of equal length and rank.

Important: Advancing after a takeout double is fundamentally different from responding to an opening bid or overcall. Doubler is not forced to bid, and will usually pass a non-jump advance. Therefore, advancer bids the higher of equal suits, being prepared to show the lower suit next (without reversing), if necessary. We'll see this approach also pays off, when doubler shows a strong hand with three-card support.

When advancer has to bid a three-card suit, a minor suit is less encouraging than a major. Over the takeout double of 1 ♠ on this hand, many would bid 2 ♣, but I would bid 2 ♦, clubs and diamonds being equal suits:

♠ 9 7 3 2 ♥ Q 7 4 ♦ 9 3 2 ♣ J 7 4

Advancer's Free Bid

If RHO raises opener to the two level, advancer should bid with any decent excuse. Since the simple bid shows values, it is no longer necessary to jump with a marginal hand. So when partner doubles 1 ♥, and RHO raises to 2 ♥, bid 2 ♠ with either of these:

♠ 9 7 6 3 2 ♥ 7 4 2 ♦ 9 3 ♣ A 7 4

♠ K 7 3 2 ♥ 7 4 2 ♦ Q 3 ♣ K J 4

Doubler Has a Normal Hand

Advancer may have no values at all for a non-jump bid in a suit; with a normal hand, doubler must pass. Any action, even if the opponents bid, shows a strong hand.

However, if advancer takes a free bid, doubler is released from the prohibition on competing in advancer's suit. Doubler should raise with 4-card support and a suitable hand.

Doubler Is Strong

After a simple advance in a suit, game is likely only when doubler has a strong hand, as defined above; with a lesser hand, doubler passes. Rebidding is straightforward with a notrump hand, a GOSH or true support.

Doubler Has a Strong, Balanced Hand with a Stopper

After any advance, doubler simply bids notrump at an appropriate level. Doubler no longer promises three-card support for unbid suits.

Doubler Has a GOSH

After any advance, doubler bids their long, strong suit at an appropriate level. Doubler no longer promises any support for other suits.

Doubler Has True Support for Advancer's Suit

The raise of advancer's suit promises at least 4-card support. Doubler usually raises to the appropriate level. With true support, the usual 18 points for bidding again may go as low as 16 support points.

Doubler Has Three-Card Support for Advancer's Suit

With only three-card support in a strong hand, the modern expert doubler never raises immediately. Suppose 1 ♠ is doubled and advancer bids 2 ♡ on this hand:

♠ A 8 7 3 ♡ 8 6 3 2 ♦ K 3 ♣ 9 6 2

When opener's raise to 3 ♡ promises four-card support, bidding 4 ♡ should be automatic. However, should doubler be permitted to have only three-card support, even 3 ♡ may be a poor contract.

Mike Lawrence's book avoids the 3-card raise, but Bridge World Standard (BWS) still permits them. Be sure to discuss the methods presented below with your partner.

Two of opener's suit is available: The two-level cue-bid of opener's suit implies exactly three-card support for advancer's suit, in a good hand. Doubler may later cancel that implication, but such a hand is unusual. Advancer assumes doubler has three-card support and continues:

weak Repeating the original suit is weak and does not promise extra length. A new, lower-ranking suit is also weak. Suppose you hold this stinker:

♠ 9 7 3 2 ♡ Q 7 4 ◇ 9 3 2 ♣ J 7 4

1 ♠	Dble	Pass	2 ◇
Pass	2 ♠	Pass	?

Diamonds may be a 3-3 fit, so suggest an alternative with 3 ♣. With more diamonds than clubs, rebid 3 ◇.

inv Advancer's 2 NT is natural with some values, but non-forcing. If available, a jump to three of advancer's suit shows five or six cards in the suit, and six points or so.

forcing Advancer's cue-bid is forcing to game, as is a jump into a new suit. A new, higher-ranking suit is natural and forcing: four cards, if that makes sense, or a value in the suit.

Advancer's jump to game shows some points and a suit of six or more cards. If doubler happened to be slamming, they can just bid their suit.

Opener has rebid two or three of the opening suit: The two-level cue-bid is no longer available, so a second double shows a strong hand with exactly three-card support. At the two level, the same structure applies, since bidding is at the same place as after the cue-bid. At the three level, 19+ points are required, and advancer has no invitational actions.

Doubler's Cue-Bid-and-Bid

Almost all of the time, doubler's cue-bid provides three-card support. Playing this way, non-jump bids made by doubler after the cue-bid are *fit-showing*: at least five cards, a hand suitable for playing at least one more of advancer's suit, and intended as forcing. The final contract might be in advancer's first or second suit, notrump, or in a side suit held by doubler. Advancer might choose to pass that side suit with a terrible hand, for example:

♠ 9 8 7 3 2 ♡ 7 4 ◇ 9 7 3 ♣ J 5 2

1 ♠	Dble	Pass	2 ◇
Pass	2 ♠	Pass	3 ♣
Pass	3 ♡	Pass	Pass

Advancer's 3 ♣ shows equal minors, trying for the better fit. It does not show any values. A 3 ♥ contract sure looks safer than four of a minor.

Slam in the offing: Doubler could have a huge hand with either support for advancer or a super-GOSH, likely safe at the five level, perhaps this rarity:

♠ – ♥ A K Q J 9 7 4 ♦ A 3 ♣ A Q J 7

After doubling 1 ♠, jumping to game over a simple 2 ♦ advance could miss a slam. It's reasonable to cue-bid on such a powerful hand, even without three-card diamond support, *so long as you jump next*, forcing to game. (Remember, a non-jump is fit-showing, in these very modern methods.) Bidding this way shows a hand with at least 11 playing tricks (at most 2 losers).

With this lesser hand, don't cue-bid, just rebid 4 ♥:

♠ – ♥ A K Q 10 9 7 4 ♦ A 3 ♣ A J 9 7

After a 2 ♥ advance, cue-bid 2 ♠ and jump in hearts with:

♠ – ♥ K Q 10 7 4 ♦ A K Q 10 ♣ A K 9 7

1 ♠	Dble	Pass	2 ♥
Pass	2 ♠	Pass	3 ♥
Pass	5 ♥		

This sequence asks advancer to bid slam with one winner, in this case, either ♥ A, or ♥ J and ♣ Q. On some other deal, any non-spade king would suffice.

After a minor suit advance: When advancer has bid a major suit, the cue-bid showing three-card support works well. However, when the advance is in a minor suit, 3 NT may be the best contract. Doubler's cue-bid should not deny four-card support, when a smattering of useful values will produce game in some other strain. Here is an exceptional hand, after RHO opens 1 ♠:

♠ – ♥ K Q 9 7 4 ♦ A K 10 3 ♣ A K 9 7

As mentioned earlier, make a takeout double. If you overcall with these anemic hearts, you may play there in a 5-1 fit, with game or even slam making in either minor suit. Also, a secondary takeout double with a void is a particularly bad idea: partner may pass for penalties, expecting you to have at least one trump to lead. The opponents might make 3 ♠ with a bunch of trumps and a singleton or two.

Partner advances 2 ♦. It's somewhat encouraging that partner did not scrape up a 1 NT bid. It must be right to try for game in hearts. But bidding hearts would show a GOSH – pard might again pass you in a 5-1 fit. Cue-bid 2 ♠.

Advancer's first responsibility, over the cue-bid, is to bid 2 NT with a few points

that include a stopper. Doubler might have a hand such as one of these:

♠ 9 2 ♡ K 7 4 ◇ A K 3 ♣ A K J 9 7 [pass 2 NT or try 3 ♣]

♠ 9 2 ♡ A Q 4 ◇ A K 3 ♣ A K Q 9 7 [raise to 3NT]

If advancer bids 2 NT over the 5-4-4-0 hand,

♠ – ♡ K Q 9 7 4 ◇ A K 10 3 ♣ A K 9 7

some or all of partner's meager values are wasted. It should be best to sign off in 3 ◇. Advancer should figure out that the reason for bidding this way is a heart suit with spade shortness.

If advancer instead bids 3 ◇, bid 3 ♡ saying, my hand can support a 4 ◇ contract, but we may have game in hearts – without heart support, please go back to 4 ◇.

Another example:

♠ 6 ♡ A K 9 8 6 2 ◇ A Q J 4 ♣ K 3

1 ♠ Dble Pass 2 ◇

Pass 2 ♠ Pass 3 ♣

Pass 3 ♡ Pass ?

RHO opens in spades, and our hand doubles. If partner advances in clubs, we will bid hearts, treating the hand as a GOSH. When partner bids 2 ◇, we get to explore for the correct strain with a cue-bid followed by a fit-showing 3 ♡. Here are some hands for advancer:

♠ 9 8 7 3 2 ♡ 7 4 ◇ 9 7 3 ♣ J 5 2 [pass with this total stinker]

♠ 9 7 3 2 ♡ 4 ◇ 10 9 7 3 ♣ J 5 4 2 [bid 4 ♣, pick a minor]

♠ 9 7 3 2 ♡ 10 7 4 ◇ K 7 3 ♣ 9 5 2 [raise to 4 ♡]

♠ 9 8 7 3 2 ♡ Q 4 ◇ 10 9 7 ♣ J 5 2 [raise to 4 ♡]

Not perfection, but we reliably reach a decent strain. These concepts extend Lawrence's methods and are well worth playing.

Alternative Methods

This first bunch I could be convinced to play:

Equal level conversion: Playing this method, if the takeout doubler removes the advance in the lowest ranking unbid suit to the next unbid suit, it shows five cards in that suit and four in the highest unbid suit. This removal promises neither real support for advancer's suit nor extra values. This is most often employed after the double of a major suit, where removing a 2 ♣ advance to

2 \diamond shows five or more diamonds and four cards in the unbid major. It could also be used with four spades and five or more hearts, over clubs or over either minor suit; it could get scary if the opponents keep bidding diamonds.

Doubler's cue-bid guarantees three-card support: Some pairs do not permit doubler to cue-bid to set a game force in doubler's suit. Presumably they jump to game or higher, on potential slam hands – if they ever get one. They might also be stuck with a huge balanced hand lacking a stopper.

Complete two-suiter coverage with two bids: When the opening bid is in a major suit, we can already handle all three two-suiters with two bids. The following untested change would allow showing all three two-suiters when the opening bid is in a minor suit:

- 2NT still shows hearts and the other minor (the two lowest).
- The cue-bid now shows spades and either hearts or the other minor.

Raise with four: With standard methods, a free bid by advancer releases opener to compete: doubler's raise in traffic becomes competitive, with four-card support. (Similar considerations apply after a value-showing 1 NT advance.)

Some pairs play that doubler's raise shows four-card support, but not extra strength. I used to play this way with Phyllis Rye, and it worked fine. This helps in the mix-it-up of matchpoint pairs, but doubler will need to jump raise to show extra values with support.

Thumbs down on the following methods:

Three two-suited bids: For a decade or more my main partner and I played a third two-suited bid, the *cheapest jump overcall*. Our plan used this bid, the cue-bid and 2 NT to show the three specific two-suiters. However, under control of my autopilot, the cheapest one-suited weak jump overcall would fly out of my bidding box. We had to abandon this method, returning to the normal Michaels and unusual 2 NT. YMMV.

Unusual always minors: Some folks play the unusual 2 NT always shows 5-5 or more in the minors, even over a minor suit opening. This approach has some attraction if the minor suit opening might be made with two or fewer cards in the suit. However, even in such a case, opener is still likely to have a real suit, and "two lowest" will happen more often. Furthermore, playing "always minors" increases the coverage problem over a minor suit opening: there is no bid for either major/minor two-suiter.

Scramble: Robson and Segal describe a scramble as "an attempt to find a better

strain than the one suggested by partner.” These methods extend the idea of equal level conversion. They require serious discussion, especially because, as presented, they apply to takeout doubles by either partner in various situations.

Top and bottom cue-bids: Starting in 1989 or earlier, Max Hardy recommended top and bottom cue-bids. Instead of Michaels, bidding two of opener’s suit shows the highest and lowest ranking unbid suits, with emphasis on the bottom (e.g. 4-6). If cue-bidder next bids the top suit, this shows at least five cards in that suit and a strong hand.

Complementing this approach are jump overcalls in some auctions that show a good minor suit and a secondary heart suit, and takeout doubles that emphasize the two highest suits (using equal level conversion). This plan appears to fit together well, but it removes the Michaels cue-bid on weak hands.

References

The Complete Book on Takeout Doubles, 2nd Edition, Mike Lawrence, © 2012. This is the only comprehensive, modern book on the topic. Be sure to examine “Chapter 12: Continuing with 18+ Points but Only three-card Support” starting on page 209, from which I have distilled the essence. Also see Chapter 18, starting on page 268, about Leaping Michaels.

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