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Michelangelo - A Better Alternative to Michaels

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Source

In part I we introduced our general structure of artificial overcalls:

- 1♣-2♣ shows precisely 4 spades, and 5 or more of a red suit;
- 1♣-2♦ shows precisely 4 hearts, and 5 or more diamonds;
- 1♦-2♦ shows precisely 4 of either major, and 5 or more clubs;
- 1♦-2♥ shows precisely 4 spades, and 5 or more hearts;
- 1♥-2♥ shows precisely 4 spades, and 5 or more of a minor.

Summarized in words, the jump shift promises 5+ of the bid suit and 4 of the next higher suit; the cuebid shows the only two other 4-5 hands where you can get out at the 2-level. 1♠-2♠ still classical Michaels promising 5-5 hearts and minor and 2NT is still the unusual notrump promising 5-5 in the two lowest unbid suits.

If overcaller has a singleton in opener's suit, he may well opt for a takeout double rather than a Michelangelo jump. Over 1♦ for instance ♠AJxx ♥Kxx ♦x ♣QJTxx is clearly better described by a double, since we are happy to let partner play in hearts on a 4-3 fit. While overcaller may be 2-2 in the other two suits, and can be 4-6 or 4-7 in his own suits, overcaller's most common distribution is three cards in opener's suit and one card in the unbid suit. Even 5440 (4 cards in opener's suit, void in fourth suit) is possible. Some typical overcalling hands after a 1♣ opening:

- ♠Kx ♥QJxx ♦AQxxx ♣xx: the classic hand for 2♦, normal-overcall strength and 4-5.
- ♠Jxxx ♥xx ♦AQJxx ♣Kx: cuebid 2♣. A natural 1♦ overcall is OK, but here we gain both the preemptive value of denying responder a cheap 1M response, and the ability to show the 4-card spade suit to partner. Over a 1♥ opening this would be very minimal for a 2♥ cuebid, since we are no longer guaranteed to escape at the 2-level.
- ♠x ♥Kxxx ♦KQTxxx ♣xx: in standard bidding we'd be afraid to make a natural weak jump to 2♦ (or 3♦ at favorable vulnerability); playing Michelangelo, 2♦ shows this hand.
- ♠AQJx ♥x ♦AKJxxx ♣Ax: cuebid 2♣, and follow up with a strong rebid over partner's expected attempt to sign off at 2♥. The alternative, doubling first and then jumping in diamonds, may still miss a spade fit if responder has both majors.

Over a 1♦ opening:

- ♠Axxx ♥x ♦Kxx ♣KQxxx: the classic hand for the 2♦ cuebid. With the red suits reversed, a takeout double would be better. Over a 1♥ opening, a very close decision between a 2♥ cuebid and a takeout double (I favor the cuebid here; with

- ♠ AJxx ♥ x ♦ KQx ♣ QTxxx, I would double.)
- ♠ xx ♥ Kxxx ♦ xx ♣ AKxxx: not vulnerable, a 2♦ cuebid is more descriptive than a 2♣ overcall.
- ♠ AKJx ♥ QTxxx ♦ Qxx ♣ x: 2♥. Playing Standard, you are afraid to double for fear of a club response, and are forced to bid a lousy 1♥ and get partner off to a bad lead. (Over a 1♣ opening, double is fine but I favor a 2♣ cuebid to show the suit lengths exactly.)
- ♠ Qxxx ♥ - ♦ Axx ♣ K9xxxx: 2♦. you'd hate to sit back and watch while the opponents find their heart fit. Almost as much as you'd hate to overcall 2♣ on such a ratty suit.

And a few examples of when not to use the bid:

- ♠ Qxxx ♥ AJx ♦ KQxxx ♣ x: double a 1♣ opening. You are OK with partner declaring a heart partscore. (NV, I would cuebid 2♥ over 1♥.)
- ♠ JT9xx ♥ AKxxx ♦ Ax ♣ x: I know you are tempted to "pretend you only have 4 spades" and show this as a 4-5 hand. I prefer telling the truth about my suit lengths; I still overcall 1♠ here. Maybe with 9-high spades you could talk me into it.
- ♠ AJxx ♥ — ♦ KQJxx ♣ Axxx: over a 1♣ opening, in my style you are strong enough to overcall 1♦ and rebid 2♠ if it goes 1♥-Pass-2♥ back to you. Your partnership may agree on a different cutoff between weak, medium, and strong hands for cuebidding.
- ♠ Qxx ♥ AJxx ♦ AKQxxx ♣ -: over a 1♣ opening, partner will never play you for this strong of a hand if you jump to 2♦ now. Double and rebid the diamonds as in Standard, heading for 4 of partner's major or 5♦ if you get any encouragement x from partner.

Responding to the Roman Jumps

After 1♣-2♦ and 1♦-2♥, advancer knows both of overcaller's suits. He assumes overcaller is 4-5 with a 7-loser hand. Raising to any level of either of overcaller's suits is to play. Cuebid is Western (see above re overcaller being more likely to have a fragment in opener's suit than shortness): overcaller bids notrump if he has the desired stopper, otherwise makes his most descriptive rebid. We haven't formalized our understandings of bids of the fourth suit and of notrump; right now I would expect these to be to play (rare).

Responding to the Cuebid

Advancer's bids of cuebidder's known suit are to play. Bids below game in the suit cuebidder might have are "pass or correct." In the simplest and most common case, this simply allows the partnership to find out if a playable fit exists. For instance, you hold ♠ xx ♥ Axxx ♦ QJxx ♣ xxx and the bidding starts (1♦)-2♦-Pass. You bid 2♥. If partner has hearts and clubs, he will pass 2♥ unless he has a monster; if he has spades and clubs, he will rebid 2♠ and you will correct to 3♣. Less commonly, responder can manipulate the auction to bid as high as is safe immediately. More possibilities after (1♦)-2♦-Pass or (1♦)-2♦-(Double):

- ♠ KJxxxx ♥ Kxxx ♦ xxx ♣ - : start with 2♥; if partner has hearts, you want to be in a partscore. If partner corrects to spades, raise him to 4.
- ♠ Kxxxx ♥ xx ♦ xx ♣ Kxxx: you're prepared to leap obstructively in clubs to make it hard for your opponents to find a red-suit game. You could jump in clubs now, or start with a jump to 3♠, and let partner correct to clubs if he doesn't have a fit.
- ♠ xxx ♥ xxx ♦ Kxxxx ♣ xx: Just what you didn't want to hear partner bid. But at least you can bail out cheaply in whichever 4-3 fit you have. Bid 2♥ and be glad you aren't doubled.
- ♠ Kxx ♥ AQxx ♦ KJxx ♣ xx: Lacking the fourth heart you would just bid 3NT to play. With the heart you might cuebid 3♦, anticipating that partner won't have a diamond stopper and will tell you which major he holds, after which you'll choose between 3NT and 4♥.

After (1♣)-2♣-Pass or (1♣)-2♣-(Double):

- ♠ xx ♥ xxx ♦ xxxx ♣ Axxx: you're guaranteed a fit in partner's red suit, but are willing to go the 3-level only if partner has diamonds. Start with 2♥; if partner has hearts he will pass. If he has spades and diamonds, he will correct to 2♠ and you in turn will correct to 3♦.

Overcaller's Rebid

The same basic principles as after textbook Michaels apply here: with just a minimum 4-5, pass any non-forcing bid, respond politely to partner's forcing inquiries. Freely bidding again shows extras: normally, bidding one of your suits again shows extra distribution while other bids show extra strength. Unlike Michaels, however, "extra distribution" always means 4-6 or 4-7, not 5-5. This makes possible some options not available in a standard system. At favourable vulnerability, I've actually used this sequence:

	LHO	Partner	RHO	You
♠ KQJx				
♥ x			1 ♥	2 ♥
♦ QJxxxxx	4 ♥	Pass	Pass	4 ♠!
♣ x				

Partner can conclude you must be 4-7 and wanting to sacrifice against 4♥, but you can still bid 4♠ rather than commit yourself to 5 of a minor since partner knows your extra length has to be in the minor. That's an extreme example. Much more typically, you simply have a hand like ♠ Kxxx ♥ KQxxxx ♦ xx ♣ x and show your sixth heart by passing if partner chooses spades, but taking the push to the 3-level if partner chooses hearts and the opponents bid on to 3 of a minor. For a Roman overcall, you are limited to a narrow normal-overcall-like strength range (typically 6 or 7 losers.) For the cuebid, I recommend the same "weak or strong" advice as is often given for Michaels: the hand suitable in strength for a reverse overcalls in the 5-card suit and then reverses.

If the Opening Side Keeps on Bidding:

Here we have only one extra agreement - in an auction where the opening side bids one of the two suits cuebidder might have, like (1♣)-2♣-(Double)-2♦-(2♥), cuebidder doubles to show they have bid his suit (inviting advancer to pass for penalty), and passes to confirm possession of spades and diamonds, but without extra length to justify a raise to 3♦.

The opponents can and should keep on bidding. My suggested defence to Michelangelo use the cheapest bid of my 5-card suit as a forward-going cuebid, the other bids natural and forcing one round by an unpassed hand (including bidding my 4-card suit).

Responder can pass with a shapeless hand up to 10HCP or so. Double could show a desire to penalize one of overcaller's suit (as over Michaels), but if there is an un-shown major, negative is probably more useful: e.g., 1♣-(2♦!)-X to imply a 4-card spade suit, and 1♣-(2♣)-X to show 4 cards in either major. (These common-sense recommendations align with my philosophy on defending unusual opening bids.)

Here's a hand from a sectional in July 2009 showing Michelangelo at its best:

Dealer: North
Vul: E/W

North
♠ AQ54
♥ 107
♦ 952
♣ 8654

West
♠ QJ8
♥ J65
♦ AQJ7
♣ 1072

East
♠ 106
♥ Q98
♦ K10843
♣ KQJ

South
♠ K732
♥ AK432
♦ 6
♣ A93

West	North	East	South
	Pass	1♦	2♥!
Pass?	2♠	Pass	Pass
Pass?			

West's passes are very timid, but apparently show a respect for the Losing Trick Count and an awareness of East's opening bid style. But E-W really are in a bind: they can either pass out 2♠ for a likely -140, or they can be set in 3♦. Notice that against a pair not playing Michelangelo, that light 1♦ opening followed by a 1♥ overcall would cause N-S to miss their spade fit. (South should double 1♦ for takeout, for that reason.)

In this hand from a club game in November 2008, both sides had some delicate maneuvering to do:

Dealer: West
Vul: N/S

North
♠ KJ102
♥ KQ9752
♦ 76
♣ 8

West
♠ Q93
♥ 83
♦ AQ2
♣ 1072

East
♠ A865
♥ A4
♦ KJ108
♣ KQJ

South
♠ 74
♥ J106
♦ 9543
♣ A762

West	North	East	South
1 ♣	2 ♣!	2 ♦?	2 ♥
3 ♦	3 ♥	4 ♦?	Pass
Pass	Pass		

Without an agreement what a double would mean, East could reasonably have blasted 3NT. (Several pairs made 3NT on these cards, apparently after South failed to unblock the hearts.) As it played out at the table, South felt confident that North had the majors after the 2♦ bid, showed his 3-card support, and North took the push with his 6-card suit. Quite a remarkable deal, with 19 total tricks available despite 17 total trumps and three shapeless hands. (Not playing Michelangelo, the auction probably starts 1♣-1♥-X-2♥, and again East will have a tough decision about selling out to 3♥ or gambling on bidding on.)

As I said in Part I, normally partner is entitled to expect at worst a 7-loser hand. Overcalling more lightly carries risks. If you like gambling, you can try it and you may get

away with it, but there is such a thing as "too light," even at favorable vulnerability. As a cautionary tale I show this deal from a club game:

Dealer: West
Vul: None

North
♠ 103
♥ A1063
♦ QJ109
♣ 864

West
♠ K943
♥ Q9742
♦ 83
♣ A3

East
♠ QJ6
♥ K5
♦ AK752
♣ K75

South
♠ A875
♥ J8
♦ 64
♣ QJ192

After East chose to open 1♦ instead of the more normal 1NT, I tried an excessively light 2♦ bid, and was lucky to escape with my skin. A good East-West pair would have succeeded in penalizing me, probably with an auction like Pass-Pass-1♦-2♦; Double-2♥-Pass-2♠; Double-3♣-Double-All pass, which could cost me very dearly if they lead clubs and prevent me from ruffing any losing spades in the dummy.

Finally, here's a hand from a club game in January 2009 with some real fireworks:

Dealer North
Vul: E/W

North
♠ 75
♥ K8732
♦ 87
♣ 864

West
♠ KQ10864
2
♥ 4
♦ 10954
♣ 9

East
♠ A93
♥ 1065
♦ AKQ62
♣ Q10

South
 ♠ J
 ♥ AQJ9
 ♦ J3
 ♣ AK8732

This was the auction:

West	North	East	South
		1 ♦	2 ♣
2 ♠	3 ♣	3 ♠	5 ♣
5 ♠	Pass	Pass	Pass

South has to decide if his hand is "reverse-strength", in which case he overcalls 2♣, hoping to follow up with 2♥ if 2♦ comes back to him, or "very strong", in which case he cuebids 2♦ (4M5C). If I had chosen to cuebid, my partner could have bid 3♥ rather than 3♣. Either way West isn't going to give up cheaply. If I had been West I would have gone right to 4♠, which might have shut us out.

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