



It Ain't Over 'til It's Over: Balancing at Bridge

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2 April 2022



Agenda

- What is Balancing?
 - Balancing Calls:
 - NT
 - Suit
 - 2-Suited Bids
 - Big Hands
 - When NOT to Balance
 - Summary/Key Points
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What is Balancing?

- After any bid or series of bids where at least one is not a pass, the person who can pass the hand out is in the *balancing seat*
- Examples:
 - 1H - P - P - ?
 - P - 1D - P - 2D
 - P - P - ?
 - 1C - P - 1S - P
 - 2S - P - P - ?
- After P - P - P, 4th hand is not in the balancing seat (why?)

General rules for balancing – I

Case 1: When the opening bid is passed around to you

- When short in opener's suit
 - Your high card points almost don't matter
 - Favor reopening with a double when short in opener's suit
 - Suit overcalls are fine
- With length in opponent's suit and at least near opening bid strength
 - Consider balancing with 1NT (11 - 14/15 HCP)

NOTE: A jump to 2NT by 4th seat is NOT unusual, it is an 18 - 21 HCP NT hand!

General rules for balancing – II

Case 2: When the opponents have found a fit at a low level

- Be aware of the vulnerability and its risks!
- When short in opponent's suit, consider re-opening with a double
- 2NT becomes a 2-suited takeout, NOT a NT bid
- 4(+) length in opps' suit is a reason to NOT balance
- We sell out much more often at IMPs (where -500 can be a disaster) than at matchpoints (where it's only one board)
- BALANCE AND THEN GET OUT!
 - Resist the temptation to 'bid one more' if P has balanced; he's already bid your hand
 - Don't be tempted to double them – you pushed them up, that's enough! X risks a bottom for Av+

○ 1C - P - 1S - P

○ 2S - P - P - ?

Rationale for Balancing

- If the opponents have a fit, odds are we have a fit
 - If they have an 8-card spade fit, only 5 of our 26 cards are spades. Therefore, we have three seven-card fits (rare), or at least one 8(+)-card fit
 - If they have a 9-card spade fit, only 4 of our 26 cards are spades. Therefore we **must** have at least one 8-card fit (combined hands are 4-8-7-7, 4-9-7-6, etc.).
- If the opponents stop at a low level with a fit, the points are about evenly split
 - Say, 1D - 1H; 2H - P. Opener says he has only 12-14 support points; Responder says he is minimum, 6-9. The Law of Total Tricks says you are generally safe competing to at least the 2-level.
- We will get no better than an average – usually average-minus – if we let opps play at a low level when they have a fit

Balancing with 1NT – I

- 10 - 14 HCP (others play 11-15)
- No singleton or void
- Balanced hand
- No stopper needed if opening bid was a minor

1C - P - P - 1N

S K83

H QT72

D AJ3

C J42

1H - P - P - 1N

S T753

H KT86

D AJ5

C KQ

Balancing with 1NT – II

- 15 - 17 HCP? Double first, then rebid cheapest NT – KJx, Qxxx, JTxx, AJ
- 18 - 21 HCP? Jump to 2NT (unpassed hand)
- Vulnerability matters!
 - Slightly aggressive non-vulnerable
 - If vulnerable, consider passing borderline hands, especially if forcing to the 3-level; shape and quality are more important than HCP
 - Unfavorable? 1H - P – P - 1N might show S T85, H KJ97, D AQ7, C KQJ
- Be conservative with 4(+) length in opponents' suit (why?)
- Always evaluate whether 1NT, Double, or a suit bid best shows your hand

Balancing with a Suit

- Balancing with a suit is also typically 10+ HCP
- Typically holds a singleton or void, 5+ suit length
- A jump overcall in the balancing seat is *intermediate*, and shows 12-16 HCP and a good 6-card suit – it is **not weak** or preemptive Kx, QJx, KQJxxx, Kx
- With a good 15 or more HCP, double first, then raise P or bid your good 5(+) card suit (or rebid in NT, if shape and strength allow).
- Length (4+) in the opponents' suit is a caution against balancing (why?)
- Pay attention to the vulnerability and level!

Balancing with a Two-Suited Hand

- Michaels cue-bid is available
- Double may be the right first call
- Unusual 2NT if you can't have 18+
 - Remember that a jump to 2NT by an unpassed hand is the "big NT", 18 - 21 HCP
 - If you're a passed hand, you can't have 18, so it frees 2NT to be unusual
 - Take the auction
 - 1H - P - 2H - P
 - P - ?
 - 2S: 5 card suit (rarely 4), 10 - 15: AJ9xx, xx, KQxx, Q
 - 2N: Minor-suit takeout: O_x, xx, KQxxx, AJxx
 - Double: Spade support, Takeout: Kxxx, X, QJTxx, AJx

Balancing with a Big Hand

- Strength – 15 good HCP on up
- Double – then bid a suit or NT at the appropriate level
- NT Ranges:
 - 10 - 14/15: Immediate 1NT balance
 - 15+ - 17: Double, then NT at lowest level (or raise P with 4 cards)
 - 18 - 21: Immediate jump to 2NT
 - 22+: (it does happen!) Double, then as appropriate (jump in NT?)
- Some hands are suited for an immediate balancing jump overcall – NOT preemptive! Remember Kx, QJx, KQJxxx, Kx

When to NOT Balance

- Opponents have not found a fit - Danger! We also may not have a fit
> 1D - 1H; 1NT > 1H - 1NT; 2C - P
- 4(+) Length in opps' suit (P may be short in their suit, but didn't act. Why didn't he?)
- In the middle of a live auction – their hands are not limited!
- Be careful (but not timid) vulnerable at higher levels
 - After 1S - P - 2S - P; P - ? for instance
 - This is when you want a hand with good shape: 4 in the other major, no more than a doubleton in their suit, no wasted values in their suit, Tens and Nines for body

Key Concepts (Wrap-Up Summary)

- Balancing is (initially) scary, but is necessary to score well, particularly at matchpoints (pairs)
- Basic math protects us
 - If they have a fit, we have a fit
 - We know the points are evenly split
 - Law of Total Tricks
- We benefit from balancing by:
 - Pushing the opponents to an unmakeable level
 - Finding a makeable contract of our own
 - Going down less than the value of their making contract (-100 vs. -110)
- Balance and then get out of the auction

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