

Balancing

Bidding games and slams are the glamorous aspects of bridge. Most bridge columns, textbooks, and lessons are geared to those aspects of bidding. But the real truth is that *most duplicate contests are won or lost at the part-score level*. The pair who competes most successfully in part-score auctions has a great advantage.

There are certain auctions that should ring a bell in your ear. Some auctions where you know you're going to bid, without even needing to look at your cards.

For example:

LHO	You	RHO	Partner
1♣	pass	2♣	pass
pass	??		

Do the opponents have a fit? Yes, LHO has at least three clubs; RHO has at least five. They have, at worst, an eight-card fit. What about their strength? RHO has 6-10 points (including distribution), LHO has a minimum opener – with a good 15 or more, he would make some sort of game try. The opponents will have about 18-22 points for this auction. Since there are 40 points in the deck, your side also has 18-22 points! And when they have a fit, your odds of finding a fit are actually increased. Originally there were four suits in the deck, but now you have to consider only three (discounting their suit).

What should you do in the example above? I haven't seen your hand, but the answer is *bid!* If you have only six points, *bid!* Partner will have twelve (trust me). The real question is not *if* to bid - it is *what* to bid.

Balancing Over One-Bids

A balancing bid is made in the pass-out seat after an opponent has opened the bidding (1 of a suit on your left, pass, pass, to you). In these situations, it is usually a good idea to stretch to keep the auction alive. To decide whether or not you should balance after a one-bid is passed around to you, keep these general guidelines in mind:

The BEST time to balance is when:

- You're short in the opponent's suit.
- You have length and high-card strength in the other three suits.
- You have a good 5-card or longer suit.
- You're not vulnerable (if you can't make your bid, the penalty will be lower, and may be even less than the score you would have lost if you had defended the one-bid).

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The WORST time to balance is when:

- You have a very weak hand (fewer than 8 points) and/or a weak suit.
- You have length in **OPENER'S** suit. The more cards you have in the opponents' suit, the less chance there is that you and partner will have a fit. It's often best to pass and let opener play in what may be a bad contract.
- You're vulnerable. If you can't make your bid, the penalty may be expensive, so be conservative.

How strong is partner's hand?

One reason for balancing is to protect partner when he has good values, but did not have a descriptive bid available in the direct seat. In some of these cases, he may have had a "trap pass" - a strong hand that could not bid because of length in opener's suit. To get a general idea of partner's points and distribution when the opponents pass out a one-bid, you can usually assume that:

On average, your side will have about 20-22 points and the opponents will have 18-20 points (14-16 for opener, 4 for his partner). Subtract your HCP's from your side's 20-22 to determine partner's probable point-count.

Your side will have an average of 6 cards in opener's suit. Subtract the number of cards you have from 6 to determine partner's length in that suit.

Now look for other clues to determine how likely it is that partner's hand falls in the "average" ranges above. If you have a marginal balancing hand, use these guidelines to make your decision:

- **If you have length in opener's suit, strongly consider passing.** Since you know partner is short in their suit, it's more likely he has a **weaker** hand (with shortness and strength, he could have made a takeout double or overcall).
- **If you're short in opener's suit, stretch to balance.** It's more likely partner has the **stronger** hand - his length in their suit may well be the reason he couldn't bid.
- **If you're short in opener's suit, don't play partner for more than 15 points.** With length in their suit, partner might have overcalled 1NT if he had a 15+-point hand.
- **Don't ever figure partner for more than 17 HCPs.** He won't usually "trap" with a hand this strong, so you don't need to protect him (or a possible game) with fewer than 8 points.
- **Consider the vulnerability and level of the opening bid.** If you're not vulnerable and the 1-level was available, partner could have overcalled if he had a long suit and 9+ points Vulnerable (or if the opening bid would have forced him to the 2-level), he will often pass with these minimum hands.

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Balancing after a Suit Opening Bid (1♣/1♦/1♥/1♠ - Pass - Pass - ?)

When you balance over a one-bid, you are, in effect, bidding some of partner's values for him. This means you can "shade down" many of your bids. As a guideline, most of your balancing bids promise about one King fewer than you would need to make the same bid in the direct seat.

- **Minimum suit bid** (1♦-Pass-Pass-1♥) = 8-13 points, usually a 5+-card suit (but may be a good 4-card suit at the one-level). The better your suit, the fewer points you need to bid.
- **1NT** (1♦-Pass-Pass-1NT) = About 10-14 points with stoppers (or moderate length) in the opponents' suit.
- **A jump in a new suit** (1♥-Pass-Pass-2♠) = 13-16 points and a strong 6+-card suit. A jump in the balancing seat *invites* game - it is *not* a strong jump-shift or a preempt.
- **Double** is for takeout, showing 10+ points with shortness in the opponent's suit. A takeout double can also be used to start the description of a better hand (14+ points) that was too strong to balance with a simple suit bid or 1NT. After partner responds to your double, you can show the stronger hand by rebidding 1NT (to show 16-18 points) or freely bidding a new suit (to show 14+ points and a 5+-card suit).
- **Bid of the opponent's suit** (1♥-Pass-Pass-2♥) = A two-suited hand (Michaels).
- **Jump to 2NT** (1♠-Pass-Pass-2NT) = Unusual, showing length in the two lower unbid suits.

Balancing Over an Opening Notrump (1NT - Pass - Pass - ?)

- **A SUIT BID in the passout seat** is natural and shows a good suit. Don't worry too much about HCP requirements. The quality of your suit is far more important.
- **Check the vulnerability.** Since it's guaranteed that LHO has some length and defense against your suit - and his partner knows this - you'll be doubled more often, so be sure you have extra strength if you're vulnerable. If you're not vulnerable and the opponents are, be more aggressive - you can balance with almost any hand that has a long, decent suit.
- **A DOUBLE in the passout seat** is "optional" (partner may bid a long suit or pass for penalties, at his option). The double shows about 12 HCP and partner will pass with about 10 points or more.

Responder's Bids (after partner balances over a one-bid)

Remember that partner may have stretched to keep the auction open for you, so don't hang him. In general, most of your responses promise about one Queen more than you would have if partner had taken action in the direct seat. Remember, you should balance *only once* in each auction. If you overbid when partner balances, he will quit balancing!

If partner balances with a suit (showing 8-13 points):

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Don't get too excited. Partner usually has less than opening-bid strength, so you should usually pass if you have a weak hand without a fit. The meanings of your other bids are:

- **"Free" raise of partner's suit** (1♥-Pass-Pass-1♠ / Pass-2♠) shows a constructive hand (8-12 playing points).
- **Competitive raise of partner's suit** (over an intervening bid – 1♥-Pass-Pass-1♠ / 2♥-2♠) shows support, but may be made with a slightly weaker hand than a free raise. If opener bids again (or if his partner comes into the auction), compete if you have a fit and fair playing strength (7+ points).
- **Jump raise of partner's suit** (1♥-Pass-Pass-1♠ / Pass-3♠) invites game - 11-13 playing points.
- **Low-level notrump bid** shows good strength, stoppers in the opponent's suit and no fit for partner's major. (1NT = about 9-12 points. A jump to 2NT = 12-13 points. A jump to 3NT = 14+ points)
- **New suit** (1♥-Pass-Pass-1♠ / Pass-2♦) shows a 5+-card suit and good playing strength. If partner balanced with a major, your new-suit bid usually denies support for his suit.
- **Cuebid** (bid of the opponent's suit – 1♣-Pass-Pass-1♠ / Pass-2♣) is artificial, showing quite a strong hand and interest in game.

If partner doubles (showing 10+ points):

Remember that partner can be relatively light in high-card points, so don't hang him. With most hands, respond at the cheapest level possible (don't jump, even with 10-11 points). If partner has a full opening bid, he'll usually bid again.

If partner balances with 1NT (showing 10-14 points):

- **Pass** with most fairly balanced hands of up to 10-11 points
- **2NT** is invitational, showing about 11-13 points.
- **A game bid** (1♣-Pass-Pass-1NT / Pass-3NT/4♥/4♠) should show about 14 points if you're not vulnerable, about 12 points if you're vulnerable.
- **Systems are on** – 2♣ is Stayman. Other bids follow your notrump system (transfers, etc.).

EXAMPLES

The auction goes 1♥ - pass - pass to you. What is your bid with:

♠Q3 ♥KQ4 ♦AJ87 ♣QJ92 ?

Double. Too strong for a balancing 1NT. You will rebid notrump over partner's response.

♠984 ♥QJ6 ♦KQ1032 ♣K10 ?

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1NT. With your balanced shape and heart stopper, 1NT is better than 2♦.

♠K5 ♥64 ♦1032 ♣AJ10854 ?

2♣. Don't be afraid to balance light if you have a good suit, especially if you're relatively short in your opponent's suit.

♠QJ83 ♥98 ♦A754 ♣K102 ?

Double. You have minimum points, but you have right distribution.

♠AQJ103 ♥754 ♦6 ♣AQ83 ?

Double. This hand is too strong for a simple 1♠ balance, which can show as few as 8 points. You plan to rebid 2♠ over partner's response, showing a "good" overcall.

♠4 ♥1043 ♦KQ7 ♣AKJ1054 ?

3♣. This hand is too strong for a simple 2♣ balance. Jump to show your strong suit and invite game.

♠4 ♥QJ84 ♦Q7654 ♣AQ7 ?

Pass. Your long suit is very weak and you have length in opener's suit. Also, they probably have a better contract in spades, and they may find it if you reopen the bidding for them.

♠53 ♥J973 ♦KQ1032 ♣Q9 ?

Pass. You have a good suit, but you are very weak. Partner's failure to bid suggests that opener has a powerhouse, or that the opponents have a better fit somewhere.

Balancing after both opponents have bid

When the opponents have stopped at a low-level contract, you will often want to make a balancing bid or takeout double to try to find a contract of your own. Fairly aggressive balancing bids are especially popular at matchpoint (pairs) play, where the rewards can be great. However, there is some risk in entering the auction after the opponents have exchanged information, so you should adopt a more conservative balancing style in IMP (team) games and rubber bridge.

To determine whether or not you should reopen the bidding in these situations, keep these general rules in mind:

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The BEST time to balance is when:

- The opponents have stopped in a low-level suit partscore (1 or 2) - especially if it's possible that you can find a 2-level contract of your own (they've stopped in 2♣, 2♦ or 2♥ or lower).
- The opponents have found a trump fit (they have bid and raised a suit).
- The opponents have limited their high-card strength (they have willingly stopped in a part score).
- You have length and high-card strength in the unbid suit(s).
- You're not vulnerable. The opponents will be less tempted to double because a set would only score +100 instead of +110 or +140.

The WORST situations for balancing are when:

- You are extremely weak (fewer than 7-8 pts.).
- You have a strong holding in their suit or you suspect they have a better contract available.
- The opponents haven't found a good trump fit (they've stopped in 1NT or had an auction that suggests a misfit). Typical non-fitting auctions are: 1♥-1NT; 1♣-1♠-1NT-P; 1♣-1♥-2♣-2♥; 1♥-1♠-2♦-P .
- Your honor cards are in the opponents' suits (especially the suit bid on your left).
- You're vulnerable - the opponents are more likely to double because a one-trick set (+200) will be greater than the value of their part score.

How strong is partner's hand?

If the opponents find a trump fit and stop at 2, you can USUALLY assume that:

They have a combined average of about 22 HCPs and your side has an average of 18 HCPs. Subtract your HCPs from 18 to determine about how many points partner will have.

They have 8 trumps and you have 5. Subtract the number of cards you hold in their suit from 5 to determine partner's length in their suit. The shorter he is in their suit, the more likely he'll have a fit for YOUR suit.

You and partner are likely to have an 8-card fit somewhere.

The opponents aren't crazy. Don't worry too much about balancing them into a game. If they haven't made a try for game, assume they WANTED to stop where they did.

If the opponents stop in 1NT (**they bid 1♣-1♥-1NT or 1♦-1NT, etc.**):

Balancing in the pass-out seat is somewhat risky because the opponents don't have a fit. You'll want to have some extra strength to balance over these auctions. As a result, most of your actions suggest at least moderate length in the suit bid on your right (because if

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you had shortness in that suit, you probably would have made a bid earlier in the auction).

Some pairs like to play a double in these auctions as a "trap pass", showing a strong holding in the suit bid on your right. In this case, responder shouldn't be afraid to pass and lead dummy's suit.

Balancing Actions

If you're in the pass-out seat after the opponents stop in a part score, the meanings of your bids are:

- **Double** (1♥-Pass-2♥-Pass / Pass-DBL) = For takeout. You may be fairly light for this action if you have the right shape (shortness in their suit). A typical hand for a balancing double after the opponents stop in 2♥ would be:
♠QJ72 ♥2 ♦AJ76 ♣Q1053
- **Suit bid** (1♥-Pass-2♥-Pass / Pass-2♠) = A one-suited hand that doesn't have the right pattern for a takeout double. Your failure to make a direct overcall at your first turn tells partner that your suit may not be robust:
♠J7432 ♥832 ♦A7 ♣K107
- **Notrump** (1♥-Pass-2♥-Pass / Pass-2NT) = Unusual, showing length in the two lowest unbid suits (usually the minors). A balancing bid of 2NT is never natural; partner should always pull this to one of your suits. If the opponents stop in 2♥, your balance of 2NT would show a hand like:
♠7 ♥J72 ♦AJ104 ♣QJ972 .

Responding to Partner's Balancing Bid

When partner balances over the opponent's low-level contract, it's important to remember that he has essentially already bid your cards for you. Your partnership's goal is to find a fit and a safe part score, *not* to bid a game.

If partner balances with a suit, the best advice is *don't* bid on at all. Unless you have a great fit and extraordinary playing strength -or no fit, but a good suit of your own - you should pass.

If partner balances with a double, resist the temptation to jump in your suit. Respond your longest suit at the lowest level available. You may pass the double for penalty if you have a long, strong holding in the opponent's suit.

If partner balances with an Unusual 2NT (showing the minors), he is warning you that he has no support for the unbid major. Just bid 3 of your longest minor, even if it's just a 2-card suit.