

BALANCING

BY ALAN LEBENDIG

It is very important to understand when to reopen an auction that has died at a low level. In other words, when to BALANCE. Most importantly, it is very important to understand when NOT to balance. Most balancing decisions should be based on whether or not the opponents have established a fit. If no fit has been established, it is very dangerous to be balancing. A fit has not been established until one of your opponents has RAISED their partner. Here is a common auction that results in a balancing decision:

<u>RHO</u>	<u>YOU</u>	<u>LHO</u>	<u>PARTNER</u>
1♥	Pass	2♥	Pass
Pass	?		

This is one of the most common decisions you will face. You MAY NOT pass in this situation. Your balancing decision is based mostly on the number of SPADES in your hand.

With four or five spades, you will bid 2S:

♠ Jxxx ♥ Jxx ♦ Kxxx ♣ Qx. It is important to understand that you and your partner own approximately half of the high-card points in the deck. If the opponents held as many as 24 points, they would likely have made a game try. If they have a fit, you have a fit. Yes, it is always possible that they will double and you will suffer a large defeat. But, you will discover that if you pass the auction, you will average less than 20% of the available matchpoints. If you are willing to accept that fact, then you have very little to lose!

If you have three spades, you will double:

♠ Jxx ♥ Jxx ♦ Kxxx ♣ Qxx. This is for takeout and asks your partner to bid a long suit. Your partner will know that you have **exactly** three spades. If your partner has both minors, they should now bid 2NT which asks you to bid your long minor. On a bad day, you'll arrive at a 4-3 spade fit. But you will be able to survive a one or two-trick defeat (if not vulnerable) and still get a better result than you rated to get if you had defended 2♥. If you are worried about playing a 4-3 fit, **GET OVER IT!** It is time that you practice this skill.

If you have two (or less) spades, you bid 2NT which asks partner to pick a minor:

♠ Jx ♥ Jxx ♦ Kxxx ♣ Qxxx. It is going to be difficult for your opponents to gauge the size of your fit. They may either defend without doubling or bid one more time which will increase the likelihood of a plus score for your side. It is not uncommon to find out that both sides can score +110 on these hands.

If the opponents have bid and raised spades in the same auction, the same principles apply if you are not vulnerable. (An experienced player will tend to be nearly as aggressive even if vulnerable.) Some more consideration might be given to vulnerability if you are not as distributional. The only difference is that you will never be bidding a four card suit at the three level. A double will always show a tolerance for hearts and 2NT will still suggest that you are at least 4 - 4 in the minors.

It is very important to understand that the partner of the balancer will NEVER raise a balancing action. The rare exception would be the ability to compete to 3♠ (if the opponents had originally resided in 2♥) provided you have at least five spades and an exceptional hand. Your partner should always presume that you have already seen their hand and have bid as high as the combined hand permit. Once you start raising partner's balancing bids, you will find that your partner will stop balancing!

<u>RHO</u>	<u>YOU</u>	<u>LHO</u>	<u>PARTNER</u>
1♠	Pass	1NT	Pass
Pass	?		

♠ xx ♥ Q9xx ♦ Axx ♣ Axxx. This is a very dangerous auction. You will usually find partner with spade length and your LHO with length in your suits. This is a classic misfit auction and you will frequently be in trouble if you balance. A pass is in order.

It is not uncommon to find partner holding ♠ Kxxxx ♥ Kx ♦ Qxxx ♣ Qx. A balancing double with this hand would lead to a very unpleasant result.

<u>RHO</u>	<u>YOU</u>	<u>LHO</u>	<u>PARTNER</u>
1♦	Pass	1NT	Pass
Pass	?		

This is a slightly different situation. Since your LHO did not bid a major (they will usually do so your opponents will generally have some minor suit fit in this auction. I suggest that you should tend to be very aggressive about balancing here if you have the majors. Many teach that a bid of 2♦ in this position asks partner to choose a major. This is sort of like a mini-Michaels. You will locate a fit most of the time. You should make this bid with a minimum hand such as: ♠ Kxxx ♥ Jxxx ♦ Ax ♣ Jxx. If we do have a fit, we will frequently be "safe" at the two level. Don't forget that we still own approximately half of the points on this hand.

<u>RHO</u>	<u>YOU</u>	<u>LHO</u>	<u>PARTNER</u>
1♥	Pass	1NT	Pass
2♣	Pass	2♦	Pass
Pass	?		

♠ Kxxx ♥ Ax ♦ Kx ♣ Qxxxx. This is not an auction in which you want to enter the bidding! First of all, there is only one suit left. Most importantly, you opponents have not established a fit. They have merely stopped bidding. There is a big difference.

LHO	<u>PARTNER</u>	<u>RHO</u>	YOU
			1♠
	Pass	1NT	Pass
2♣	Pass	Pass	?

♠ xx ♥ Kxxx ♦ Axx ♣ Kxxx. This is another dangerous auction. You should figure there are five spades on your left, one will be in the dummy. Add in your spades and you will quickly determine that partner's long suit is spades. You will frequently find that your RHO will hold length in your suits. Once again, they have not revealed that they have a fit. They have merely quit bidding.

<u>LHO</u>	<u>PARTNER</u>	<u>RHO</u>	<u>YOU</u>
1♠	Pass	1NT	Pass
2♠	Pass	Pass	Pass

♠ Qx ♥ Axxx ♦ Kxx ♣ Jxxx. Once again, they have no "fit". A balance here is very dangerous and will frequently find your RHO with length in your long suits. If they potentially have a misfit, you will be much better off in the long run if you choose to defend.

<u>LHO</u>	<u>PARTNER</u>	<u>RHO</u>	<u>YOU</u>
1♦	Pass	1♥	Pass
2♥	Pass	Pass	?

♠ Jxxx ♥ xxx ♦ Ax ♣ Kxxx. This is very similar to the first auction we discussed. If you have at least four cards in each black suit, it is generally right to double. Many players will take that action even if they are 4-3 in the black suits. The key here is that the opponents have found a fit and you have roughly half the high-card points. You should be aggressive about looking for your fit.

Good balancing decisions will earn you many more matchpoints than they will cost you. You and your partner need to understand that every now and then your decision to balance will lead to zero. But if you keep track of your gains by using the guidelines set forth here, you will discover that you are way ahead. It is important to look at what happens when you DON'T balance with the examples presented here. Learning to balance in the right situations will not only improve your scores, it will serve to frustrate your opponents and earn you respect as a tough competitor!

HAPPY BALANCING!