

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's often 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:

1. You're short in the opponent's suit.
2. You have length and high-card strength in the other three suits.
3. You have a good 5-card or longer suit.
4. 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).

The WORST time to balance is when:

1. You have a very weak hand (fewer than 8 pts.) and/or a weak suit.
2. 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.
3. 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 call 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 pts. and the opponents will have 18-20 pts. (14-16 for opener, 4 for his partner). Subtract your HCP's from your side's 20-22 to determine partner's 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 pts.** With length in their suit, partner would have often bid 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 pts.
- **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+ pts. Vulnerable (or if the opening bid would have forced him to the 2-level), he will often pass with these minimum hands.

Balancing after a Suit Opening Bid (1C/1D/1H/1S - 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** (1D-Pass-Pass-1H) = 8-13 pts., usually a 5+-card suit (but may be a good 4-card suit at the one-level). The better your suit, the fewer pts. you need to bid.
- **1NT** (1D-Pass-Pass-1NT) = About 11-14 pts. with stoppers (or moderate length) in the opponent's suit. If you're vulnerable -- and/or if the opening bid was 1H or 1S -- raise the range to 13-15 (or a poor 16) pts.
- **A jump in a new suit** (1H-Pass-Pass-2S) = 13-16 pts. 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** = for takeout, showing 10+ pts. with shortness in the opponent's suit. A takeout double can also be used to start the description of a better hand (14+ pts.) 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 pts.) or freely bidding a new suit (to show 14+ pts. and a 5+-card suit).
- **Bid of the opponent's suit** (1H-Pass-Pass-2H) = This is called a *cuebid*, and depending on your partnership's preference, it can have one of two meanings:
 - 1 - A two-suited hand (the Michaels convention); **or**
 - 2 - A strong, game-forcing takeout.
- **Jump to 2NT** (1S-Pass-Pass-2NT) = This can also be assigned one of two meanings:
 - 1 - 21-22 pts. balanced; **or**
 - 2 - Unusual, showing length in the two lower unbid suits (this meaning is probably more valuable).

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

A SUIT BID in the passout seat can be whatever you and partner agree -- a natural one-suited hand, a conventional bid showing two suits, etc. Don't worry too much about HCP requirements. It's much more important to have a good suit(s) and playing strength when you balance.

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** can have different meanings at different vulnerabilities.

- **If the opponents are vulnerable and you are NOT**, it can be valuable to play a "light" double that shows as few as 10-12 pts.. If partner has fair strength (8+ pts) and can pass, the reward is great. If partner is weaker and pulls the double to his long suit, you have the safety of being non-vulnerable.
 - **If the opponents are NOT vulnerable**, a double should show a better hand (14+ pts.). Partner will bid or pass accordingly.
 - **If YOU are vulnerable**, a double shows a real powerhouse (a minimum of a "great" 18 pts.). Partner will pass with almost anything.
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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.

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

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** (1H-Pass-Pass-1S / Pass-**2S**) shows a constructive hand (8-12 playing pts.).
- **Competitive raise of partner's suit** (over an intervening bid -- 1H-Pass-Pass-1S / 2H-**2S**) 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+ pts.).
- **Jump raise of partner's suit** (1H-Pass-Pass-1S / Pass-**3S**) 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 pts.. A jump to 2NT = 12-13 pts. A jump to 3NT = 14+ pts.)
- **New suit** (1H-Pass-Pass-1S / Pass-2D) 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 -- 1C-Pass-Pass-1S / Pass-**2C**) can have one of two meanings, depending on your partnership's preference:
 - 1** - Artificial, showing a **very** strong hand and interest in game; **or**
 - 2** - Natural, showing a desire to make that suit trumps. The natural meaning is usually used only if the opponent's opening bid was a minor suit (if he opened a 5-card major, the cuebid of his suit should be artificial).

If partner doubles (showing 10+ pts.):

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 pts.). If partner has a full opening bid, he'll usually bid again.

If partner balances with 1NT (showing 11-15 pts.):

- **Pass** with most fairly balanced hands of up to 10-11 pts.
- **2NT** is invitational, showing about 11-13 pts. not vulnerable (10-11 pts. Vulnerable).

- A **game bid** (1C-Pass-Pass-1NT / Pass-3NT/4H/4S) should show about 14 pts. if you're not vulnerable, about 12 pts. if you're vulnerable.
- **Other responses to 1NT** can follow one of two approaches, depending on your partnership's preference:
 1. "**System off**" -- 2 of a new suit (1C-Pass-Pass-1S / Pass-2D) is to play. A jump in a new suit is forcing. A cuebid of the opponent's suit is Stayman, asking partner for a 4-card major.
 2. "**System on**" -- 2C is Stayman. Other bids, including a cuebid, follow your notrump system (transfers, etc.).

AT THE TABLE

The auction goes 1H by your LHO (left-hand-opponent) - Pass - Pass to you. What is your bid with:

♠Q3 ♥KQ4 ♦AJ87 ♣QJ92 ?

1NT. This is about the strongest hand you should have for a balancing 1NT.

♠984 ♥QJ6 ♦AQ1032 ♣K10 ?

1NT. A 2D bid is also a possibility, but with your balanced shape and heart stopper, 1NT is a better description.

♠K5 ♥64 ♦J102 ♣AJ10854 ?

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

♠QJ93 ♥2 ♦A874 ♣K1032 ?

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

♠AQJ103 ♥754 ♦6 ♣AQJ3 ?

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

♠4 ♥1043 ♦AQ7 ♣AKJ1084 ?

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

♠J ♥QJ84 ♦Q7654 ♣AQ7 ?

Pass. Your long suit is very weak and you have length in opener's suit. Also, they may 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're very weak. Partner's failure to bid suggests that opener has a powerhouse, or that the opponents have a better fit somewhere.

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