

Balancing Over One-Bids

This type of 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.

Here are some guidelines to help you decide if you should balance after a one-bid is passed around to you:

The BEST time to balance is when:

1. You're short in opener'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 weak hand (fewer than 8-9 points) 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.

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 around 20-22 points and the opponents will have 18-20 points. Subtract your high-card points from your side's 20-22 to estimate 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 estimate partner's length in that suit.

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 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 and a 15+-point hand, partner might have overcalled 1NT.

- **Don't ever play partner for more than 17 points.** He won't usually "trap" with a hand this strong, so you don't need to protect him (or a possible game) when you have fewer than 8-9 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. When vulnerable (or if the opening bid would have forced him to the 2-level), partner 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) = 8-14 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** (1D-Pass-Pass-1NT) = About 11-14 points with stoppers (or moderate length) in the opponent's suit. If the opening bid was 1H or 1S, raise the range to 13-15 (it might be a poor 16) points.
- **A jump in a new suit** (1H-Pass-Pass-2S) = 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** = Takeout, 10+ points with shortness in the opponent's suit. A takeout double can also be used to start the description of a better hand (15+ 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 15+ points and a 5+-card suit).
- **Bid of the opponent's suit** (1H-Pass-Pass-2H) = Two-suited overcall (Michaels convention). If the opening bid was 1C or 1D, the cuebid shows 5-5 in the majors. If the opening bid was 1H or 1S, the cuebid shows 5 of the other major and a 5-card minor.
- **Jump to 2NT** (1S-Pass-Pass-2NT) = This can be assigned one of two meanings:
 - 1 - 21-22 points balanced; **or**
 - 2 - Unusual, showing length in the two lower unbid suits (this meaning is probably more valuable).

Balancing after a Notrump Opening Bid (1NT - Pass - Pass - ?)

A SUIT BID in the pass-out seat can be whatever you and partner agree -- a natural one-suited hand or a conventional bid showing two suits. Don't worry too much about high-card strength. It's much more important to have a good, long suit and playing strength when you balance.

Check the vulnerability. Since it's guaranteed that the 1NT opener has some length and defense against your suit, you'll want to have decent strength if you're vulnerable. If you're not vulnerable and the opponents are, you can stretch to bid with .

A DOUBLE in the pass-out 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 12-13 points. 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+ points). Partner will bid or pass accordingly.
 - **If YOU are vulnerable**, a double shows a real powerhouse (at least a "great" 18 points). 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 8-14 points):

Partner usually has less than opening-bid strength, so 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 points).
- **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+ points).
- **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 points. A jump to 2NT = 12-13 points A jump to 3NT = 14+ points)
- **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+ points):

Remember that partner can be relatively light in high-card points. With most hands, respond at the cheapest level possible. Don't jump unless you have at least 10-11+ points.

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

- **Pass** with most fairly balanced hands of up to 10 points. If the opening bid was a major, partner may have as many as 15-16 points, so invite with 10-11 points; bid game with 12+ points.
 - **Play "system on"** -- 2C is Stayman, 2D and 2H are transfers, 2NT is invitational, etc.
 - When deciding whether to pass, invite or bid game: Assume partner will be nearer the top of his range when vulnerable and that the range for his 1NT balance will be a bit higher when the opening bid was a major instead of a minor.
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AT THE TABLE

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

♠KQ3 ♥Q4 ♦AJ86 ♣QJ92 ?

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

♠QJ4 ♥J103 ♦AQ972 ♣K10 ?

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

♠65 ♥K4 ♦J102 ♣AJ10954 ?

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.

♠3 ♥QJ92 ♦A874 ♣K1032 ?

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

♠7 ♥AQJ108 ♦Q54 ♣AK103 ?

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

♠43 ♥J6 ♦AQ7 ♣AKJ1087 ?

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

♠QJ74 ♥7 ♦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 will have the opportunity to find it if you reopen the bidding for them.

♠J973 ♥73 ♦KQ1032 ♣Q5 ?

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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