

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:

The BEST time to balance is when:

1. 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 2C, 2D or 2H or below).
2. The opponents have found a trump fit (they have bid and raised a suit).
3. The opponents have limited their high-card strength (they have willingly stopped in a part score).
4. You have length and high-card strength in the unbid suit(s).
5. 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:

1. You are extremely weak (fewer than 7-8 pts.).
2. You have a strong holding in their suit or you suspect they have a better contract available.
3. 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: 1H-1NT; 1C-1S-1NT-P; 1C-1H-2C-2H; 1H-1S-2D-P .
4. Your honor cards are in the opponents' suits (especially the suit bid on your left).
5. 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 a 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 1C-1H-1NT or 1D-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 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** (1H-Pass-2H-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 2H would be:
♠QJ72 ♥2 ♦AJ76 ♣Q1053 .
- **Suit bid** (1H-Pass-2H-Pass / Pass-**2S**) = 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** (1H-Pass-2H-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 2H, 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.