THE BALANCING ACT

What does “balancing” mean in bridge vocabulary?

You are in the “direct” seat if your RHO (Right Hand Opponent) has made the last bid:

West  North  East  South
   1♣  ?

You are said to be “balancing” when you are in the pass out seat after a bid by your left-hand opponent (LHO).

West  North  East  South
   1♣  Pass  Pass  ?

If you were to pass, the auction would now be all over. If the opponents have opened with one of a suit, you simply must not allow them to play a contract at such a low level. You must either:

- Try to push them to a higher level or
- Try to buy the contract for your side instead of letting them make an easy partscore

The action that you take in the balancing seat is often different from that taken in the direct seat. You should tend to overbid by 3 points when you are in the pass out seat. Just add 3 points to the value of your hand to determine what you should bid. Why do you do this? To protect partner, who may have quite a good hand. For example, your partner would have had to pass after 1♣ on her right with the following hand:

A542
K6
KJ72
Q65

Since the responder to the opening bid has also passed (showing 0-5 points) you can now be more aggressive, since your partner most likely has some goodies.

Let’s practise! In all cases, the bidding has proceeded.

West  North  East  South
   1♣  -  Pass  -  Pass  -  ?

What should you bid on each of these hands:

1. ♠Q2  ♥AJ10  ♦K976  ♣QJ109
2. ♠Q75  ♥A102  ♦KQJ  ♣AJ94
3. ♠Q5432  ♥76  ♦AQ76  ♣87
4. ♠A76  ♥A987  ♦Q1054  ♣42
5. ♠65  ♥AQ4  ♦765  ♣AQJ98
Answers:

1. In direct seat, you would pass. In balancing seat, you should bid 1 N.T. (You have 16 pts for a fleeting instant, having added those 3 points!)

2. Now you really do have 17 H.C.P. In direct seat, you would overcall 1 N.T.: in balancing seat, you will double first and then bid notrumps later.

3. In direct seat, you will pass with this tired, moth-eaten spade suit. In balancing seat, you must overcall 1♠.

4. In direct seat, you will pass. In balancing seat, make a takeout double.

5. In direct or balancing seat, you must pass. Your only decent suit is clubs, and the opponents will have a most unpleasant time in their 1♣ contract.

Some people say that you should consider that you are “borrowing a king” when you balance. Whenever I have taught “balancing” this way, my students always get very fussy about which king they wish to borrow! Thus, I prefer to base actions on “adding 3 points”. You must remember, however, that since you are overbidding in this seat, that your partner must now compensate (as responder to your bid) by underbidding accordingly.

Sometimes the bidding will go 1♥ - Pass - 2♥ Pass

Pass

This is another fine time to balance and apply all of the above rules.

However, it is more dangerous to balance if the opponents have both bid and they have not found a fit:

West  North  East  South
1♣ - Pass - 1♥ - Pass
1N.T. - Pass - Pass - Pass (most of the time)

Bridge is a bidders’ game. Get involved! Don’t let the opponents steal contracts at a low level. Become a feared opponent! Balance! Alex reminds you that the meek shall not inherit the earth.
If the opponents have bid a suit and raised it

e.g.

W    N    E    S
1H    P    2H    P
P    ?

You really must get back into this auction. Even on a skimpy, tired looking five card suit and not many points.

Same with

W    N    E    S
1D    P    1H    P
2H    P    P    ?

You should not sell-out (give up) at the two level.

When they have a trump fit and about half of the available 40 HCP between them, they can usually take eight tricks for their side. The point is that if their side has half the HCP, then so does your side. It is a fact that if their side has a fit, then your side usually does also. So it is up to you to push them around a bit out of their safe two-level contract up to the not-so safe three-level.

This does mean that you will have to be prepared to go to the three-level yourself and you may not make your contract. But often it will mean that the cost of your going down in your contract will be less than if they MAKE their contract if they had been left undisturbed to play their contract at the 2 level. You will strike gold if they bid one more and go to the three level. You will have pushed them higher and that is what balancing is all about...they will be forced to make uncomfortable decisions. Now with luck, you will be able to beat their contract.

Once you manage to push them to a higher level, do not now bid one more yourselves. Pass and Defend and take your plus.

Here are some possible consequences of your aggressive “pushiness!”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YOUR SIDE</th>
<th>PLUS</th>
<th>MINUS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
a) If you let them play at the two-level | 110     |
b) If you bid at the 3 level and make it | 110     |
c) If you bid at the 3 level and go down | 50 or 100 |
d) If THEY bid to the three level and go down | 50 or 100 |
e) If they bid 3 and make it | 140     |
f) If they double you at 3 level | 500     |

So you can see that most of the time, it is right to not let them play a contract in their comfort zone and bid and make their contract. You will be ahead 60% of the time (b, c and d).

You will break even 20% of the time: (e)

Suffer 20% of the time (f). This is the least likely result. Most of the time you will not be doubled.
When is it not smart to balance?

When they may not have a trump fit.

W  N  E  S
1S  P  1NT  P
2D  P  2S  P
P  ?

East most likely does not have a fit in Spades. He is merely taking preference. East may only have two cards in spades. You should not have to race to buy this contract, North.

When they are about to play in their third suit as trumps:

W  N  E  S
1C  P  1H  P
1S  P  2S  P
P  ?

The only suit left is diamonds. Declarer is likely to play this hand on a cross ruff so lead trumps at every opportunity.

THE DELAYED 2NT OVERCALL

If the bidding goes 1H on your right and you bid 2NT, we should all know by now that this does not mean you have a strong balanced hand and 20-21 HCP.

If you have 20-21 HCP and a balanced hand, you must double and then bid NT to show that hand.

If you make a jump to 2NT as an opponent after the opening side has opened with a major, you are showing a hand with 5-5 in the minors. This is called the Unusual No Trump.

1H

This bid is called the UNUSUAL NO TRUMP. It is indeed unusual!!! It tells partner you are 5-5 in the minors and asks her to pick her best minor.

It is different here though…let’s see how this applies to our discussion of delayed intervention in the bidding:

W  N  E  S
1H  P  2H  P
P  2NT

Note that this NOT a jump to 2NT, therein lies the difference. The Unusual NT is always a JUMP in NT by an opponent.

If North had been 5-5 in the minors, he would have bid 2NT early on in the bidding. He wants to bid now and show minors but he only has 4-4. He bids 2NT. It cannot be a real No Trump bid. Not when they have bid and raised a suit. If you had lots of stoppers in their suit, you would be planning to make them play it and go down for a much more profitable score than you making a part score your way.

You have ♠xxx ♥xx ♦KQxx ♣KJ10x  Bid 2NT in Balancing seat after the above auction and partner will choose her best minor suit to bid. Perhaps East West may now push on to 3H. You have driven them one level higher. This is GOOD!!
Here are some practice hands to bid. West is the dealer in all cases.

1. KQ10
   1097
   K98
   A963
   86
   KJ32
   AJ742
   K7
   J7542
   A5
   Q10
   J852

2. KJ654
   AK64
   J
   A
   Q87
   J1083
   983
   J102
   92
   97654
   KQ82
   Q1072
   Q75
   A103
   964

3. Q74
   AQ73
   Q1062
   108
   K52
   AJ8
   98
   642
   983
   K54
   A9632
   KQ75
   10963
   KJ105
   AJ7
   J4

4. K984
   K6
   976
   J1063
   1063
   A2
   1054
   983
   A832
   QJ104
   AQ2
   QJ75
   AQJ72
   K5
   75
5. AKJ3
   Q104
   J83
   K64

1074  85
A     876532
A962   KQ4
J9873   K64
    Q962
    KJ9
    1075
    Q52

1.
W N E S
1D P 1H P
2H P P 2S
?

2.
W N E S
P 1S P 2S
P P 2NT 3S
P P P

3.
W N E S
P P 1C P
2C P P Dbl
P 2H ?3C?

4.
W N E S
P P P 1H
P 1S P 2S
P P 2NT P
3D P P P

5.
W N E S
P 1C P 1S
P 2S P P
2NT P 3D P
P P
With such a lousy suit, North should not make an overcall of 1S in the direct seat. Ditto for South who should not overcall 2C after 1D opener. The delayed bid of 2S shows a poor quality spade suit in North’s hand. EW should not sell out to 2S and should bid one more. NS has done their damage and must not bid again.

N leads D 10. Declarer wins this and draws trump. N must HOP UP with the Ace of trump (saving the baby trumps for ruffing) and now leads a S. South wins the first spade and gives N a D ruff. N leads another S. South wins and gives N another D ruff. Down One

Opening lead: J D. N wins K D and cashes Ace D. When declarer gets in, she draws three rounds of trump, cashes H KQ and ruffs the H loser in dummy. NS gained nothing this time by competing over 2S but SOME EW pairs might give up over 3D and some days 3S might go down.

South cannot make 3 H. That is West’s reward for not selling out to 2H which does make.

3D would also have failed. (2 hearts, 2 clubs and a club ruff)

It is quite common for both sides to fail at the 3 level. These guidelines are not infallible. The success rate is better than 80% which is excellent but there will still be occasions where following the rules will lead to a loss. Since this is rare, ’tis best to abide by the rules.

Some hands and commentary by Ron Klinger.
Bidding Commentary: North's jump to 2S in the balancing seat is strong— not a weak jump overcall. In this position, it shows a strong six card suit with 13-15 HCP. East is not strong enough to get back into the fray and South has enough to raise to game.

Defensive Commentary: West signals with the H8 at trick one and East continues with the King and jack to squash declarer's 10. West ruffs the HQ and returns a diamond.

Play Commentary. Even if the diamond finesse works (and it is a big favorite to fail), declarer still needs the club finesse which figures to work. If the club finesse works, a diamond can be discarded on a winning club. Why take two finesses when only one is needed? North should clearly rise with the DA, draw trump and run the CQ through East. After this holds, a club is led to the jack and the DQ goes off on the CA. Just as the Dr. ordered.

Never take two finesses when one does the work of two.
Dlr: East
Vul: None

North
S. Q95
H. J109732
D. 86
C. A5

West
S. J82
H. 8
D. 75432
C. Q962

East
S. A43
H. KQ
D. AK109
C. J1087

South
S. K1076
H. A654
D. QJ
C. K43

East          South          West          North
1NT        Pass        Pass        2H
Pass        3H        All Pass

(1) 15-17

Opening lead: DA

Bidding Commentary: When the opponents die out at the one level, chances are that the high card points are rather evenly divided between the two partnerships. Translation: If you are in the balancing (passout) seat with a long suit, bid it! North expects to find 10-12 HCP in partner's hand. Partner has a bit more than normal expectation and raises to 3H. North is thrilled to pass.

Defensive Commentary: After cashing the DAK, East exits with the CJ.

Play Commentary: As declarer, try to form the habit of adding your HCP to dummy's HCP. Here, both the good and the baddy guys have 20. In addition, East has at least 15 of those 20 HCP. Win the CA, cross to the CK and ruff a club stripping clubs. Your plan is throw them in with a heart and force a spade return, a suit you would rather not attack yourself. By removing their safe exit cards in clubs, you can force a spade return or a ruff and a sluff diamond return. Next play the HJ to the ace and exit a heart. After East wins he either has to surrender a ruff-sluff or switch to a spade. If he shifts to a spade, you can lose no more than one spade trick. If you had to attack spades, play East for the ace and West for the jack? Why? East has turned up with 13 HCP outside of spades and can't have the AJ (18 HCP) and can't have the jack without the ace (14 HCP). Ergo, East must have the ace without the jack. Elementary, my dear Watson.

If you want to force them to lead a suit you would rather not attack yourself (spades), strip the side suit(s), before giving up the lead in trump.
Opening lead: SK

Bidding Commentary: West's 2D rebid facing a passing partner promises at least 6 diamonds with extras. East is allowed to compete one level with an ace and three card support. East-West make 3D. South has extras for the reopening bid of 1H (only needs 8+ HCP) and should not count the DK. South's distribution makes competing to 3H attractive.

Lead Commentary: Pretty obvious.

Defensive Commentary: East signals encouragement with the S8 (not the 7!), the higher of equals. The S8 also denies the S9. The defense reels off three spades and East switches to a diamond. West plays the ace of diamonds and then queen of diamonds. South ruffing the queen.

Play Commentary: East, a responder who has passed an opening bid, has shown up with 4HCP, the SA. If East had the CQ, he would have had enough to respond. West must have the CQ, so there is no point in finessing. After trumps are drawn, declarer plays the king-ace of clubs hoping the queen is doubleton. Guess what?