

IN THE BALANCING SEAT: WHEN PASS MAY BE YOUR BEST CHOICE

By Maritha Pottenger

1. Always consider the **vulnerability**. It is much more dangerous to enter the auction when your side is vulnerable—particularly over a Weak Two or preempt when you (or partner) would have to bid at a relatively high level.
2. **Three small cards**, or even three to the queen, is a “death holding” in the suit opened on your left. If LHO made a Weak Two and RHO passes, often RHO has a singleton or doubleton and the Weak Two bidder starts with Ace, King, ruff by Weak Two bidder’s partner (often over-ruffing your Dummy).
3. **All suits below the suit opened on your left are “dangerous.”** Bid them at your own risk! Remember, RHO will stretch to bid at the one level, but not at the 2 level. So, when LHO opens a diamond, clubs are a dangerous suit. [With an unbalanced hand, many people will open 1D with four diamonds and five club to avoid reversing or rebidding 1N with a singleton; this makes venturing in with a club bid even more dangerous.] If LHO opens a heart, both clubs and diamonds are dangerous. If LHO opens a spade, then clubs, diamonds, and hearts are all potentially dangerous.
4. Be **very careful** when the opponents have a **misfit and stop in 1NT**. The Opener could have as much as 14 HCP and Responder could have as much as 10 HCP. In addition, you often want to defend misfit hands—not be Declarer.
5. Be **cautious about reopening with length in Opener’s suit**. If you have length, partner often has shortness—and yet couldn’t act. That suggests partner is fairly weak and/or this could be a misfit hand. Passing may be your best option. Particularly with length in Opener’s minor suit, consider that you might be able to set that contract and reopening may allow them to find a superior contract.
6. **Strongly consider a pass when you are missing the major suits**. If you have great shortness in the majors (only 2 or 3 or 4 cards total), it is quite likely that the opponents have a better fit somewhere else. You may be better off passing the minor opening bid (1C or 1D) rather than coming in and then seeing the opponents get to 2H or 2S and take 8 or 9 tricks.
7. **Think about distribution and where honors are likely to be placed**. When LHO preempts, RHO is likely to hold good stuff behind your partner’s cards, so the outlook is less bright for your side. When an auction goes 1D-P-1NT-P-P, the NT bidder probably has 4 or more clubs, but the diamond opener could (conceivably) have 4 cards in one or both majors. The opponents could have as few as 18 HCP or as many as 24 HCP. Most often, they will have a slight majority in HCP strength. When the auction goes 1C by LHO-P-1S by RHO-P by you-1NT by LHO-P-P, there is a good chance that LHO has 4 hearts. So even with 4 decent hearts and 4 diamonds, it may not be right to reopen. The hearts are more likely to be sitting behind you. Also, if you have only 2 spades, partner usually has at least 4 spades, perhaps 5 spades—making a fit with you less likely.
8. **Do not reopen with the wrong shape**. If you make a take-out double with a doubleton in an unbid major, Murphy’s Law practically guarantees that partner will bid that suit and be quite unhappy with the dummy that you provide.
9. **Be more aggressive about reopening when the opponents have found a fit**. If they have a fit, your side is more likely to have a fit. Plus, allowing the opponents to stop at the two level when they have a fit and you have almost half of the points in the deck rarely results in a good board.
10. **If the signs point to a misfit hand, pass is probably best**. Defend; do NOT declare on misfit hands.