

BALANCING

by Maritha Pottenger

A balancing bid occurs when you are in the pass-out seat and an opponent has opened the bidding. Often, it is advisable to bid—hoping to buy or the contract or to push the opponents to a higher level where they might go set. If your LHO opens a suit, partner passes and RHO passes, most of the time your side will have 19-24 HCP and the opponents will have 16-21 points. (LHO could have as few as 11-12 HCP and RHO could have zero, but 13-17 is more likely for LHO and 2-5 for RHO.) You are bidding some of your partner's values when you balance. The general guideline is that you will have a King less (3 fewer HCP) than you would need to make the same bid in the direct seat.

The **best times** to balance are:

- 1) If you are short in the suit your opponent opened. (If you are short, partner may have length that made it harder for him/her to bid in the direct seat.) Assume partner does NOT have more than 15 HCP. If s/he did, partner would probably have overcalled one no trump.
- 2) You have a good 5-card or longer suit.
- 3) You have length and high cards in the 3 unbid suits.
- 4) You are not vulnerable.
- 5) You can bid at the same level (not have to go a level higher to make your bid).

The **worst times** to balance are:

- 1) You have a very weak hand (usually less than 8 HCP) and/or a very weak suit. (With more than 17 HCP, partner will almost always take action, so you don't need to balance with less than 8 for fear of missing a game your way.)
- 2) You are vulnerable.
- 3) You have length in the suit your opponent opened. (If you have length, partner usually has shortness, yet passed. So, partner is likely to be very weak. This is a case where LHO may have been planning to jump shift next bid.)
- 4) The opponents' bidding has indicated a misfit. (Generally, prefer to defend on misfit hands.)
- 5) You are very short in the major suits and LHO opened a minor. Opponents may have a better fit in a major. This is a serious danger at team play where the opponents may bid on to a makeable game.

After one of a suit-pass-pass to you:

Common Cases

1. **Double** with as few as 7-8 points and perfect shape.
 - A. If you double and rebid at the 1-level, you show a good opening hand.
 - B. If you double and rebid at the 2-level or rebid NT, you show about 16-18 HCP.
2. **One no trump** with 11-14 over 1C or 1D with a stopper or reasonable length in the minor; with 11-15 or 16 over 1H or 1S (almost always have a stopper in the major).
3. **Bid a suit at one level:**
 - A. Usually 5 cards. Occasionally 4 cards when double and NT are unsuitable with your hand.
 - B. Occasionally have 7 HCP to balance in. (Usually your range will be 8-13 HCP.)
 - C. Could have as many as 16 HCP and just bid one. With more, double first.
 - D. On close decisions, balance with shortness in opponent's suit. Pass with length.
 - E. May NOT bid longest suit if you have a strong 4-card suit above opener's suit and a weak 5-card suit that you would have to bid at the 2 level. Just want to push opponents up.
4. **Bid a suit at the 2 level (without jumping):**
 - A. 5-card or longer
 - B. Usually 10 HCP or more.

- C. Beware of “missing majors.” Sometimes you don’t reopen with two of a minor because you suspect that opponents might have game in a major (or a better part score). If you are very short in major suits, consider passing hand out.

Rarer Cases

5. **Jump to the 2 level** in a higher-ranking suit:
 - A. Usually a 6-card or longer suit.
 - B. Generally around 11-15 HCP (opening hand that does not excite you). Some people say 13-16 HCP.
6. **Jump to the 3 level in a lower-ranking suit** (usually a minor):
 - A. Usually a 6-card or 7-card suit.
 - B. Better than opening hand.
 - C. Looking for 3NT.
7. **Jump to 3 level in a higher-ranking suit** (usually major):
 - A. Usually 7-card suit.
 - B. Close to opening hand in values
8. **Cue bid** shows a strong hand, offensively oriented hand (could not risk partner passing a double). Usually a one-suited hand with slam interest. Could be 2-suited. Lawrence suggests cue-bid by balancer be played as forcing to 3NT or 4 of a suit. (Some people use the cue bid for a Michaels-type of hand or play it as natural for a minor. Discuss!)
9. Reopening with a **jump to 2NT** should show around 19-20 HCP. NOT UNUSUAL! (If you are a passed hand, you can use the jump to 2NT as unusual if you wish.)

Reopening After One No Trump by Opponent-Pass-Pass

The key here is having good distribution. With shape, compete. Otherwise, pass!

1. Bid with a 6-card suit. You can have very few HCP because partner is marked with strength.
2. Bid with hands that are 5-5 or longer. Mike Lawrence bids 5-5 hands with 3 HCP.
3. Double (unless a conventional treatment) shows same range as no trump bidder or higher and is penalty oriented.
4. Be more cautious re-opening after a weak (e.g., 13-15 HCP) NT than a strong NT (15-17). The partner of the weak NT bidder, the “keeper of secrets”, could have considerable strength and still pass.

Reopening after Both Opponents Have Bid

1. When opponents have found a fit, you are more likely to have a fit. Be willing to compete. Mike Lawrence: *“When the opponents have a fit, it is always safe to reopen with two spades...”* p.44 of *Balancing*
2. When the opponents have not found a fit, be more cautious.
3. When responder raises opener or bids 1NT, all suits below opener’s suit are potentially dangerous, i.e., responder could have length and strength in those longer-ranking suits. Strive to reopen to higher-ranking suits. Do not reopen in lower-ranking suits unless very, very good.

Reopening after a Weak Two Bid

1. Lawrence recommends reopening with 9 or more HCP (with perfect shape) with a double.
2. Bid a suit with 11 or more HCP and 5 cards. Bear in mind that RHO will hold cards behind your partner—especially in any suit in which you have 3 little cards.
3. 2NT (by an unpassed hand) shows 15-19 HCP. 2NT by a passed hand is unusual for minors.
4. Jump bid shows good hand (usually 16+ HCP) and 6-card (or longer) suit. Do NOT preempt a preempt.
5. An immediate 3NT is to play. Usually shows a solid suit and a stopper. Partner is discouraged from bidding a suit.
6. A double followed by 3NT shows a big balanced hand. Partner is allowed to take out to a suit with a very distributional hand.
7. A cue-bid shows a solid suit (source of tricks) and asks partner to bid 3NT with a stopper.

Reopening after a Weak Three Bid

Assume that partner will come down with a random 7 HCP. Base your bidding on that assumption.

1. Can double with around 11 HCP and perfect shape.
2. Can bid a suit at 3-level with 8-17 HCP, depending on shape.
3. Almost never bid a minor suit at 4-level. If you are going to bid, usually better to try 3NT than 4 of minor.
4. 4 of a major shows a 6-card or longer suit and that you expect to make opposite partner's random 7 HCP.
5. 3NT shows either a big, balanced hand or a reasonable hand with a good minor suit (source of tricks).
6. Mike Lawrence recommends that many times, pass is the best choice. Preempts pay off. Don't risk getting your side in big trouble by bidding on marginal hands or making a double with off-shape hands.

BALANCING ACTIONS: BALANCER'S REBIDS

You have made a balancing double and partner makes cheapest response.

1. Raise by you would show a good 14 or more HCP.
2. Cue bid by you shows a good hand, but probably only 3-card support; looking for a NT stopper usually. Probably 18+ HCP.
3. Rebid of 1NT after your double shows 17+ HCP.

You have made a balancing double and partner makes a jump response.

1. If partner jumped to 2 of major (showing 11-13), you should go to game with almost any 13 or more HCP; raise to 3 with 12 HCP; pass with less.
2. If partner jumped in a minor, bid NT with a stopper and around 12 HCP. Otherwise, pass. (5 of minor is very unlikely.)
3. If partner jumps to 2NT, raise to 3NT with any decent 12 or more HCP.

You reopened in a suit and partner raised you.

1. Note whether the raise was "free" or whether the opponents were in the bidding. When the opponents are in the bidding, partner will "stretch" to bid. Don't hang him/her.
2. If you have a very good hand, you can make a game try just as you would in a non-competitive auction.
3. When partner cue-bids, cater to the possibility that it was a strong raise or that partner wants to hear about any stopper you have for NT.