

BALANCING

When playing matchpoint scoring, you seldom get a good result for allowing your opponents to play at the one or two level of a suit. So, you and your partner must be prepared to enter the bidding with less than full opening-hand values and hope to only go down a little (a cheap sacrifice against their part score) or to push the opponents a level higher (where they might go down!).

In the balancing (or pass-out seat), you are assumed to be bidding most of your partner's points. You generally assume that partner has 6-8 HCP. Therefore, **when your partner balances, discount your hand by 6-8 HCP** and then take the appropriate action! If you bid without discounting, you'll consistently go down and partner will be afraid to ever balance again.

Many people will balance at the one level with as few as 8 HCP in the pass-out seat. Others demand 10 HCP or more. A balancing 1NT bid should be in the 10-14 (or some demand 12-14) HCP range and does not necessarily guarantee a stopper (although you usually have one). Mike Lawrence recommends a balancing NT be 11-14 over 1C or 1D, but 11-15 or 16 over 1H or 1S. (Need more strength when opponents have known 5-card suit.) Lawrence suggests a jump to 2NT show 19-20 HCP & guarantee a stopper. A suit promises at least 5 cards. A balancing double (which is always take-out at the one or two level) can be made with around 10 HCP (7-8 HCP with perfect shape) and should promise support for all the unbid suits—especially the unbid major(s).

If you have the appropriate hand for it, making a jump overcall in the balancing seat is perfectly fine. Many people play that the jump overcall is intermediate (6-card suit but 13-15 HCP) in that case rather than simply weak (just as you might open an extra-hefty Weak Two in 4th position after 3 passes). A balancing jump to the 2 level is usually in a major. A balancing jump to the 3 level is usually in a minor & shows good 6-card suit & better than opening hand. You are looking for 3NT. Lawrence suggests that a jump to the 3 level in a higher-ranking suit (than Opener) should show a good preempt

There are times when **balancing is contra-indicated**:

- (1) on **misfit hands**, it is better to defend than declare. If the opponents have not found a fit, it is likely that you and your partner also do not have a fit. You probably do not want to balance in.
- (2) when opener bids a minor and it goes pass-pass to you and **you have length in that minor** and not a very good hand, it is often better to pass. Opener may have been intending to jump shift into 2NT and playing the minor could easily be an inferior spot for them.
- (3) When your side is **vulnerable**, you need to be more cautious. Consider whether you think it likely you might be doubled if you balance in. If so, discretion is the better part of valor.

When the opponents have found a fit, it becomes more likely that your side has a fit, so balancing is usually a good idea. Even if you venture to the 3 level, down 1 undoubled (or even down 2 undoubled, nonvulnerable) will usually give you a better score than allowing the opponents to make their 2-level part score.

If one opponent opens a major and the other opponent goes to 2 of that major and you are in the pass-out (balancing) seat, you should probably double for take-out if you have 10 or more HCP and 4 cards in the unbid major. If you have only two cards in the unbid major, but have 4 cards in one minor and 4 or 5 cards in the other minor, bid 2NT—asking partner to pick a minor. If you have a 5-card suit, bid it at the cheapest possible level. If it goes 1H by one opponent, 2H by the other opponent, pass-pass to you and you have four decent spades, a 2S bid will often work out but it is risky. Many would prefer to double with that holding. Cue-bidding (in the balancing seat) should probably show a strong, very distributional hand (because you did not want to double first)—probably single-suited; perhaps two-suited.