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Balancing at the 2 Level

When balancing will take you to the two level, more discretion is required. Vulnerability becomes an issue; if you are vulnerable and the opponents not, it becomes easier for them to pin the dreaded -200 on you when balancing is wrong. This doesn't mean you should not do it, particularly at matchpoints. It does mean that it's no longer almost automatic as it was at the 1 level.

There are two situations where it may be right to balance at the two level.

RHO opens one of a suit, and LHO opponent raises to two

LHO opens 1NT, followed by two passes.

1. When RHO opens 1 of a suit and LHO makes a single raise, you know the following:

RHO has 11 – 14, and LHO 6 – 9 (probably on average about 20-22)

- Opponents have an eight-card fit, which implies you and partner also have a fit somewhere
- If the opening bid was a minor, LHO does not have a four-card major. This increases the odds that partner has a major fit for you.
- Partner will not have a great hand. Partner could have bid over the raise and did not. Similarly, you did not have the right shape or values to intervene directly after RHO's opening bid.
- Caution! – If opponents are playing inverted minors, and LHO raises a minor to two, this auction has become “dangerous” (see lesson on Dangerous Auctions). The reason for this is that the single raise in a minor when playing inverted minors promises 10-12 points, not 6-9. This leaves much less for partner to have.

This case where RHO makes a single raise of opener's one bid is the most promising for a balancing bid. The lower ranking their suit, the more promising!

After 1C – P – 2C – P

P - ?

If you double partner can bid any suit at the two level.

But after 1S – P – 2S – P

P - ?

If you double partner must bid at the three level. This is one auction where it may be right to sell out, particularly if vulnerable.

At matchpoints we don't want to let them play at the two level when they have shown a fit. Letting the opponents play undisturbed at the two-level when they have a fit will usually result in a poor matchpoint result. (At team play we are not so concerned about giving up.)

Competing by balancing can also win by forcing the opponents to the three-level. In practice at the club level I find the opponents will compete to the three level about 80% of the time. If they make three, you are no worse off (they get the same score); if you beat them one trick at a 3-level contract you have turned a poor score into a plus score.

Almost always when you choose to balance in this type of auction, you will do so with a double. (If you had a good suit of your own you would have overcalled at your first opportunity to bid.) You simply cannot have a hand worth bidding 2NT to play. 2NT here should be unusual for the 2 lower unbid, but do discuss this with partner!

2. LHO opens 1NT, followed by two passes.

This auction is very different from one of a suit – pass – pass, because:

- Opener has 15-17, not 11-19
- Opener's partner can have a balanced 8 count and still pass. This potentially leaves much less for partner, and the more you have, the less partner has.

For this reason, it is often correct even at matchpoints to pass out the opponent's bid of 1NT. To balance on this auction you need a good suit and real values. Remember that the strong hand is sitting behind you and any finesses you need will probably not work. Don't double for takeout with a balanced 12 count!

So after 1NT – P – P - ?

With something like: S-AKJxxx H-xx D-Axx C-xx, its OK to bid 2S. You don't need much from partner to make this. Furthermore, if you pass 1NT partner is unlikely to lead a spade, which may be the only lead to set the contract.

But with S-KJxxxx H-xx D-AQx C -xx, bidding two spades is a lot more dangerous. The missing honors in the spade suit make it much easier for the opponents to double, and it is not clear that a spade lead is best.

With a balanced strong hand, you are probably better to pass and try to beat 1NT. If both you and opener have a 16-count, that leaves only 8 points divided between your respective partners. Unless your partner has all 8 (and they probably don't) you cannot make anything (remember opener is sitting behind you and none of your finesses will work, even if you can get to the dummy).

