



By: Don Rogers

Balancing at the 1 Level

If you can make a balancing bid at the 1 level, then your LHO has made a one bid in a suit, and both your and opener's partner have passed. In this case you can deduce a great deal about the likely deal by looking at your own hand. You know the following things:

- Opener has 11 – 19 points. Usually, opener will have 13-14.
- Opener's partner has less than 6 points.
- Your partner probably did not have a strong suit of his own, or he would have overcalled.
- Your partner did not have a strong NT type hand (he would have doubled for takeout without a stopper, or bid 1 NT with a stopper).
- Partner might have an opening count with a distribution unsuitable for a takeout double (long in opener's suit).
- If you have a 10 – 14 count, partner probably has a 9 – 12 count, and your side probably has a makeable part-score contract.
- Unless you have a strong NT or better, your side is very unlikely to have a game. Therefore, the objective is to find a good low-level contract.

At matchpoints you will almost always get a terrible result for letting the opponents play in one of a suit. Either they make their contract, or you find that you could have made more points by declaring. Therefore in this situation it is almost automatic to balance at matchpoints, and even at teams it is usually right.

The following table shows the standard bids in the balancing seat after LHO opens one of a suit.

Conventional Bids in Balancing Seat

Your Hand	Bid
10 – 16, decent 5 card or longer suit	Bid your suit
Balanced 11 – 14, with no stopper	Double
Balanced 11 – 14, with stopper	1NT
Balanced 15 – 17	Double, then rebid 1NT if possible
18 or more	Double then bid a suit

Before we get to some examples, we need to talk in some detail about what a balancing bid of 1NT means. Based on what I've seen happen at the Center, many players believe that when partner balances with 1NT, partner has the same hand as if they had opened 1NT (15-17). Some would probably announce just like you would with an opening 1NT. Furthermore, some would argue that a 2D or 2H bid by you is a transfer, although you might be unsure about that.

In standard American or 2/1, this idea is just wrong. In either system, 1NT in the pass out (balancing) seat shows a balanced 11-14 count. The strong NT hand in the balancing position is shown by doubling, then rebidding 1NT (if possible).

Examples:

In each case, LHO deals and opens 1C, and the next two players pass.

1. S-Ax H-KQxxx D-Qxx C-xxx

Bid 1 Heart. You should still bid 1H even without the spade Ace. Remember that the less you have, the more partner is likely to have.

2. S-xx H-Kxx D-AQxx C-Axx

Bid 1NT. All responses by partner are natural (not transfers), unless you and partner have agreed otherwise. If 2C is Stayman, it should be alerted.

3. S-Kxxx H-Kxx D-AQxx C-xx

Double for takeout. This is very similar to a takeout double in the direct seat – you will be happy with whatever suit partner chooses. Game is not impossible.

4. S-Kxxx H-Kxxx D-Kxxx C-x

Double for takeout. Super shape, and there is a possibility that partner has a good hand with 6 or 7 clubs (in which case they may choose to pass for penalty).

5. S-Kx H-Kxx D-AQxx C-KQxx

Double, and plan to bid 1NT after partner responds. This is how you show a really good balanced hand (equal to a 1NT opener) with stoppers.

6. S-AKQxxx H-xx D-AQ C-KQx

Double, and then bid spades. Just like a direct takeout double, making a double here and then bidding a suit shows a big hand with a fine suit. Partner should raise to game

unless they are broke or void in spades.



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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).



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Balancing After Preempts

Modern duplicate style is to preempt very light, and sometimes with terrible suits, particularly at matchpoints. So sometimes the auction will go:

LHO - weak 2 bid (or 3-bid) - P – P -?

And you will be looking at a decent hand. (Note that in this auction preempt bidder will be the dealer; otherwise you could have opened the hand. If you don't have an opening hand or better, you should not balance.)

This is an auction where you need real values and good shape to compete in the pass out seat, in particular because partner is unlikely to have a great hand. Having said that, we cannot afford to let the opponents rob us blind!

After LHO opens a weak two bid you know the following:

- Opener has a six-card suit and 5 – 10 points
- Partner chose not to take action directly over the 2-bid, so they do not have a great hand. (With a 16+ hand and stoppers partner should bid 2NT; with a good hand and a suit of their own they should overcall.)
- RHO may have a good hand with a poor fit for opener's suit.

It also depends on the suit of the preempt. When LHO opens 2 diamonds, either you or partner can still bid a major at the two-level. When the opening bid is 2S, you will be at the three level, which is much more dangerous.

Examples:

After 2D – P – P - ?

With: S-KQxx H-KQxx D-x C-Axxx, it is clear to double. Partner can bid either major at the two level, and if partner bids 3C they will have a five-card club suit.

With: S-AKxxx H-KQx D-x C-xxx at matchpoints go ahead and bid 2S. It may not always work out, but you will probably be OK

With S-AKx H-KQx D-xxx C-Qxxx, probably best to pass. Your 3 small diamond holding is the worst possible, and suggests that RHO is short in diamonds. If you double, partner may end up playing a 4-3 fit.

With S-Kxx H-KQx D-AQ C-AQxxx, consider bidding 2NT (natural). This is not safe if partner is broke, but you can't let the opponents steal you blind. (Note that double here would be takeout, not penalty.) Partner should take you for this kind of hand, and you should go quietly if partner bids a suit. Remember that if they had a good suit they would have bid directly, so when they take you out of 2NT they are just trying to find a makeable contract.

After 2S – P – P - ?

You need a really good hand to take a call here. If you bid a suit, partner should take you to game with a fit and a couple of working cards. You need a hand good enough to make it when partner raises.

For example, after 2S – P – P – 3H

P - ?

Partner should bid 4H with something like: S- Kxx H- Qx D-xxxx C-Kxxx

So you need to have something like S-xx H-AKJxxx D-Kx C-AQx to bid 3H.

After a 3-level preempt the same considerations apply, taking into account that you will be at the three level. If the opening preempt is 3 spades, you will be at the four level!



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Dangerous Auctions – When Not to Balance

Some auctions are inherently “dangerous”, either because you know that partner will not have values, or because you have no expectation of a fit. In general, you should not balance when the opponents are in one of these auctions – better to sit quietly and hope you can beat their contract.

Dangerous auctions are of two types – 2/1 auctions and preference auctions.

In Standard American, a direct 2-level bid by responder shows at least 10 points. After an auction like:

1H – P – 2C – P
2H – P – P – ?

The opponents have a minimum of 22 points with no heart fit. Partner will not have the 8-10 points you need to make a balancing bid make sense. Furthermore, you have no reason to expect a fit, since the opponents do not. You can pass here without even looking at your hand.

If the opponents are playing 2/1 as game forcing, don't even think about balancing if they stop short of game. Partner will have nothing, and the hand is a misfit.

Do not confuse “preference” auctions with true fit auctions. Particularly when opponents play 2/1, auctions like this are very common:

1H – P – 1NT – P
2C – P – 2H – ?.

This does not really show a fit. Responder may have only 2 hearts, and is just taking a preference to opener's first suit. A 2/1 pair would have this auction with the following hands:

Opener: S-KJxx H-Kxxxx D-x C-AQx

Responder: S-Qxx H-Qx D-Kxxxx C-xxx

If you bid 2 spades expecting partner to have spades you may be disappointed.

The situation can be even worse when opener bids 1S, because responder can be long in any other suit.

For example, the auction could well be

1S –P - 1NT – P

2C –P - 2S - ?

if responder had any of the following hands:

S-Qx H-Q10xxx D-Kxx C-xxx

S-Qx H-Kx D-Q10xxx C-xxx

Or even

S-Qx H-Kxx D-xxx C-Q10xxx

If you have a hand that is tempted to balance in on this type of auction, you probably should have made an immediate overcall. Doubling here (inviting partner to bid a red suit), could be a disaster. Remember that if the opponents have a misfit, you probably do also.



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Responding to Partner's Balancing Bid

The first thing to remember is that balancer is counting on you having something like 8-10 points. Unless you have substantially more than that, don't get excited!

CASE I: Opening bidder passes

A. Partner balances with a double

If you have a decent 5 card minor suit, or even a decent four card major that you can bid at the one level, do so. If you have good controls in opener's suit, you can bid 1NT if you have a little extra. Unless you have a monster trump suit (probably a minor such as QJ10xxxx) you may not pass.

Examples:

Opener bids 1D – P – P - X by partner, and opener passes.

1. S-Ax H- KQxx D- Qxx C-xxxx, bid 1H
2. S-xxx H-Kxx D-xx C-AKxxx, bid 2C. Not completely safe, but you don't have any other options.
3. S- xx H-Kxx D-AQxx C-Axx, bid 1NT. You couldn't take a bid on your first shot because you are not good enough for a direct 1NT overcall, but now you can!
3. S-xx H-Kxx D-AQJ9xx C-xx, this is what a penalty pass looks like. Even better if opponents are vul and you are not. Same rules for a pass as if partner had made a direct takeout double.

B. Partner balances with a suit bid

This is pretty simple – if you have a fit and the expected 8-10 points, raise to the two level. This will help prevent the opponents from competing. If you don't have a fit, pass. If you have a super fit and some extra values, cue bid the opponents suit.

Examples:

Opener bids 1D – P – P - 1H by partner, and opener passes

1. S-Ax H-KQxx D-xxx C-xxxx, bid 2H. This will help prevent LHO from backing in with 1S, allowing opponents to discover their spade fit. Partner should pass unless they are on a big hand.

2. S- Qxxx H- xx D-xx C-AKxxx, pass is probably best. You have no extra values, and if partner cared about spades they would probably have balanced with a double. You have no particular reason to expect a club fit.

3. S-AQx H- Kxx D- xxx C-Axxx, bid 2D. If partner just rebids 2H, pass. Game is possible if partner has an opening hand. You could have made a takeout double your first opportunity, but you didn't.

C. Partner Balances with 1NT

Remember that this shows 11-14, and that your bids are natural and non-forcing. If you have a decent 5 card major suit, you can bid it. With a 5-card minor suit, better to play NT. If you have 12 or more, you can invite game.

Opener bids 1D – P – P - 1NT by partner, and opener passes.

1. S-Ax H-KQxxx D-xx C-xxxx, bid 2H. Partner should have at least 2, and maybe 3, hearts.

2. S-Qxxx H-xx D-xx C-AKxxx, Pass 1NT should be an excellent contract.

3. S-AQx H-Kxx D-xxx C-Axxx, Bid 2NT! Partner should bid 3NT with a maximum.

CASE II: Opening Bidder Takes another bid

Unfortunately, the opponents do not always go easily. Often the opening bidder will either rebid their suit (showing 6), or bid a second suit at the 2 level (probably 5-5 in their suits). In either case the same general principles apply, but you need a lot more stuff to bid at the 2 level! If you have a random eight count best to pass. Remember that partner will now get another chance.

CASE III: Opener Passes after a Single Raise and Partner Doubles.

As with CASE I, you must bid unless you have a spectacular trump holding. Bid your best suit. Partner should have some support for it.

CASE IV: RHO opens a Weak two bid, and Partner Doubles

Unless you have a spectacular holding in the opponent's suit, you will bid your best suit, giving preference to a major suit. With a great holding in opponent's suit, you can pass for penalty.