

Balancing

Until now the term balance has been applied to the form of a hand – a balanced hand meaning no voids and at most one doubleton – but there is a second meaning to the term balance. Consider the following auction: $1\spadesuit - P - P - ?$. If the player in the fourth seat Passes the auction is over and the opponents likely have a very easy part score contract. Let's consider what information the two Passes conveyed, in particular the Pass by the Partner of the opening bidder. His Partner told him that he has opening points and invited him to join the bidding. Most Responder's will definitely bid if they hold 6+ HCP and may even try to find a bid even with a 5 good HCP and/or a distributional hand with support for his Partners suit. One conclusion we can definitely draw from this is that our Partner didn't have a 5-Card suit and 10 HCP (required for a 2-level Overcall). If the Openers suit had been something less than $1\spadesuit$, Partner might even have 10-11 HCP but still not have the necessary 5-Card suit for the Overcall. In this type auction you might have a 5-Card suit but not the points required for an Overcall (8-9 HCP for the 1-level and 10-11 for the 2-level) and so you might be tempted to Pass. Let's analyze this situation a bit more. The Opener didn't show a fist-full of HCP (he didn't open 2NT or $2\clubsuit$), you know your point count is meager, and the responder indicated he didn't have even 6 or a good 5 HCP. The points have to be somewhere – there is a very good chance that Partner has some values but didn't have a 5-Card suit required for an Overcall in the Direct seat. Partner might even have 12+ HCP but could not use the TOD. This should be an incentive to bid something rather than sell the contract out at the 1-level. If you bid it is called a balancing bid or balancing Overcall (balancing from the premise that the HCP count is roughly balanced between the two Partnerships) and this means that a 1- or 2-level contract is likely available to (and make-able by) both sides.

How many HCP do you need to do a balancing bid? You shouldn't be surprised to hear that, in the Balancing (or Pass-Out) seat, you need fewer points than you would to either Overcall or exercise a TOD. How much fewer? There is an expression that says “you should borrow a K(ing) from your Partner. This means you could bid a 5-Card suit with as little a 5-6 HCP (recall an Overcall in the direct seat requires 8-9 HCP; and to exercise a TOD you only need 9+ HCP. Of course the TOD still requires that you can support any suit other than the Openers suit i.e. you should have at least 3 cards in the unbid suits. The preferable distribution would be 4-4-3-2 where the 2-card suit is the Openers suit. Its called a Balancing Double; but with a 5-Card suit you should “balance” with as little as 5-6 HCP (borrowing a K from Partner to get to 8-10).

Bidding with so few points might seem scary or careless but consider this. If Partners Pass was indeed a result of a weak hand, the Opener will have a better than minimum opening hand and has only three options: (1) Pass, and give you the contract (2) Rebid in order to take the contract away from you or (3) Double. OH NO, not the dreaded Double! Relax! Openers Double is a Reopening Double usually showing a bigger than minimum hand, a 5-Card (not 6-Card) suit and demanding that his Partner bid. The Double is, in its effect, like a TOD and Opener's Partner is certainly compelled to bid – to take you 'off the hook'.

Regardless of (1) (2) or (3) you have, with your meager hand, forced the opponents to a higher level. This bid should be viewed as a friend by all those who complain that they are never dealt anything but 6-9 point hands.

Mel Colchamiro gives us the “Rule of Two” which applies after LHO opens 1NT followed by two Passes. If you don't use one of the “Interfering” Conventions such as D.O.N.T. or Capelletti or you have a hand which doesn't fit your Convention you should still bid if you have Two or more shortness points regardless what your HCP count is and no matter the vulnerability. Partner, who couldn't bid with 14 HCP (to go with your ~ 5-6) should not go crazy. Now here's the strangest part of the idea. With a balanced hand, in the balancing seat, like $\spadesuit Axxx \heartsuit Kxx \diamond Kxx \clubsuit Kxx$ (with no shortness points) you should Pass. You have the majority of the theoretical 18-21 HCP that your side should have, but with the stronger hand on your left your “winners” mostly fitness-able.