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Ask Jerry

Balancing – part 1

Dear Jerry,
I sort of understand the concept of “balancing” in certain situations. I think “sort of” is the operative phrase. Could you provide some guidance?

Unbalanced

Hi Unbalanced,

Yours is a good question about an important concept in bridge that deserves enlightenment.

The purposes of a balancing action are multiple:

- You may reach a level and denomination where a plus score is available.
- You may reach a level and denomination where going down is less than what you would give up by defending.
- You may push the opponents to a higher level, giving you a better chance to defeat their contract.

Consider the following auctions where you are faced with a decision in the passout seat (m= minor; M= major):

A	1m	Pass	Pass	?
B	2M	Pass	1M	Pass
			Pass	?
C	1m	Pass	1M	Pass
	2M	Pass	Pass	?

In each of these auctions, without looking at your hand, how many points do we rate to have? No, this is not a trick question!

In the first auction, the 1m opening bid is generally between 12 and 19 points. Responder's pass is typically 0–5 points. If opener's medium is around 16, and responder's medium

is around 4, their total rates to be around 20. Guess what? We rate to have around 20!

In the second auction, 1M = 12–19 points, the simple raise to 2M = 6–10 points. If opener had a maximum opening, he would jump to game. If he held a medium opening, he would invite. By passing, he confirms around 12–14 points. Responder's simple raise has a medium of around 8. Once again, in this auction, we rate to hold around half the deck.

In the third auction, 1m = 12–19 points, 1M = 6 or more points. A raise to 2M shows a minimum opening bid. When responder passes, he is also minimum because with an opening bid, he would bid game. With 11 or 12, he would invite game. Once again, the auction suggests the values on this deal are somewhat equally divided.

Auction **A** is a little tricky. In second seat, your partner did not overcall or make a takeout double. With this in mind, it is still often right to take some action in the passout position. If you have a normal overcall, make it. If you have a normal takeout double, make it. But on occasion you should take action despite less than perfect values. Examples:

1♣ Pass Pass ?

♠K 5 4 3 ♥K 8 6 2 ♦A 6 3 ♣5 2

It would be a stretch to make a takeout double in the direct seat, but clear to double in the passout seat based on the probability that *we* rate to own half the deck.

With either of the following, I would overcall a 1♣ opening in the passout seat.

♠K 9 7 6 2 ♥A 4 ♦Q 7 4 2 ♣6 2

♠A Q ♥9 8 6 5 3 ♦A 3 2 ♣8 6 2

Although some might bid 1♠ in the direct position first, I would tend to pass, with minimal values and a poor suit. On the second, overcalling 1♥ in the direct seat would be unthinkable, but I would gut it up and bid 1♥ in the balancing seat.

Even with values, it's not always right to balance. Be particularly careful when you are short in one or both majors. Examples:

1♦ Pass Pass ?

Holding:

♠4 ♥Q 8 7 4 3 ♦A 10 9 4 ♣A 8 3

Despite 10 HCP, the singleton spade coupled with partner's pass and the probability that he doesn't have a lot of diamonds makes me lean towards passing. Where is the spade suit? Opener probably has a strong opening bid, and I don't want them to find spades. Defending 1♦ feels right ... but it might not be.

1NT in the passout seat is typically 12–14 points. Example:

♠K 7 4 ♥Q 5 3 ♦A J 7 ♣J 10 5 4.

I would tend to bid 1NT over any bid on my left to keep us in the auction. By agreement, you may play “systems on” or natural by advancer. Start with this, but ultimately, there is a difference between balancing with 1NT over a major suit opening bid as opposed to a minor suit.

We'll continue this discussion next time with the auctions where the opponents have tried to stop in two of a major. ☺