Larry and the Law

Balancing

High-card points have nothing to do with it. If the opponents have stopped in 2♥, we should have approximately half the points in the deck. Otherwise, they would have been trying to get to game. Even if I have 6 or 7 high-card points, I still know our partnership has roughly 20 combined points – half the 40 high-card points in the deck. When I have 6 or 7 points, partner likely has 13 or 14 points with a hand unsuitable to enter the bidding earlier.

Furthermore, if I bid, partner should realize that I’m bidding just to avoid letting the opponents play at the two level in their eight-card fit. Partner is not going to jump to game, even with the values for an opening bid.

In the balancing position, I can bid with a bad five-card suit that would be unsuitable for a direct overcall. If I don’t have a five-card or longer suit, I can make a takeout double with shortness in hearts. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEST</th>
<th>NORTH</th>
<th>EAST</th>
<th>SOUTH</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2♥</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Yes. However, when the opponents have found an eight-card fit and are about to play at the two level, top players know that they can’t afford to let them stay in that contract … despite the risks of bidding.

Double. It’s a little dangerous to double but the goal is the same: to get them out of 2♥.

When we make a balancing call in this position, any one of three good things might happen:

1. We reach a contract we can make.
2. We go down in our contract but lose only 50 or 100 points instead.
of the 110 or more points they would receive for making their contract. This small difference is crucial at matchpoint duplicate.

3. We may push them a level higher and then defeat them.

In the balancing position, we bid aggressively on hands we wouldn’t dream of acting on in direct position. This is especially comfortable when the opponents’ suit is hearts because we may find a spade fit at the two level. When their suit is spades, we’ll have to go to the three level, but it’s the same philosophy. The potential gain more than outweighs the risk.

Use the same strategy if playing matchpoint duplicate or a team game. Try to be a little sounder if vulnerable – after all, we don’t want to be minus 200 points when they can make only 110 points – but don’t be overly concerned about vulnerability.

The Unusual Balance

In balancing position, we overcall with a single suit or double with support for the other three suits, but what do we do with a two-suited hand? The answer is to use the “unusual” 2NT bid. This says nothing about wanting to play in notrump. It merely says we have a two-suited hand, typically with both minor suits.

WEST  NORTH  EAST  SOUTH

2♠  Pass  Pass  ?

♠ 8 6  2NT. Since I passed over 1♥, partner knows I don’t have the values for a 1NT overcall or more, so this must be an unusual notrump bid asking partner to bid one of the minor suits, clubs or diamonds. Partner knows not to bid hearts since I didn’t make a takeout double. Hopefully, we can find a spot to play in 3♣ or 3♥, or push the opponents to 3♠.

Balancing in the Direct Seat

Although the usual definition of the balancing position is when the auction will be over if we pass, there is a situation where I consider “balancing” in the direct position. Suppose I’m South and the auction begins:

WEST  NORTH  EAST  SOUTH

1♥  Pass  2♥  ?

If I pass and West passes, partner, North, will be in balancing position. It may be difficult for partner to make a balancing call if partner has length in hearts – three or more cards. So, if I’m short in the heart suit, I like to strain to bid even in the direct position.

Marty Bergen had a very cute mnemonic for this. He called it OBAR BIDS: if the Opponents Bid And Raise, Balance In Direct Seat. It’s a nice way to remember the concept.

What I teach is to really go crazy in this position ... throwing the usual guidelines out the window. Be very aggressive. The opponents have found a fit and, if we pass, there are two things that are likely to happen and both of them are bad for us:

1. It may go all pass. I consider this a disaster since we’ve violated the competitive philosophy by letting the opponents play comfortably in their eight-card fit at the two level.
2. They may continue to game and now we’ve lost the opportunity to make a lead-directing call or perhaps find a profitable sacrifice.

WEST  NORTH  EAST  SOUTH

1♥  Pass  2♥  ?

♣  K Q 10 9 7  2♣. Textbooks will say we can’t overcall at the two level in the direct position with only 6 points.
♥ 7 3
♦ J 10 8 5
♠ 8 4

Nonsense. This is an OBAR bid. We have to alert our opponents and tell them that this could be a weak bid in this situation, but that doesn’t prevent us from trying to stop them from having a comfortable auction.

Double. If we pass, they will likely stop in 2♥. So, we double. It’s light. It’s aggressive. It’s good bridge.

The whole philosophy of balancing goes against the standard maxims about having a good suit to overcall or the values for an opening bid to make a takeout double. However, balancing is a proven winning strategy. If the opponents have found an eight-card fit at the two level, we need to act, and the person with shortness in the opponents’ suit is the one who needs to do the acting.

When Not to Balance

We can’t be too aggressive if the opponents may not have found an eight-card fit. Consider this auction:

WEST  NORTH  EAST  SOUTH

1♠  Pass  1♥  Pass
2♥  Pass  Pass  ?

The opponents have stopped at the two level, so it’s likely we have about half the points. However, there’s no guarantee the opponents have found an eight-card fit. West has shown a six-card suit but East may have no spades. In this type of situation, we shouldn’t be too aggressive in entering the auction. If the opponents don’t have a fit, we may not have a fit either.

WEST  NORTH  EAST  SOUTH

1♥  Pass  1♥  Pass
2♥  Pass  Pass  ?

The opponents probably have an eight-card fit, but be aware of the danger. West might have raised with three-card support and the opponents could be in a seven-card fit. Also, the opponents have bid two suits, so the possibility we have a fit is reduced.

When Partner Balances

If we’re going to follow a competitive philosophy of trying to stop the opponents from playing comfortably at the two level in their eight-card fit, both partners have to be aware that this is our style. If partner makes a balancing bid, we don’t want to punish partner’s effort.

WEST  NORTH  EAST  SOUTH

1♥  Pass  2♥  Pass
Pass  2♣  Pass  ?

♣  J 8 7
♥ K 8 3
♦ K J 8 5
♠ A Q 2

Pass. We might have the best hand at the table, but partner is expecting us to have something because the opponents stopped at the two level. Remember, partner didn’t overcall 1♠ and may have only 6 or 7 points and a poor five-card suit.

Balancing effectively gains many points. Don’t let the opponents play at the two level in an eight-card fit!