

Balancing in 4th position

This is the procedure where a player will re-open the auction with a bid or a double when the opposing bidding has stopped at a low level. Typically:

(1H) – P – P - ?

The designation Balancing Seat is common in the bridge community to describe the player, who has the option of either passing in the pass-out position, which would end the auction, or to take some action in order to increase the level of play either by the opponents and/or to compete for his/her side.

The normal overcalling values are reduced in this position. Why? In order to compete on many hands, the value of the 4th hand is increased by a king. This king is borrowed from partner's hand! Therefore, when partner decides what to bid he must deduct a king from the value of his hand.

When **balancing**, the normal range of strength, for suit overcalls, is:

1-level: 8-13 points

2-level: 10-15 points

See **Balancing with 1NT** for values of all no-trump bids.

After a suit opening

W	N	E	S
1♦	P	P	?

East's hand is known to be extremely weak, otherwise East would have responded. Therefore, South can **balance** with a hand of medium strength on the assumption that his partner has unrevealed strength.

The normal range for a simple suit bid by South in this situation would be from a minimum of 8 HCPs to a maximum of 13 HCPs. The ♠ suit is particularly significant. Possession of ♠s favours a balancing action, and lack of ♠s suggests against it – because the opposition may have a better place to play!

In more general terms, a shortage in an un-bid suit, especially a major, militates against balancing, and a shortage in the suit of the opponents favours balancing.

After the following auction:

W	N	E	S
1♦	P	P	?

♠ 3
♥ AQ64
♦ KJ53
♣ Q642

South has sufficient strength to bid 1 ♥, but that would be dangerous and risky. The opponents almost certainly have a ♠ fit, which they are likely to discover if given the opportunity. It is perhaps better policy to allow them to play in 1♦ which will more than likely be a poor contract for them, especially by unfavorable vulnerability. Realizing that West has a very strong hand, close to half the values in the deck, the tendency is to pass.

After the following auction:

W	N	E	S
1♠	P	P	?

♠ 3
♥ AQ64
♦ KJ53
♣ Q642

But if the opening bid is 1♠, a balancing action would be considered just about automatic. A double would indicate 4♥s and at least 3-card support in the other two unbid minors. It is now probable that:

- East-West are in their best denomination.
- North and South have a fit somewhere.
- North has some strength.
- West has an Opening bid and South has 12 high card points; where are the other high card points?

North will frequently pass a strong hand with length and strength in the suit of the opponents. West has 5♠s, South has 1♠, East is unable to respond. There are 7♠s not accounted for, and this means that if South doubles, North may pass if he holds 5/6 good♠s.

But, in this situation, if South holds length and strength in suit of West, which is ♠s, then he should pass. A double would invoke a forced response by his partner, which would be an undesired effect.

Balancing takes some logical thinking and maths.

W	N	E	S
1♠	P	P	?

♠ 3
♥ AQ6
♦ KQ9853
♣ Q64

If South jumps in a new suit, he shows a hand too good for a simple balancing bid, in general a six-card suit or longer and about 12-16 HCPs. Therefore, in the example above, South would:

- Count his high card points, 13, and
- Count the length of his longest suit, 6, and
- Make a jump bid of 3♦ to inform his partner that he has a holding with the required length and strength in the suit bid.
- Also be communicating the fact that his holding is much too strong for a simple balancing bid.

The fact that North has already passed in the above example does not mean that the partnership should not reach a game contract. The fact that East has passed and not supported his partner's opening may strongly indicate that North may hold several stoppers and sufficient high card points to bid a game contract in No Trump, providing that North holds sufficient entries to the long ♦ suit held by his partner, South. This is a matter for the partnership agreement since the range shown by South is between 12 and 16 high card points, but the distribution should also be seriously considered.

Balancing with 1NT

Normally a 1NT overcall would show 16-18 in 2nd position, but in 4th position the values are reduced to 11-14.

♠ K8
♥ Q102
♦ KJ976
♣ KJ5

You hold this hand. LHO opens 1♣ and this is passes round to you.

What do you bid? Partner did not bid over 1♣ but he must have some values but probably not a five-card major. If you double then he will probably bid a 4-card major. But 1NT is likely to be the best spot and if you bid 1NT having first doubled, partner will take you for a stronger hand.

Hand A	Hand B	Hand C	Hand D
♠ K8	♠ K8	♠ AQ	♠ A8
♥ Q102	♥ QJ10	♥ Q102	♥ AJ2
♦ KJ976	♦ AQ976	♦ AQ976	♦ AQ976
♣ K95	♣ K95	♣ KJ5	♣ KJ5

With all of hands A-D you would like to bid no trumps. The problem is that we need to be able to show a balanced hand (with a stop) in the balancing seat with a wider range of points than in the direct seat and there simply are not enough bids available to do it very accurately. The common treatment is:

Hand A:	11-14	1NT
Hand B:	15-16	dbl followed by 1NT
Hand C:	17-18	dbl followed by 2NT
Hand D:	19-20	2NT

Note: that a pre-emptive **Unusual 2NT** is not needed in the balancing seat and so the 2NT overcall can be used to help to fill in the large point spread.

After a suit opening and response

The most important consideration is whether the opening side seems to have a fit. If the opening bid is raised to the Two Level and the opener then passes, **balancing action** is strongly indicated, especially if the opening bid was in a Minor suit.

W	N	E	S
1♣	P	2♣	?

♠ AJ53
 ♥ KJ42
 ♦ J53
 ♣ 64

In this situation South should **balance** with a **double**, showing at least:

- 8+ high card points, and
- 3 card support in the un-bid suits.

The double by South also strongly indicates that the holding contains both 4-card majors. Modern bidding practices allow, however, that one major suit may contain only a 3-card suit, but that the values held should be mainly in the major suits.

In the above example, an affordable risk, even if partner responds in the un-bid minor. If North does bid 2 ♦s, then South should PASS. Partner knows that a balancing double of a minor infers values in the majors.

When one side has a fit, their opponents are almost sure to have a fit also. If the opening bid was 1 ♦, and was raised to 2 ♦, **balancing action** would still be called for. For this reason many players, after opening, continue to three of the minor suit as a pre-emptive maneuver to forestall any balancing action.

Balancing after a major has been raised

If a major suit has been opened and raised:

- Balancing action is desirable in theory but more difficult in practice
- The player who balances must be prepared for his side to land at the 3-level
- Partner of a balancing action will suspect a 4-card suit in the other major

Vulnerability

Any Balancing Action must be considered under the aspects of the state of vulnerability and the successful chance to find a fit almost immediately.

If you follow these guidelines with your partner, then your partner will almost always understand the line of communication, and will be able to respond accurately, without taking you to any unfavourable bidding level, trying to find that fit, and discovering that you have exceeded your bidding level.

Strength and values for overcalling

One of the more important aspects of balancing for the bridge player is the question regarding the minimum number of values necessary to initiate a balancing action.

Mike Lawrence, early in his publication presents an example with the corresponding clarification, which addresses this question.

Example 1:

West	North	East	S
1♣	P	P	?

♠ 10654
♥ KJ107
♦ K983
♣ 3

Quoted explanation:

'Even vulnerable, this is a fine double. You should feel no qualms about this. '

End quoted text.

Example 2: Vul.vs.Non-Vul.

West	North	East	S
1♣	P	P	?

♠ 8765
♥ K1093
♦ QJ82
♣ 3

Quoted explanation:

'You would want to double with this hand. Your shape is ideal, and your few values are working.'

End quoted text.

I'm not sure about these examples from Mike Lawrence; but he is world class and I'm not!