

Balancing Seat Bidding Over a 1-level Suit Bid

By Neil H. Timm

How often have you found yourself in the balancing seat after the opponent opens a suit at the 1-level and there are two passes to you? The bidding goes 1X – Pass – Pass - ?

This situation is like the case: Pass -Pass - ?, except now you know playing 2/1 that the opening 1-level bidder has between 11 and 19 HCP.

A common bid over a minor or major suit bid is 1NT where for a minor suit the point count range is about 11- 14/15 HCP and for the major 12 - 15/16 HCP. A common range used by many is 12-14HCP.

What about stoppers when you make the 1NT bid? Like the 1NT overcall bid, the balancing 1NT bid promises NO STOPPERS if the bid is a minor. Why?

Over a minor 1m level bid your shape is likely 3343 without a stopper or perhaps 4432 with a stopper in the bid minor, a balanced or semi-balanced hand. You may X if 4-4 in the majors or bid 1NT. With a 5-card major you may bid the major instead of 1NT. And with a 4441 you may X and not bid 1NT.

While some may assume no stoppers over a major suit bid, I would suggest that to bid 1NT over a major you should have at least one stopper, one less than a 1NT (15-18) overcall bid over a major suit bid.

Over a 1M level bid, your shape is very likely 4432 with a doubleton in the bid major or This with a very good hand X and if you are 5431 with 5-cards in the other major and a 4-card minor you may again X. This X is called an Equal Level Conversion (ELC).

Rodwell, Eric (2019, pp. 63-78), “Eric Rodwell’s Bidding Topics – Book Two”, Baron Barclay recommends bidding 1NT with 11-15HCP with NO Stoppers over either a major or minor suit bid. With a weak doubleton in their suit, he recommends a double or overcall and if you have only 11HCP, that you are assuming your partner has a very good hand.

When bidding in the balancing seat, Karen Walker recommends:

- **Minimum suit bid** (1♦-Pass-Pass-1♥) = 8-13 points, usually a 5+-card suit (but may be a good 4-card suit at the one-level). The better your suit, the fewer points you need to bid.

- **1NT (1♦-Pass-Pass-1NT)** = About 11-14 points with stoppers (or moderate length) in the opponent's suit. If you're vulnerable — and/or if the opening bid was 1♥ or 1♠ — raise the range to 13-15 (or a poor 16) points.
- **A jump in a new suit (1♥-Pass-Pass-2♠)** = 13-16 pts. and a strong 6+-card suit. A jump in the balancing seat *invites* game-it is *not* a strong jump-shift or a preempt.
- **Double** = for takeout, showing 10+ pts. with shortness in the opponent's suit. A takeout double can also be used to start the description of a better hand (14+ points) that was too strong to balance with a simple suit bid or 1NT. After partner responds to your double, you can show the stronger hand by rebidding 1NT (to show 16-18 points) or freely bidding a new suit (to show 14+ pts. and a 5+-card suit).
- **Bid of the opponent's suit (1♥-Pass-Pass-2♥)** = This is called a *cuebid*, and depending on your partnership's preference, it can have one of two meanings:
 - 1 – A two-suited hand (the Michaels convention); **or**
 - 2 – A strong, game-forcing takeout.
- **Jump to 2NT (1♠-Pass-Pass-2NT)** = This can also be assigned one of two meanings:
 - 1 – 21-22 pts. balanced; **or**
 - 2 – Unusual, showing length in the two lower unbid suits (this meaning is probably more valuable).

A very comprehensive reference on balancing is the book by Lawrence, Mike (2012), "The Complete Book on Balancing in Contract Bridge, Revised Edition, Baron Barclay. He spends two chapters on this topic pp. 3-59.

Lawrence reviews, in some detail, the following bidding options: When to

- (1) X
- (2) Bid 1NT
- (3) One of a suit bids
- (4) Bid two of a lower ranking suit

- (5) Jump to two of in a higher-ranking suit
- (6) Jump to three of a higher/lower ranking suit
- (7) Cue bid
- (8) Jump bid into NT (2NT/3NT)
- (9) Jump to the 4-level/higher
- (10) Pass

You should review each of these cases with your partner. And how one is to respond to partner's balancing bid. Lawrence spends over 100 pages on responding to a balancing bid and in Chapters six and beyond follow-up bids; his book is over 400 pages! The topic is complicated.

As Bob Hamman says "Mike consistently gives a thorough and accurate analysis of one of the toughest areas in bridge."