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This Week in Bridge
(433) Balancing by Responder

© AiB   *Robert S. Todd*
Level: 6 of 10 (2 of 6)   *robert@advinbridge.com*

General
Balancing in general is a large and complicated topic. Here we focus on a small but common auction where partner opens the bidding and we are later in the balancing seat. In these auctions we have responded and the opponents have competed in the bidding, leaving us responsible for stopping the opponents from winning the auction at a low level. Sometimes we must stretch to bid in many of these auctions.

Pass then Bid
If partner opens the bidding and Right Hand Opponent (RHO) overcalls, then Responder can double (negative double) to compete in the bidding. If Responder passes on their first call in this type of auction, then they cannot double later to compete in the auction. Later doubles show a trap pass of RHO's suit:

Example 1

1♦	1♠	P	2♠
P	P	X	

This shows a trap pass of ♠ - Responder has a decent hand with good ♠. This is penalty!

If Responder wants to compete they will need to just bid or bid 2NT, "Scrambling 2NT". This is competitive with two places to play:

Example 2

1♦	1♠	P	2♠
P	P	2NT	

Desire to compete, looking for a fit -- Usually 9+cards in the minors (3+♦ and 5+♣).

Other Balancing Doubles and 2NT

When we act (as Responder) on our first call and then double later, that is more "card showing," not penalty (not a trap pass.) It shows a desire to compete, not sure what to do, but some defensive values.

Example 3

1♦	1♠	X	2♠
P	P	X	

Card showing, something like 3-4-2-4, 9+ points

Example 4

1♦	1♠	2♥	2♠
P	P	X	

Card showing, 5+♥, 11+ points, no ♦ fit, some defense

Example 5

1♦	1♠	X	2♠
P	P	2NT	

Scrambling 2NT, 1-4-3-5, 7+ points (desire to compete in the bidding)

New Suits Non-Forcing

New Suits by Responder are generally (not always) forcing on the first round of the bidding. But new suits by Responder on the second round of the bidding are frequently non-forcing.

Example 6

1♣	1♠
1NT	2♥

In competitive balancing auctions this is also true! In these auctions, Responder will have two clearly forcing calls: double (card showing) and cuebid (usually a stronger, more distributional hand). Occasionally, Responder will be able to force with a jump (when it is clear):

Example 7

1♦	1♠	2♥	2♠
P	P	4♣	

But in general, a new suit in these auctions will be a distributional, competitive hand (non-forcing):

Example 8

1♦	1♠	X	2♠
P	P	3♣	

This 3♣ bid is NF, showing long ♣ with 7-9 points (may or may not have 4-card ♥).

Example 9

1♦	1♠	X	2♠
P	P	3♠	

This cuebid is game forcing, showing a strong hand that is offensively oriented. This bid usually asks Opener for a stopper – a Western Cuebid.

Example 10

1♦	1♠	2♥	2♠
P	P	3♣	

3♣ shows 5+♥ and 5+♣ with 9-11 HCP, non-forcing and competitive.

These agreements also apply if the Opener makes a support double:

Example 11

1♦	P	1♥	1♠
X*	P	__?	

- 2♣   Non-Forcing, 5+♣, 6-9 points, only 4-card ♥
- 3♣   Non-Forcing and Invitational, 5+♣, 10-11 points, only 4-card ♥

Remember that in the balancing seat, strong hands can make it clear that they are strong by either doubling or cuebidding!

Advanced Note: Some players may choose to use 2NT in some of these auctions as "Good/Bad 2NT" instead of Scrambling. If you play Good/Bad 2NT in other auctions, it is important to discuss with partner whether you do the same in balancing auctions or you revert to Scrambling 2NT.

Conclusion

Balancing as the Responder is not particularly complicated (we frequently just bid what we have) but we should keep in mind that most of our bids are geared towards competing with marginal hands, not towards forcing with strong hands. With a strong hand we must not get lazy – we need to make it clear to partner with a double or a cuebid of the opponent's suit. Additionally, we should keep in mind that we have many competitive bids (non-forcing bids) available to us and we should do our best to describe our hand to partner. Now that we have clear agreements, be sure to compete hard and do not let the opponents steal the contract at too low a level!