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This Week in Bridge

(435) Balancing with Distributional Hands

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Level: 4 of 10 (1 of 6)

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General

When we have a distributional hand, we naturally want to compete in the bidding. When we hold that hand in the balancing seat, we usually want to bid even more. Balancing with a distributional hand is more straightforward than balancing with a balanced hand, although we still “borrow” 3 points from partner just like we do in our balancing NT auctions. Let’s look at options for balancing to show one, two, or even three suits.

Hold Defensive Values

When we have a shapely hand, we should consider if the opener might have a shapely hand as well before we balance. We should consider our own defensive values when debating whether to balance in or pass the hand out – in particular, we should consider if we have enough defense to beat a game in the opponent’s suit. One of the most sinking feelings in bridge comes from this auction:

Example 1

1♥ P P 1♠
4♥

We should be careful about balancing if we fear this type of rebid by LHO, or really any rebid that lets LHO improve the contract.

Single-Suited Hands

With one long suit, we balance by bidding that suit naturally and as cheaply as possible. We do borrow 3 points from partner to balance. So if we have a genuine 16 or more HCP, we start with a takeout double and then bid our suit on the next round – the same principles as a “double and bid” direct overcall, just with the extra points borrowed from partner to treat it more like a 19+ point hand. On the other end of that spectrum, we could also balance with a good 5-card suit and as little as 8 pts if we think it is right and want to compete.



Example 2

1♥ P P 1♠

This overcall could be as few as 8+ HCP and 5+card ♠.

Example 3

1♥ P P X
P 2♣ P 2♠

This bid is non-forcing, 16-19 HCP with 5+card ♠.

We also have a special jump overcall available in the balancing seat. Because it doesn't make sense to make a preemptive bid in the pass-out seat (just pass it out with that hand!), this jump overcall is used to show an intermediate hand. An *intermediate jump overcall* (IJO) shows 13-16 HCP and a good 6+card suit. This type of hand is almost good enough to double and bid, but the IJO shows the quality suit, values, and playing strength of balancer's hand in one call.

Example 4

1♥ P P 2♠

This jump overcall is Intermediate - 13-16 HCP with a good 6+card ♠ suit.

2-Suited Hands

Since a balancing 2NT bid is natural, showing 19-21 points, we have no Unusual 2NT bid available in the balancing seat. (Unusual 2NT is also most commonly a weak bid, and we don't need that in the balancing seat.)

A Michaels cuebid can normally be either weak (5-11 points) or strong (16+) points. But again, since we don't need a weak bid in the balancing seat, a balancing Michaels cuebid is strong once we include the 3 points borrowed from partner's hand (meaning about 13+ HCP originally.)

Example 5

♠ KQ873

♥ AJT92

♦ 6

♣ K5

1♦ P P 2♦

Michaels cuebid showing at least 5-5 in the Majors and 13+ HCP points. This is a "maximum" Michaels once we "borrow" 3 points from partner.



3-Suited Hands

With a 3-suited hand that is short in the opponent's suit we can balance with a takeout double with fewer HCP than we need to make a takeout double in the direct seat. This is often done with as little as 9-10 HCP, so that when we borrow 3 points from partner we have a full opening hand.

We should be careful to consider that we have enough defense that we could beat the contract if the opponent jumps to game (as considered previously). We should also consider if we have enough defense so that if partner passes our takeout double, having made a trap pass, we will feel confident in beating the contract.

Example 6

♠ AT63

♥ 8

♦ A9843

♣ Q75

1♥ P P X

Here we make a balancing takeout double, showing 3+card support for all the unbid suits, shortness in the opponent's suit, and roughly an opening hand (after we borrow 3 points from partner).

Conclusion

After an opening bid by LHO and two passes we need to use good amount of judgment when deciding if we should balance into the auction. This is especially true with a distributional hand. We weigh wanting to compete in the bidding (not letting the opponents buy the contract too low) against not letting the opponents improve the contract by reaching a better fit or getting to a game that they may have missed. Considering the amount of defense we have to go along with the offensive nature of our hand will help us make good decisions in using our balancing bidding tools. Make sure you work on these balancing situations!