

A BALANCING ACT

This hand comes from a recent online international competition (so gives us all hope!).

You are South and the auction has been:

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
1♣	Pass	1♥	Pass
2♥	Pass	Pass	?

Your hand:

♠ J 10 6
♥ 6
♦ A J 6 3
♣ A J 10 7 4

We are repeatedly told that we should not sell out to the opponents when they are in a known 8-card fit at the 2-level. In all likelihood, this is such a scenario (given that partner did not overcall). So, what action should we take?

In the Columbus-Alt tournament (which was created when the American Nationals were cancelled in March), one South passed and six Souths doubled. When South doubled, most Norths now bid 2♣, though I think that is essentially wrong with a 3-card suit when you do have an outside 4-card suit (it's right with a 3-4-3-3 or a very weak hand). My reasoning is that the 2♣ bid is wrong because the 'long' trump hand will be forced quickly by heart leads, so you may lose trump control.

However, kudos to the eighth South who took the most thoughtful action, balancing with 2NT. His 2NT bid showed both minors, so now North comfortably bid 3♦, making. (See hand below.)

♠ K Q 4	
♥ 9 8 7 2	
♦ Q 9 8 7	
♣ Q 3	
♠ 9 5 3	♠ A 8 7 2
♥ A Q J 10	♥ K 5 4 3
♦ K 4	♦ 10 5 2
♣ K 9 5 2	♣ 8 6
♠ J 10 6	
♥ 6	
♦ A J 6 3	
♣ A J 10 7 4	

Remember, whilst it is important to balance – at Pairs – it is important to take the 'best' action.

Also remember, if you play Teams, that balancing is still important, but if you get doubled and go down some large number (I remember, we used to refer to them as 'telephone enquiries' – 1100), it's a disaster – so you can be more wary at Teams scoring (including Butler Pairs).

Here's another auction:

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
		1♠	Pass
2♠	Pass	Pass	?

You are South and hold:

♠ 6 4
♥ Q 8 5
♦ 7 6
♣ K Q 9 8 7 4

Basically, you should bid 3♣, regardless of the vulnerability. Your partner won't play you for a great hand; after all, you didn't overcall the first time around. What they will expect is that either you have a poor hand and a good suit, or you have a good-ish hand but a poor suit (too poor to bid at the 2-level – it may be a 6-card suit but headed by the Jack or 10).

Here's the full hand:

	♠ 10 2	
	♥ K 10 6 2	
	♦ A 9 5 4	
	♣ A 10 3	
♠ Q J 7 3		♠ A K 9 8 5
♥ J 7 3		♥ A 9 4
♦ K 10 3 2		♦ Q J 8
♣ J 6		♣ 5 2
	♠ 6 4	
	♥ Q 8 5	
	♦ 7 6	
	♣ K Q 9 8 7 4	

The auction has revealed that partner should have some values, given both East and West have limited their hands. This makes it safer for South to come in at the later stage.

As it happens, with the ♥J onside, North-South can make 9 tricks in 3♣. If East-West compete to 3♠ (with their known 9 card fit), they will go down one trick if the defenders switch to hearts having cashed two clubs. So, 2♠ makes one way and 3♣ makes the other way, or you take the opponents down if they bid on.

As you can see, competing is important.

Let's look at one more hand. Sitting South, you hold:

♠ 2
♥ A 8 6 5
♦ A K J 10 9
♣ 8 6 2

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
1♣	Pass	Pass	?

Have you bid 1♦?

Well, let me tell you that West now bids 1♠ and East raises to 2♠ or 3♠. 5 seconds later, the opponents have reached 4♠ - and you balanced them there.

One of the 'rules' about balancing relates to these types of auctions, where opener's bid has been passed around to you. If you are short in an unbid major, particularly if you have a singleton or void, you should not balance – you should pass!

If you think about it, it makes sense. Your partner couldn't overcall 1♠. You are short in spades. In all likelihood, the opponents have a good spade fit and, if you balance, you allow them to find that fit.

So, despite the need to balance being important, it is more significant when the opponents have already found a fit, but then limited their hands. When 1♣ is passed around to you, East is limited, but West is still unlimited, hence the extra risk factor.

The full hand:

♠ 5 4 3		
♥ K J 10 9		
♦ Q 8 6 5		
♣ 4 3		
♠ A K 9 8		♠ Q J 10 7 6
♥ Q		♥ 7 4 3 2
♦ 4 3 2		♦ 7
♣ A K Q J 7		♣ 10 9 5
♠ 2		
♥ A 8 6 5		
♦ A K J 10 9		
♣ 8 6 2		

4♠ makes 11 tricks. I bet you'd rather defend 1♣, which is exactly what you should be doing, with that singleton spade. You should pass out 1♣. It will be right way more often than it is wrong.

I am going to discuss some other elements of balancing bids in the next column.

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