

Learning Points – A Balancing Act
by Steve Moese (Mike Purcell ed.)

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Bidding LEVEL: Intermediate

North Deals NS Vul MPs	♠ J864 ♥ KJ84 ♦ 8 ♣ 9542	Mike
♠ KQ ♥ 109765 ♦ K9763 ♣ 3	N W 5 E S	♠ A532 ♥ AQ2 ♦ 1042 ♣ KJ10
Steve	♠ 1097 ♥ 3 ♦ AQJ5 ♣ AQ876	

North	East	South	West
Pass	1♣	Pass	1♥
Pass	1♠	Pass	1N
Pass	Pass	2♣ ¹	2♦
Pass	2♥	Pass	Pass
3♣!	All Pass		

West leads ♠K
1 = Natural balance

Monday Evening November 27, 2009 ACBL Charity Pairs, Cincinnati Bridge Association Bridge Center, 2860 Cooper Road, Cincinnati, OH 45241 (513) 631-8070 . Mr. Mike Lipp, Director. All hands played in this pairs event are summarized in the hand record provided by the ACBL. Today my partner is Mike Ma. We play Precision.

At duplicate pairs, leaving opponents in a low level contract can give away Matchpoints. Balancing is an attempt to win the contract at a low level or raise the level of the contract for the opponents. Balancing occurs in the pass-out seat. Often when opponents have a fit, so does your side. When opponents have no fit, your side might not either. Unless of course you are listening...

The Bidding

I like South's hand even with partner's opening Pass and RHO's opening 1♣ bid. However I can't take a bid since RHO has chosen to bid my long suit. A pass is right. When I hear 1♥ from my LHO opponent I now think they have found their fit. Partner's 2nd pass leads to RHO's 1♠ bid – an opening hand with at best a delayed fit for ♥ or perhaps a misfit. I still pass, as

acting here while the auction is still forcing is uncalled for with my hand. LHO offers 1NT followed by 2 passes. Time to think about what I've heard...

Partner said nothing but isn't broke on this auction, as RHO will likely be 12-14 HCP and LHO 6-8 HCP. With opponents 18-22 HCP, and my 13 HCP, partner will be 5-9 HCP most of the time. I know my club honors are well placed. I also know that partner's major honors might be working since our opponents have suggested they do not fit. Since opponents own only half the deck here, I do not expect a 2-level balancing bid to be doubled. Nevertheless the gain from pushing them off the 1-level has only one real risk – they land in ♥ where they have workable fit. Yes, I know we are vulnerable.

A double by me here is penalty (opponents have bid 3 suits – what else can it be?) I cannot risk we can take 7 tricks based on my hand and what partner's minimum is likely to be. I try a 2♣ balancing bid. It's not often you balance in ROH's opening bid. I prefer holding 6 cards for my bid, but I hold two tenaces over the opening hand. Since the suit is ♣ opener might just be holding 3 cards in that suit.

The next 2 bids by our opponents led me to believe my decision rash. My ♦ tenace is now worth much less. When RHO completed the delayed support for ♥, I could only hope partner held the right cards (penalty double against their 4-3 ♥ fit?).

Partner found a hard choice – double 2♥, Pass, or bid 3♣. Since partner knew ♠ were working for opponents (any ♠ strength we hold would be in South and finessable) he judged his ♥ holding was insufficient for the penalty. Hopefully holding 4♣s would provide protection under the Law of Total Tricks. Partner bid 3♣ and our opponents passed quietly. So far so good.

The Play

I still think opponents can make some number of ♥ so my goal is to make 3♣ or go down 1. The opening ♠K lead surprises. I expected these cards to be with RHO. When RHO overtakes the ♠Q at trick 2, I

expect the worst. Looks like RHO holds 4=3=3=3 and holds the ♣KJ10. Sure enough LHO ruffs the 3rd ♠ and now has to get out. I expect a ♥ switch for an immediate down 1. LHO makes the passive attempt at leading a low ♦. This really gives nothing away in ♦ as I can always take a ruffing finesse. However now I have just enough tempo to pitch my losing ♥.

Backing the count of the hand, I win the ♦J, ruff a small ♦ and finesse the ♣Q. Then I play the ♣A and ruff the ♦Q. Now I lead dummy's 4th ♠ and East has to follow. I pitch the losing ♥ and claim 3♣+3 for +110 and 7.4 of 8 MPs (one other pair managed a +110 our way).

Pair	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
MPs	-0.06	7.38		4	4	2.31	7.38	1.19	5.69	
Score	-170	110	---	50	50	-90	110	-150	100	---

My assessment about risk/reward in this field was wrong. Down 1 would have been a horrible score. Indeed letting opponents bid ♥ making 2 or 3 would have been a bad result too!

Post Mortem

Partner saved us with the well-judged 3♣ call. We needed a minor defensive error to make this hand.

Balancing typically works well when:

- 1) Opponents bid one or 2 suits and stop at the 1 or 2 level.
- 2) We share working points equally.
- 3) When we have shortness in their suits
- 4) When vulnerability protects our cost of failure
- 5) When the hand is not a misfit for both sides.

Balancing often turns out poorly when:

- 1) our side's working points are all in one hand,
- 2) we have too many points in their suits,
- 3) we have no 8+ card fit, if we both hold 2 or more cards in their suits (maximizes our losers in their suits),
- 4) they have no fit.
- 5) we might risk a bad score if they double and set us (a particular issue when vulnerable).
- 6) opponents stop in the wrong strain or level and our balancing activity gets them to their best spot.

I will be less cavalier with balancing when opponents have bid 3 suits – even if they are weak. The risky balance caused a top or bottom situation – this time we landed on our feet, and were lucky to do so.

Learning Points

1. Balancing in their suit should happen a) in response to partners invitation (a takeout or balancing double), or b) with 6 card suit or the prospect of only one loser in that suit.
2. Balancing often can help improve your score – if your action raises the risk for your opponents or gets them to an inferior strain.
3. When Opponents Bid And Raise consider pre-balancing (bidding like your are balancing but not in the balancing seat). Research OBAR by Marty Bergen for more details.
4. Sometimes balancing helps the opponents – recognize when this can happen and stay quiet!

Key Words: Balancing in opponent's suit, working points, counting tricks