**Bridge In Townsville – Balancing**

Thanks to organizing maestro, Gloria Macdonald (who could probably run a national event single-handed), and some other key figures in the Townsville Bridge Club, I was there in early September for four days of workshops, and teaching sessions.

The first day covered Balancing, a rather large topic. In preparing for it, I had got my hands on a Mike Lawrence classic, “Balancing”, and was amused by the introduction. Mike and an old friend agreed to play a tournament after many years of not talking bridge, or having any system discussion. They met a few minutes before the session, and ran through a few essentials.

The first match was a big success, where they bid and played in perfect harmony, seemingly in tune with each other at every turn. The second match, however, was a totally different story where three times, hands came up which required understandings of balancing bidding agreements, and three times they failed to be in sync. Mike says that because there is almost no room on the system card for balancing understandings, people ignore this part of bridge.

How much have you and your partner thought about balancing? Try these exercises … (answers on the next page)

(1) The bidding goes: 1♥ P P to you.

Your bid? Answer:………

♠ 863

♥ 92

♦ A103

♣ KQ1075

(2) The bidding goes: 1♥ P P to you.

Your bid? Answer:………

♠ QJ96

♥ 82

♦ Q963

♣ AJ5

(3) The bidding goes: 1♥ P P to you.

Your bid? Answer:………

♠ Q9763

♥ 84

♦ J

♣ AK1072

(4) The bidding goes: 1♥ P P to you.

Your bid? Answer:………

♠ 103

♥ AJ10

♦ K1083

♣ KQ75

(5) The bidding goes: 1♥ P P to you. Your bid? Answer:………

♠ AKJ1065

♥ 75

♦ AQ9

♣ Q7

(6) The bidding goes: 1♥ P P to you. Your bid? Answer:………..

♠ AJ

♥ KQ9

♦ AQ73

♣ KJ92

(7) The bidding goes: 2♠ P P to you. Your bid? Answer:……….

♠ 94

♥ AJ75

♦ KQ8

♣ Q753

(8) The bidding goes: 2♠ P P to you. Your bid? Answer:………...

♠ 8

♥ KQ1087

♦ AKJ74

♣ 53

(9) The bidding goes: 2♠ P P to you. Your bid? Answer:………….

♠ 5

♥ AKJ9763

♦ 63

♣ AK10

(10) The bidding goes: 2♠ P P to you. Your bid? Answer:………..

♠ KJ8

♥ Q5

♦ AJ1075

♣ K104

Answers

(1) 2♣.Only 9 hcp + 1 LP for the five-card suit. Not enough to bid in the direct seat, but enough in balancing.

(2) Double. Support for the unbid suits,10hcp + 1 point for the doubleton heart. Not quite enough to double directly over 1♥, but enough in balancing.

(3) 2♥. Michaels cue bid, same as direct seat, showing a two-suited hand, five or more spades, and five or more cards in one minor.

(4) 1NT. In balancing, shows around 11 – 14 points, and a stopper.

(5) 2♠. A jump overcall in balancing is intermediate, stronger than a simple overcall. Because you could balance with 1♠ on a relatively weak hand, you need to show partner you have a good hand with interest in game.

(6) 2NT. In the direct seat, a jump overcall of 2NT would be unusual, showing a weak, distributional hand with at least five cards in the two lower-ranking suits. In balancing, a jump to 2NT is natural, showing a balanced 20-21 points.

(7) Double: (X) Although you are forcing partner to bid at the three level, you have to take that chance in balancing. After a preempt, the onus is on the partner with the ‘shape’ to take some action if possible, especially in balancing, to protect the partnership’s interest in the deal.

(8) 3♠ Michaels, showing five+ hearts and five of a minor.

(9) 4♥ Too strong to simply overcall 3♥, which could be a little light in balancing. Partner might pass and game might be missed. A jump to 4♥ in balancing is not preemptive. It shows a strong hand.

(10) 2NT. After a weak two-bid or a preempt, a no trump overcall covers a wide range. Here you have a balanced hand with 14hcp + 1 length point for the five-card diamond suit. With stoppers in the spade suit, 2NT is the most descriptive call.

………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………….

If you and your partner scored 100% on the Balancing quiz, well done.

The areas that players have not sorted out is the meaning of jump overcalls, and also what no trump bids mean in the balancing seat.

Preemptive hands don’t come up much in the balancing position so it’s better to play jump bids as intermediate to strong so that partner can differentiate between hands that should be played in partscore, and times when game could be right. Similarly, 1♥ p p 2NT is 20 – 21pts, a strong balanced hand NOT the unusual 2NT it is in the direct seat.

Also, there are differences of opinion between experts on what constitutes a balancing 1NT bid. Standard is 11 – 14, but some like to keep the same 15-17 as in the direct seat. Most don’t see the value of balancing with 1NT on a poor 10 count, preferring to pass the hand in.

Here’s a whole hand:

♠ Q4

♥ 97

♦ A962

♣ K8643

♠ AKT52 ♠ 83

♥ AKJ83 ♥ Q1094

♦ Q4 ♦ J853

♣ J ♣ 1075

♠ J976

♥ 52

♦ K107

♣ AQ92

Dlr W Both Vul

Bidding: W N E S

1♠ P P ?

Should you balance with the South hand with 10 points? This hand is a good example of when not to balance. South doesn’t have a good hand for an overcall or takeout double, and also doesn’t have quite enough for 1NT. With reasonable defense against spades, South should simply pass and defend. If South does balance, it gives West a chance to bid hearts. EW can make only eight tricks in spades but ten tricks in hearts. They might get to 4♥ if, after a balancing bud by South, West jumps to 3♥ and East chooses to raise to 4♥.

Deciding whether to balance or not is the key issue. Here are some standard suggestions:

**When You should Stretch to Balance**

* When the opponents have found a fit, and have stopped in a partscore
* When you don’t have wasted values in the opponents’ suit
* When you are prepared to handle the subsequent auction

**When You Should be Cautious of Balancing**

* When the opponents have NOT found a fit, eg 1♥ p 1♠ p 1NT p p to you
* When you have wasted values in the opponent’s suit
* When your side is vulnerable

**Summary of Adjustments for Bidding in the Balancing Position.**

* Overcalls and doubles may be made on less than normal values (about a King less, say 8+ (1♥ p p 1♠)
* 1NT in balancing is usually 11 – 14 (some play 11 – 16) (1♥ p p 1NT)
* To jump in your suit in balancing is not weak, it’s intermediate to strong (1♥ p p 2♠ )= 13+ points. It shows partner that you really have a good hand
* 2NT in the balancing seat is also strong, not the unusual variety (1♥ p p 2NT = 19 – 20)
* Michaels applies in balancing, same as in the direct seat (1♥ p p 2♥ = ♠ and a minor)
* Don’t balance without the correct shape.
* When your partner has balanced, you should bid with more caution, assuming partner may be weaker than usual. The “king less” that partner has balanced on, should be the “king more” that you have “up your sleeve” so to speak.

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