



Play & Learn

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If they're happy and you know it – part 1

Early in 2014, we began our discussion of competitive bidding with this important guideline: Try not to let your opponents play at the two level when they have a fit. We applied this guideline in auctions where both sides were bidding. Even if our side has been silent, however, we aren't likely to win many matchpoints if the opponents settle into a fit at the two level. Why should the pair who opened get to win the bid when it's likely that the high-card points are almost evenly split between both pairs?

Popping into the auction to prevent the bidding from dying at a low level is known as balancing. When the bidding stops at a low level, the non-bidding side has two ways to enter the bidding: overcall or double. Let's take a look at a balancing overcall.

Dlr: East ♠ 10 9 6 2
 Vul: None ♥ J 8 2
 ♦ A 6 3 2
 ♣ A K

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

♠ A 5
 ♥ 9 3
 ♦ Q J 10
 ♣ J 9 7 5 4 3

West	North	East	South
2♥	Pass	1♥	Pass
		Pass	3♣

South's hand isn't strong enough for an immediate 2♣ overcall, which tends to show an opening hand. After West's raise to 2♥ is passed back to South, passing will let East-West play happily in their fit at the two level. South knows passing isn't likely to yield a good result and balances with 3♣. This bid should not mislead North, who recognizes that South is bidding in the balancing seat and has already denied a hand strong enough to overcall at the two level. South knows North has some strength because East-West stopped so low.

After South bids 3♣, East-West must decide whether to bid higher. Without the recommended ninth trump to compete at the three level, they are likely to sell out to 3♣. If they do, South should go down one, losing one spade, two hearts, one diamond and one club.

If East-West compete to 3♥, good defense lets the defenders take one spade, two diamonds and two clubs to collect 50 points. If South had not balanced, North-South would have given up 110 points defending 2♥. By balancing, North-South lose only 50

points (100 after an unlikely penalty double), but they could go plus if East-West bid higher.

The benefits of balancing are probably most obvious at matchpoints, where the objective is to get the biggest plus score possible or, when a plus score is impossible, to give up the smallest minus score.

In the balancing seat after both of our opponents have bid, we can make a balancing bid with less strength than usual to put pressure on our opponents and force them to decide whether to compete higher.

If we succeed in pushing them up, it's usually best to pass hoping we can set them. If we balance and win the bid, we might make a partscore; but we can also gain by going down and giving up less than we would have had we let our opponents play the hand.

Balancing is most common when our opponents have found a fit. If they have a fit, chances are good that we have one, too. The auction can tell us when our opponents have a fit. Assume a fit when a suit has been bid and raised as it was in the first example. If the opponents don't have a fit, the chances are greater that our side doesn't have one either, so we're less likely to stretch to balance. ■