



Adventures in Bridge

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This Week in Bridge

(151) Balancing Notrump Bids

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Level: 1, 4

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General

When LHO opens the bidding and the auction passes around to us, we are the last line of defense against the opponents buying the contract at a low level. Traditionally, when we stretch to bid in this seat it is called *balancing*. When we balance we “borrow” some of partner’s values and add those points to our hand – usually about 3 points. Let’s see how this works for balancing Notrump auctions.

Balancing 1NT

Level: 1, 4

An overcall of 1NT in the direct seat shows a balanced hand, 15-18 points, and a stopper in the opponent’s suit. In the balancing seat, a 1NT overcall is about 3 points lighter because we “borrow” 3 points from partner, so actually about 12-15 points.

This balancing 1NT is also a little variable based on the opponent’s opening bid:

Examples

1♣	P	P	1NT	11-14 points with a ♣ stopper
1♠	P	P	1NT	12-15 points with a ♠ stopper

We want to have a slightly better hand to balance with 1NT over a Major suit opening because we know LHO has a 5-card Major to lead against us. When LHO opens a minor, though, it may only be 3-4 cards long, so balancing more aggressively with a point or so less is appropriate.



Advancer's Bid – Responding to Balancing 1NT, 11-14 Points (Systems On)

Level: 1

Just as we play Systems On when partner overcalls 1NT in the direct seat, we also use our NT bidding systems (Stayman, transfers, etc.) when partner balances with 1NT. But since partner's 1NT is about 3 points weaker than a direct overcall, we compensate when we do things like force to game or invite to game by subtracting 3 points from our own hand (the points partner "borrowed.")

- 0-10 pts Weak
- 11-12 pts Invite
- 13-14 pts Game Force

Other NT Hands in the Balancing Seat

Level: 1

With a full-valued 1NT in the balancing seat, 15-18 points, we need to start by making a takeout double and then bidding 1NT so partner understands we did not need to borrow the 3 points to get to 1NT values – that we have more values than a balancing 1NT bid.

1♣	P	P	X	
P	1♠	P	1NT	15-18 pts, ♣ stopper, no 4-card ♠ fit with partner

With 19-21 points, we can just overcall 2NT immediately in the balancing seat.

1♣	P	P	2NT	19-21 pts, ♣ stopper
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This is not an Unusual 2NT bid because with a weak hand, we would just pass the auction out in the balancing seat.

When Not to Balance

Level: 1

With a weaker hand in the balancing seat, we should be careful not to bid and then let the opponents improve their contract:

- Improve from 1m to 1NT
- Get to game in a Major – 1M to 4M

With a balanced hand but less than 11 points, we don't balance for this reason.

Conclusion

A balancing 1NT overcall is like a direct 1NT overcall, but just a bit weaker, by about 3 points or so. We treat it like a 1NT opening bid or direct overcall in terms of the systems we play – Stayman, Transfers, etc. We vary the strength of the balancing 1NT based on whether LHO opened 1m or 1M (11-14 vs. 12-15). Use the balancing 1NT to effectively describe a minimum opening strength balanced hand with a stopper in LHO's suit!