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This Week in Bridge

(325) Balancing Seat Overcalls

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Levels: 1, 3

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General

When our Left-Hand Opponent (LHO) opens the bidding and both partner and Responder pass, we are in a position called the *Balancing Seat* (or passout seat). If we pass, then the auction will end, and the play will begin. In this situation, we must make the final decision for our partnership and we must bid both our hand and partner's hand. The traditional approach is to "borrow" 3 HCP from partner for all of our actions in the balancing seat – overcalls included. Thus, we bid our hand as if it were stronger than it actually is, and partner compensates for this if they end up bidding later in the auction. Let's look at our options for how to compete in the bidding in the balancing seat.

Balancing Seat Simple Overcalls at the 1-Level

Level 1

A 1-level simple overcall in the direct seat usually shows about 7 to 18 HCP and a decent 5+card suit. If we apply the concept that in the balancing seat, we should "borrow" 3 HCP from partner, then in theory we should be able to make a simple overcall at the 1-level in the balancing seat with 4 to 15 HCP. But if the auction passes around to us and we have only 4 HCP, something strange has occurred and we are not likely to bid. Thus, we will not overcall with every hand in this range of HCP. Instead, we must use our judgment about when to get into the bidding.

Here are some examples of hands that may make a balancing seat overcall:

Example 1

1♣ P P —

After this auction it would be normal to overcall 1♠ with either of the following hands:

| | |
|---------|---------|
| ♠ KQT84 | ♠ KQT84 |
| ♥ 943 | ♥ Q43 |
| ♦ KJ8 | ♦ KJ8 |
| ♣ 62 | ♣ A2 |

With the first hand we can overcall 1♠ with a good suit and minimum values for an overcall, about 9 HCP. With the second hand we have considerable extra values, 15 HCP, but we still make a simple overcall of 1♠.



Another place where we must use our judgement about making an overcall in the balancing seat is when we have a less powerful suit but have enough values to want to compete in the bidding.

Example 2

1♣ P P —
♠ J8432
♥ 93
♦ Q9
♣ AJT3

With this hand after a 1♣ opening bid is passed around to us, we have a much more difficult decision. Even though we have 8 HCP, it is better to pass than to bid 1♠. If partner could not act over 1♣, the chances that the hand belongs to our side are small. We do not want to give the opponents a chance to improve the contract. It is likely that our LHO has a balanced 18-19 HCP hand, and if we balance by bidding 1♠ we may give them a chance to rebid 1NT and improve the contract that they play.

Balancing Seat 1NT Overcall

Level 1, 4

A 1NT overcall in the balancing seat is similar to other actions in the balancing seat in that we add about 3 points to our hand and bid as if we were in the direct seat. Thus, a 1NT overcall in the balanced seat shows about 12-15 points (15-18 points after we add 3), a balanced hand, and a stopper in the opponent's suit. Some players push this down even more, to make the balancing seat 1NT overcall 11-14 (or 11-15 points). This balancing 1NT is a valuable tool, because otherwise we could have a serious bidding problem with some hands.

Example 3

1♦ P P —?
♠ KJT7
♥ A7
♦ JT53
♣ KJ4

Here we simply overcall 1NT to show a balanced hand, 13 HCP, and a ♦ stopper.

A more sophisticated (and better) approach is to vary our balancing seat 1NT overcalls ranges a bit based on whether the opponents have opened a Major or minor. A common expert treatment is to play that a balancing 1NT overcall over a 1♥ or 1♠ opening (where they are known to hold a 5+card suit) shows 12-15 points, while an overcall over a 1♣ or 1♦ opening only shows 11-14 points. This allows us more flexibility to stretch over minor suit openings and show a slightly stronger hand over Major suit openings.



In the passout seat, with a stronger balanced hand, we add 3 points and bid similarly as we would in the direct seat. With 15 to 18 actual points we double and bid NT, bidding as if our hand were 3 points stronger (18 to 21 points). A jump to 2NT in the balancing seat is not used as the “Unusual NT”, since a weak hand would pass the hand out if given the chance. Instead, a jump to 2NT in the balancing seat is used to show an even stronger balanced hand, 19 to 21 actual points.

Balancing Seat Simple Overcalls at the 2-Level

Level 1

When the auction passes around to us and we cannot bid our suit at the 1-level, then we are forced to make our simple overcall at the 2-level. Just like direct seat overcalls at the 2-level, balancing seat overcalls promise better hands and better suits than 1-level overcalls. But again, a balancing seat borrows about 3 HCP from partner, so can be made with about 9 to 15 HCP. Though we can use this method to stretch to compete in the auction with a weaker hand, it is still a good idea to have a good suit for bidding at the 2-level.

Example 4

1♠ P P ___?

♠ 43

♥ KQT43

♦ AJ5

♣ 943

In the balancing seat with this hand we simply overcall 2♥ with our minimum values but quality suit.

Example 5

1♠ P P ___?

♠ 53

♥ J8743

♦ KQ5

♣ A83

But in the balancing seat, with the same HCP and distribution, but a weaker suit, we should not make a 2-level overcall. Here it is better to make a takeout double.

Balancing Seat Jump Overcalls

Level 3

In the balancing seat it does not make a lot of sense to make a preemptive bid. If the auction passes around to us and we have a minimum-valued hand with a good suit, then we can simply overcall our suit cheaply or we can pass the hand out. So, we will not use jump overcalls in the balancing seat in the same destructive fashion as we do in the direct seat. Instead, a jump overall in the balancing seat is an



intermediate-valued hand, showing a 6+card suit with about 13-16 HCP. This is a hand that once it borrows 3 HCP from partner is pretty close to strong enough to double and bid.

Example 6

1♣ P P ___?

♠ KQT832

♥ AJ5

♦ 8

♣ A53

We could overcall 1♠ with this hand, but with 14 HCP and a good 6-card ♠ suit, it is better to jump to 2♠, describing to partner both the length of our ♠ suit and the strength of our hand. By making this more specific bid we give partner more information about our hand and make it easier for partner to make a good decision about whether or not to reach game.

Conclusion

When in the balancing seat, we should strive to compete in the auction, as we are bidding for both ourselves and partner. But we still must consider many of the factors that we would in the direct seat – vulnerability, shape, HCP, suit quality, etc. The difference is that we will stretch to bid in this balancing seat because we are the “last line of defense”. But there are times to be careful making a balancing overcall. We do not want to give the opponents a “second bite at the apple”, by allowing them to reach a game they may have missed or by allowing them to improve the part score contract by finding a better place to play. When we do not have a long suit, then often it is right to leave the opponents to play where they are, especially if they are stuck playing in a minor suit where we have length. Trying to accomplish our goals of competing in the bidding, trying to push the opponents up a level higher or win the contract, and not giving the opponents the opportunity to improve the contract can be difficult. We will often be forced to guess what to do in the balancing seat. We should try to compete in the bidding aggressively but be careful not to save the opponents from a bad situation where they may have found themselves.