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Mel's Rules of 20 + 2

By now, most players are familiar with the Rule of 20 — the guide for opening the bidding with light hands. It's simple enough: You take your high-card points and to that add the number of cards you have in your two longest suits. If those two factors add to 20, open. If they don't, don't. That's okay, but a better rule for opening is Mel's Rule of 22. Use the Rule of 20, but then make sure you have two defensive tricks. For example, the Rule of 20 says to open with

♠QJ872 ♥Q9 ♦6 ♣AJ832.

Mel's Rule of 22 (20+2) says pass. Opening that hand is pushing a good idea too far — there are too many queens and jacks. But change the hand to

♠K8764 ♥52 ♦10 ♣AK943

— which also has just 10 HCP, but is a much better hand with two and a half defensive tricks — and you'd open. After opening each of those hands, how would you feel if partner doubled the opponents in 3♥ after a competitive auction? See what I mean? Mel's Rule of 22 keeps you on the straight and narrow. Pass the first hand, open the second.

What I want to do now, however, is to tell you about another Rule of 20 — Mel's Rule of 20 — and it

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has nothing to do about opening the bidding. It has to do about bidding in the balancing seat after they open a strong (15–17) INT. Suppose you hold

♠Q753 ♥9 ♦A105 ♣J8642

and the bidding has gone INT–Pass–Pass. Should you balance? With only 7 points? Mel and Mel's Rule of 20 say an emphatic yes! Here's why:

What we know

We know the opener has 15–17 high-card points, but we also know that the responder has 0–8 HCP. We could summarize this by saying that the opener on average has 16 HCP and the responder on average has 4 HCP. So whenever the bidding comes around to you after INT–Pass–Pass, you know their side has 20 HCP (on average) and your side has 20 HCP (on average)! So your side has as much a right to the contract as they do!

Let's go back to our example hand. With 7 points we know our partner has (on average) 13. Also, she probably has a balanced hand since she didn't bid herself. So whenever we are faced with a balancing decision after a INT opening bid, high-card points are essentially irrelevant. The controlling factor is our distribution.

Mel's Balancing Rule of 2

You should balance whenever you have at least two shortness points which I define as either a void, a singleton or two doubletons — no matter what your high-card point strength is. Remember, the fewer points you have, the more partner has because your side will have 20 HCP (on average). If you have 5, partner will have 15, if you have 9, she will have 11, if you have 13, she will have 7.

To return to our example hand, we know partner has 13 HCP and our finesses will win because partner's (13) points lie over the notrump opener. But if we have

♠A74 ♥K962 ♦K103 ♣K98

we should pass with this balanced hand. Our finesses figure to lose since partner will have only 7 points on average. It's funny, but the fewer of our side's 20 theoretical points we have, the more eager we should be to balance — providing we have 2 shortness points. But even if we have the bulk of our side's 20 theoretical points, we should balance if we have at least 2 shortness points.

What mechanism to use in the balancing seat

I get the best results by using DONT in the balancing seat. DONT works fine in the direct position, but it's a particularly big winner in the balancing seat, when used in conjunction with Mel's Balancing Rule of 2. Using the DONT convention, any suit-bid shows that suit plus a higher suit. Spades shows spades only, and a double shows a single-suited hand.

Does vulnerability matter?

Not too much. Just because your side is vulnerable, doesn't mean it can't still have a good place to play. You will lose once in a while by balancing vulnerable by going down one (minus 100) versus plus 90 their way, but only once in a while. Sure, a vulnerable balance will get doubled and go down 500 or 800, but only once in a while. The majority of the time, following Mel's Balancing Rule of 2 is a big winner. Remember Mel's adage: "There are lots of ways to die at duplicate." You can "die" by being too bold, you can "die" by being too cautious. Luck usually favors the bold.