

Balancing: another view

— part 2

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(Part 1 appeared in June, page 74.)
Which partnership has the unbid major?

When the player considering a balancing bid lacks major values and/or length in an unbid major, he must have substantial additional strength to justify a balancing bid. Without length and strength in the unbid major(s), balancing bids should generally adhere to the values which Vernes and Varian recommend. This is especially true when opener has started with 1♠, since opener can so easily bid 2♥ at his next turn.

In fourth seat at favorable vulnerability, you hold

♠K 6 3 2 ♥10 2 ♦A Q J 2 ♣J 3 2, and the auction begins 1♠-Pass-Pass.

According to our analysis, balancing on this hand gets horrible results because the opener bids hearts regularly when it is a better contract, sometimes even getting to game. Here is a typical deal:

♠ A 10 8 5 4 ♠ J 7
♥ A K 8 7 ♥ J 4
♦ K 8 ♦ 9 6 5 4
♣ A K ♣ Q 7 6 5 4

N	Q 9
E	Q 9 6 5 3
S	10 7 3
W	10 9 8

♠ K 6 3 2 ♠ Q 9
♥ 10 2 ♥ Q 9 6 5 3
♦ A Q J 2 ♦ 10 7 3
♣ J 3 2 ♣ 10 9 8

North-South have no defense against 4♥. East-West will obviously have no opportunity to reach 4♥ if South just quietly passes.

There is less of a problem when opener starts with 1♥ since a higher-ranking spade contract is more difficult to reach and opener almost certainly has fewer spades than hearts.
This should not provide too much

comfort, however. Any hand without control of an unbid major is suspect. If the hand is also light in values, pass is better than balancing. For example, with ♠K J 8 7 5 ♥3 ♦Q 5 4 2 ♣10 6 5 a 1♠ balance after a 1♣ opening was an unmitigated disaster in most cases.

Holding extra values before balancing on hands without length and strength in the unbid major reduces the likelihood that the opponents can bid and make game and increases the likelihood that the hand belongs to the balancing partnership.

Solid high-card values

The last hand shows that mere possession of the spade suit does not indicate that balancing is correct. On the contrary, some reasonable high-card values are also necessary.

Compare the last hand which contains almost no defensive values to the following hand:

♠A 10 9 5 3 ♥10 8 ♦A 10 6 3 ♣J 9

The auction begins 1♣-Pass-Pass. Evaluation of the computer-generated deals showed that this hand is really a favorite to get a good score from a balancing bid despite the lack of length or strength in hearts. It meets the Vernes/Varian standard for balancing. The two aces simultaneously improve the prospects of the balancing side and reduce the prospects of their opponents.

Here is a rather mundane deal which illustrates the point.

(See next column)

East-West is probably down one in 1♣, but North-South will most likely make eight tricks in notrump. The high-card values are evenly divided but the aces give North-South a clear advantage in the play.

♠ 8 7 ♠ A Q 4 3
♥ A Q 4 3 ♥ K 7 4
♦ Q 8 6 3 ♦ J 4 2
♣ J 4 2 ♣ J 7 5

N	♠ J 7 5
E	♠ J 9 8 5 2
S	♠ 5 4
W	♠ 5 4

♠ A K 10 7 2 ♠ A 10 9 5 3
♥ 10 8 ♥ A 10 6 3
♦ A 10 6 3 ♦ J 9

Possession of the spade suit

The advantages of the spade suit should not be overlooked. For example, after 1♥-Pass-Pass, you hold

♠K 9 7 5 4 2 ♥J ♦Q 5 4 ♣Q J 7.

This hand, which complies with the Vernes/Varian standards for balancing, still has very soft high-card values. Despite these soft values, a balancing bid of 1♠ is about as likely to succeed as fail. Note that in this instance, control of

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the heart suit is less important since it was bid by the opener. If opener's partner had length in hearts even with almost no values or simple support with just a modicum of values, he would have raised.

Conclusion

1. Traditional standards for balancing are in many cases likely to lead to a favorable result. As such, traditional standards present a reasonable *minimum* for any decision about whether to balance.

2. Lacking length and strength in the unbid major, values for balancing should approximate those recommended by Vernes/Varian.

3. With possession of the spade suit, tend to balance with values that are maybe a point or two less than otherwise indicated.

4. Balancing with reasonable defensive strength, particularly two aces, is likely to lead to a score that is better than or at least equal to the score from passing.

TEST YOUR PLAY
By Eddie Kantar

1. Dir: North ♠ 9 7 6
Vul: N-S ♥ 10 4 2
IMPs ♦ Q 6 3
♣ A 7 5 2

West	North	East	South
Pass	Pass	Pass	1♥
2NT	Pass	3♣	3♥
Pass	4♥	All Pass	

West leads the ♣3 (third and fifth best leads). You play low from dummy and capture East's ♣J. West has one trump, East has three. Take over.

2. Dir: South ♠ K 6 4
Vul: Both ♥ K 6 3 2
IMPs ♦ Q 5 3 2
♣ A J

West	North	East	South
Pass	6NT	All Pass	
Pass	2NT		

The opening lead is the ♥Q. East playing the ♥4. You win in your hand and try a club to the jack. East wins the ♣Q (West played low) and returns the ♣8. Plan the play from here.
(Solutions are on page 81.)