by Larry Cohen

The full theory behind the Law of Total Tricks (the LAW) can be difficult to comprehend, but that doesn't mean we can't benefit from some of its results. In this series, champion Larry Cohen, who has popularized the LAW, shows how we can put it to practical use.

Comfort Zone

I'm a firm believer in making the game as enjoyable as possible but that doesn't mean I have to let the opponents have a comfortable time during the auction. In fact, that would be a violation of the ACBL's Code of Active Ethics:

Actively ethical players do everything they can within the scope of the game to defeat their opponent at the bridge table while making that experience an otherwise enjoyable one for them.

So, here's an auction that almost never occurs when I'm sitting in the North-South direction at the table:

WEST NORTH EAST SOUTH

1 ♥ Pass

2 ♥ Pass Pass Pass

Let's see why.

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Counting Trumps

The basic guideline that we use in competitive auctions is:

THE LAW'S COMPETITIVE GUIDELINE

Strive to compete to the level of the number of trumps held by the partnership.

To apply the LAW, we need to count not only the number of trumps held by our side but also the trumps held by the opponents. In the above auction, we know the opponents have at least an eight-card fit. East has a five-card or longer heart suit for the 1♥ opening and West has at least three-card support to raise to the two level.

The opponents are now "LAW" protected. They have competed to the level corresponding to the number of

Larry and the Law

Balancing

combined trumps they hold. They are very happy to be in $2 \checkmark$ because nothing bad can happen to them. If they make $2 \checkmark$, great. If they don't make $2 \checkmark$, that's fine also because some contract should make the other way.

So, our goal is: don't let them do it!
Being minus 110 – the score the opponents receive for making 2♥ at duplicate or team bridge (60 trick score plus 50 partscore bonus) – is not the way to win. It's unacceptable. We have to go out of our way to accomplish the following objective:

A COMPETITIVE PHILOSOPHY

Don't let the opponents play in their eight-card fit at the two level.

Balancing

One situation in which we can apply this philosophy is in the balancing position—if we pass, the auction will be over. For example, suppose we are South and the auction begins:

WEST NORTH EAST SOUTH

1 ♥ Pass
2 ♥ Pass Pass ?

We are in the balancing seat. When I used to play with Marty Bergen, if he were sitting South, he would simply close his eyes and bid something in this type of auction. You don't have to be like Marty and close your eyes, but you do want to strive to do something other than pass. The guideline I would use is:

BALANCING GUIDELINE

If you have shortness in the opponents' suit – fewer than three cards – bid a suit or make a takeout double.



High-card points have nothing to do with it. If the opponents have stopped in 2♥, we should have approximately half the points in the deck. Otherwise, they would have been trying to get to game. Even if I have 6 or 7 high-card points, I still know our partnership has roughly 20 combined points − half the 40 high-card points in the deck. When I have 6 or 7 points, partner likely has 13 or 14 points with a hand unsuitable to enter the bidding earlier.

Furthermore, if I bid, partner should realize that I'm bidding just to avoid letting the opponents play at the two level in their eight-card fit. Partner is not going to jump to game, even with the values for an opening bid.

In the balancing position, I can bid with a bad five-card suit that would be unsuitable for a direct overcall. If I don't have a five-card or longer suit, I can make a takeout double with shortness in hearts. For example:

WEST NORTH EAST SOUTH

1 Pass

2 Pass Pass ?

Q 9 7 4 3 ▼ 8 6 ↑ A 7 3 2 ♣ 5 2

2♠. Is it risky? Yes. Could I be doubled for a large penalty? Yes. However, when the opponents have

found an eight-card fit and are about to play at the two level, top players know that they can't afford to let them stay in that contract ... despite the risks of bidding.

Double. It's a little dangerous to double but the goal is the same: to get them out of 2♥.

When we make a balancing call in this position, any one of three good things might happen:

- 1. We reach a contract we can make.
- 2. We go down in our contract but lose only 50 or 100 points instead

of the 110 or more points they would receive for making their contract. This small difference is crucial at matchpoint duplicate.

3. We may push them a level higher and then defeat them.

In the balancing position, we bid aggressively on hands we wouldn't dream of acting on in direct position. This is especially comfortable when the opponents' suit is hearts because we may find a spade fit at the two level. When their suit is spades, we'll have to go to the three level, but it's the same philosophy. The potential gain more than outweighs the risk.

Use the same strategy if playing matchpoint duplicate or a team game. Try to be a little sounder if vulnerable – after all, we don't want to be minus 200 points when they can make only 110 points – but don't be overly concerned about vulnerability.

The Unusual Balance

In balancing position, we overcall with a single suit or double with support for the other three suits, but what do we do with a two-suited hand? The answer is to use the "unusual" 2NT bid. This says nothing about wanting to play in notrump. It merely says we have a two-suited hand, typically with both minor suits.

West North **E**AST SOUTH 1 🏚 Pass 2 **Pass** Pass 2NT. Since I passed **★** 8 6 over 1♥, partner 7 3 knows I don't have • A Q 10 8 the values for a 1NT ♣ KJ985 overcall or more, so this must be an unusual notrump

bid asking partner to bid one of the minor suits, clubs or diamonds. Partner knows not to bid hearts since I didn't make a takeout double. Hopefully, we can find a spot to play in $3 \clubsuit$ or $3 \diamondsuit$, or push the opponents to $3 \diamondsuit$.

Balancing in the Direct Seat

Although the usual definition of the balancing position is when the auction will be over if we pass, there is a situation where I consider "balancing" in the direct position. Suppose I'm South and the auction begins:

West North East South

1♥ Pass 2♥ ?

If I pass and West passes, partner, North, will be in balancing position. It may be difficult for partner to make a balancing call if partner has length in hearts – three or more cards. So, if I'm short in the heart suit, I like to strain to bid even in the direct position.

Marty Bergen had a very cute mnemonic for this. He called it OBAR BIDS: if the Opponents Bid And Raise, Balance In Direct Seat. It's a nice way to remember the concept.

What I teach is to really go crazy in this position ... throwing the usual guidelines out the window. Be very aggressive. The opponents have found a fit and, if we pass, there are two things that are likely to happen and both of them are bad for us:

- 1. It may go all pass. I consider this a disaster since we've violated the competitive philosophy by letting the opponents play comfortably in their eight-card fit at the two level.
- 2. They may continue to game and now we've lost the opportunity to make a lead-directing call or perhaps find a profitable sacrifice.

West North East South 1♥ Pass 2♥ ?

★ K Q 10 9 7

▼ 7 3

◆ J 10 8 5

★ 8 4

2♠. Textbooks will say we can't overcall at the two level in the direct position with only 6 points.

Nonsense. This is an OBAR bid. We have to alert our opponents and tell them that this could be a weak bid in this situation, but that doesn't prevent us from trying to stop them from having a comfortable auction.

★ K 10 7 3
★ K 10 8 5
★ K J 8 6
Double. If we pass, they will likely stop in 2♥. So, we double. It's light. It's aggressive. It's good bridge.

The whole philosophy of balancing goes against the standard maxims about having a good suit to overcall or the values for an opening bid to make a takeout double. However, balancing is a proven winning strategy. If the opponents have found an eight-card fit at the two level, we need to act, and the person with

shortness in the opponents' suit is the one who needs to do the acting.

When Not to Balance

We can't be too aggressive if the opponents may not have found an eight-card fit. Consider this auction:

West North East South

1♠ Pass 1NT Pass

2♠ Pass Pass ?

The opponents have stopped at the two level, so it's likely we have about half the points. However, there's no guarantee the opponents have found an eight-card fit. West has shown a six-card suit but East may have no spades. In this type of situation, we shouldn't be too aggressive in entering the auction. If the opponents don't have a fit, we may not have a fit either.

West North East South

1 Pass 1 Pass

2 Pass Pass ?

The opponents probably have an eight-card fit, but be aware of the danger. West might have raised with three-card support and the opponents could be in a seven-card fit. Also, the opponents have bid two suits, so the possibility we have a fit is reduced.

When Partner Balances

If we're going to follow a competitive philosophy of trying to stop the opponents from playing comfortably at the two level in their eight-card fit, both partners have to be aware that this is our style. If partner makes a balancing bid, we don't want to punish partner's effort.

WEST NORTH EAST SOUTH

1♥ Pass 2♥ Pass

Pass 2♠ Pass ?

♣ J 8 7♥ K 8 3♦ K J 8 5♣ A Q 2

Pass. We might have the best hand at the table, but partner is expecting us to have something because

the opponents stopped at the two level. Remember, partner didn't overcall 1 and may have only 6 or 7 points and a poor five-card suit.

Balancing effectively gains many points. Don't let the opponents play at the two level in an eight-card fit!