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(1) Bidding Basics: Hand Type - Balanced and Unbalanced Hands

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Level: Novice –Intermediate

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General

We define bridge hands into two general categories: *Balanced* and *Unbalanced* hands. This classification is called *Hand Type*. Early in the auction, one of the most important pieces of information we can communicate to partner is our hand type.

Balanced Hands

Balanced hands are “flat hands.” These hands have no singletons or voids. They also have no more than one doubleton. The balanced hand distributions are:

4333

4432

5332

Balanced hands are the easiest kind of hand to describe in the bidding. These hands are generally described by opening an appropriate level of NT or by opening at the 1-level then rebidding the appropriate number of NT.

Examples

12-14 points Open a suit at the 1-level and rebid 1NT (Ex. $1\clubsuit-1\spadesuit-1NT$)

15-17 points Open 1NT

18-19 points Open a suit at the 1-level and rebid 2NT (Ex. $1\clubsuit-1\heartsuit-2NT$)

20-21 points Open 2NT

22-24 points Open $2\clubsuit$ and rebid 2NT

25-26 points Open $2\clubsuit$ and rebid 3NT



Some Balanced Hand Issues

1NT vs. 1M

With a balanced hand containing a 5-card Major and 15-17 points we have a choice between opening 1M and 1NT. This is a difficult decision and is much more of an art form than a science. There are many things that we may take into account in trying to decide whether to open 1NT or 1-Major – type of points, stoppers, strength of long suit, length of other Major, etc. We can try to take all of these things into account, but the modern approach is to open 1NT whenever possible. When we can describe our hand type and strength to partner completely in one bid, we should strive to do so. This will greatly simplify the rest of our auction!

2NT vs. 1M

With a 5-card Major and 20-21 points it is best to open 2NT. The rebids to describe this many HCP are just too difficult to do anything else. Also, if we open 1M with so many HCP, we will too often play there (when partner passes 1M) while we can often make 3NT!

Minimum Balanced Hands (12-14 HCP) with a 5-card Major

Balanced minimum hands (12-14 HCP) with a 5-card Major can be bit more difficult to describe because partner will sometimes not allow us to rebid 1NT. When we open 1M, partner will often either bid 1NT himself or bid at the 2 level. In either of these situations we tend to make the most descriptive rebid possible in order to describe our hand to partner. *See 2/1 Game Forcing and 1NT Forcing (1NT Semi-Forcing.)*

Hand Type vs. Shape Rebids

When an auction begins 1m-1♥ and we have a 4-card ♠ suit and a balanced 12-14 HCP, we have a choice between bidding 1♠ or 1NT. Rebidding 1♠ tells partner that we have a 4-card ♠ suit and not much else about our hand, while rebidding 1NT tells partner that we have a balanced minimum opening hand (12-14 HCP.) Deciding which piece of information to communicate to partner is often a difficult decision. There are many auctions where Opener faces these types of decisions – where he must choose between communicating hand type or specific shape information. Generally speaking, hand type is the more important piece of information to communicate to partner (especially when we are 4333.) *See Walsh.*



Unbalanced Hands

Unbalanced hands are hands that have a singleton or a void. These hands either have one long suit or more frequently, two or three suits. Some common unbalanced hand distributions are below:

Single-Suited Hands

6331

7321

7330

8221

Two-Suited Hands

5431

5521

6421

5530

6430

Three-Suited Hands

4441

5440

The way that we bid these unbalanced hands is to bid our suits naturally. As a *general rule*, we open our longest suit and next we rebid our second longest suit. We have a few rules that govern the way in which we bid suits, but we strive to bid naturally. See *5-card Majors, Reverses, Jump Shifts, Which Suit to Open*.

With balanced hands, we can narrowly define the strength of the hand based on Opener's initial bid or his rebid (12-14 HCP, 15-17 HCP, 18-19 HCP, etc.) In contrast, with unbalanced hands we must communicate our shape (suits) and thus are often unable to give such detailed information about the strength of the hand. This often makes unbalanced hands far more difficult to bid than balanced ones.



Example

When we have a balanced hand with primary \diamond , we have 4 bids that show our strength below a $2\clubsuit$ opener:

$1\diamond$ then rebid 1NT	12-14 HCP
Open 1NT	15-17 HCP
$1\diamond$ then rebid 2NT	18-19 HCP
Open 2NT	20-21 HCP

When we have an unbalanced hand with \diamond and \clubsuit , we only have two bids to show all 4 of these different hand strengths:

$1\diamond$ then rebid $2\clubsuit$	11-17 HCP (both 12-14 and 15-17 HCP ranges above)
$1\diamond$ then rebid $3\clubsuit$	18+ HCP (both 18-19 and 20-21 HCP ranges above.)

Some Unbalanced Hand Issues

When Not to Open Our Longest Suit

Most of the time we strive to open our longest suit. But there are times, particularly with unbalanced hands, where opening our longest suit can lead to difficulties. The reason that we open “abnormally” with some hands is that we must plan ahead – make sure that we have a convenient rebid. Most frequently, we can’t bid our suits naturally because we do not have the strength to reverse.

Example

\spadesuit 6
 \heartsuit A83
 \diamond AQ75
 \clubsuit QJ732

With this hand, if we open $1\clubsuit$ and partner responds $1\spadesuit$, we have no good rebid. $2\diamond$ would be a reverse (showing extra strength – 16+ HCP,) 1NT would show a balanced hand, and $2\clubsuit$ would promise a 6-card suit. The way we deal with this problem is by not opening $1\clubsuit$; with this hand, we open $1\diamond$, leaving us a nice rebid of $2\clubsuit$.

How to Show Extra Strength

When we have a non-minimum (15+ HCP) unbalanced hand, we need to find a way to show our extra values. If we have a very strong hand, we can make a jump shift (or a reverse if appropriate.) But when our hand is not strong enough to make a jump shift (15-17 HCP), we can’t show our extra values on our first rebid.



Example

♠ 4
♥ Q9
♦ AQJ74
♣ KQJ63

With this hand we open 1♦ and when partner responds 1♠, we rebid 2♣ - showing 11-17 HCP and usually at least 9 cards in the minors. If partner passes we hope that we are in a good contract (and we should be.) If partner corrects back to 2♦ after our 2♣ rebid, then we get a chance to bid again. We next bid 3♣, showing our additional shape and extra values (we would pass 2♦ with a minimum hand.)

Example

1♦ 1♠
2♣ 2♦
3♣ 15-17 HCP with at least 5-5 in the minors

Note: When Responder rebids 2♦, he shows 6-9 HCP. When we rebid 3♣, we show our extra shape and strength, inviting Responder to bid a game with 8-9 HCP.

Semi-Balanced Hands

Some of the most difficult bridge hands are neither balanced nor unbalanced. These hands are called semi-balanced hands – they have no singleton or void, but have more than one doubleton. The distributions are listed below:

5422
6322
7222 (more rare)

These hands may be treated as either balanced or unbalanced. We choose between bidding our suits (treating them as unbalanced) or bidding NT (treating them as a balanced hand.) We make this decision based on the “type of cards” we hold. *See Hand Evaluation.*

Example

♠ AK82
♥ 95
♦ 76
♣ AKQ92

We treat this 16 HCP, semi-balanced hand as a “two-suited” hand and open 1♣, planning to rebid 1♠. This looks much more like an unbalanced than a balanced hand.



Example

♠ KQ75

♥ Q6

♦ K4

♣ KQJ82

We treat this 16 HCP, semi-balanced hand as a balanced hand and just open 1NT. This hand looks more balanced with its values more spread out and we strongly wish to declare a notrump contract from our side.

Note: Many of the same problems related to balanced and unbalanced hands apply to semi-balanced hands.