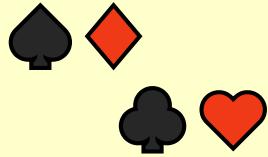


Bridge on Sundays



Hand Evaluation and Re-Evaluation

Many bridge players never get beyond counting their points, especially those who do not attend a proper course of lessons. Those who have may well be familiar with all the following.

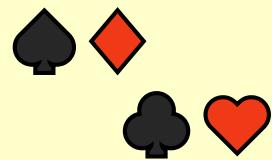
Points

In the universally used points system, aces and kings are undervalued and queens and jacks are overvalued. An ace-less hand should have a point deducted in assessing its value and hands full of Qs and Js and no other honour cards should also be initially valued less than the points total. 10s and 9s supporting other honour cards increase the value of the hand.

Examples:

- ♠KQxx ♥Jxx ♦QJx ♣QJx is an ace-less flat hand which, in first or second positions, is probably better to pass than to open 1NT.
- Consider this hand: ♠AK6532 ♥AK7652 ♦void ♣A. 18points. The majority of inexperienced players would open 1 ♠ or 2 ♠. If partner has less than 4 points, the hand may well be passed out if you open at the 1 level. Better players would open an Acol 2♣ (the strongest opening bid). A slam in ♠s is odds on even if responder has a hand like ♠Q84 ♥843 ♦J9864 ♣52 or in ♥s with a dummy such as ♠84 ♥Q43 ♦109843 ♣J82. A positive response to 2♣, showing an ace and a king, is more likely to be useful in a slam than one with two queens and three jacks!
- You often hear the statement, *I could not bid partner, I only have 4 points.* Well, consider this hand ♠873 ♥52 ♦Q97642 ♣74. If partner deals and opens with any of 1 ♠/♥/♦/♣, then you will pass immediately. But if he opens 1♦, whether your RHO bids or not, you are going to raise the suit. After a double on your right, you might well bid 3♦ to make life difficult for the opponents! So there is a lot more to bidding than just the points.

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Honour cards and length tricks

It is evident that honour cards in long suits are worth more than those in short suits. This is because you get more choices when to play them and they help to set up tricks with the small cards in the suit. The higher the contract, the more that long suit tricks become important.

Examples:

- AQ752 may make 4 tricks in this suit, whereas
- AQ7 is only going to make 2 tricks at best.

Voids and singletons do not make tricks, long suits do. So adding a point for a 5 card suit and 2 for a 6 card suit is another way of assessing the strength of your hand.

Honour cards in partner's suit help to establish the suit for long tricks, whereas a void in that suit only helps if your contract is in a different suit. The worst hand shape is 4-3-3-3, even at no-trumps, because there is scope for long tricks in only one suit

Consider these three hands:

- ♠A83 ♥K65 ♦QJ84 ♣K104
- ♠A86 ♥K6 ♦QJ84 ♣K1063
- ♠A86 ♥K6 ♦QJ843 ♣K103

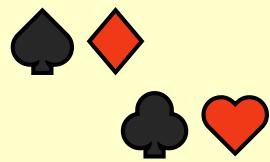
All three contain the same number of points, but the potential for length tricks is greater with the second and third hands.

Suit combinations

Look at these same suit combinations:

- K63 842 with this combination, the chances of making a trick is 50%
- Q75 643 with this, the chances of making a trick is 25%
- KQ3 752 with this, the chances of making a trick is 100%, you may make 2 tricks.

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Putting this into practice:

- ♠QJ8 ♥KQ87 ♦945 ♣AQ3 is a better hand than ♠AJ8 ♥K873 ♦Q94 ♣KJ4. It is usually better when the honour cards are in combination or only have one missing honour between them. A hand with no touching honour cards is less powerful than one with the same number of points but with touching honours.
- ♠KQ5 ♥862 ♦QJ86 ♣KQ9 is a better hand than ♠A85 ♥Q96 ♦KJ52 ♣K65 because in the first hand 3 suits have touching honours, whereas none of the suits in the second hand have this.

Bidding

The rule of 20 provides a useful guide to opening the bidding in a suit, though some hands meeting the rule should be passed.

Consider these two hands:

- ♠A98543 ♥6 ♦A75432 ♣void. Only 8 points but surely worth an opening bid - 1♠ or, perhaps better, a weak two in ♠s
- Whereas ♠AJ ♥Q9653 ♦K5 ♣J642 with 11 pts is not.

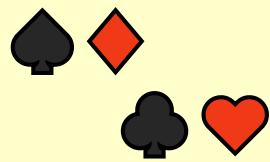
Both meet the rule of 20 but the trick taking potential of the first is far better than the second.

- ♠KQxxxx ♥x ♦AQxxx ♣x. 11points, easily meets the rule of 20 and is worth around 14points because the honour cards are all in the two long suits. The hand is almost worth a reverse bid (i.e. open 1♠ and then jump in ♦s) provided you intend to play in ♠s and avoid NTs.

Losing Trick Count

This device applies to supporting partner in a suit contract; it does not apply to NT hands. It is a far better way to determine the level of the contract compared with raising on points alone.

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First you count your losers as follows:

For each suit, the number of losers is a maximum of 3, or the number of cards in the suit, whichever is the smaller. Then deduct 1 loser for every A, K or Q in the suit.

Look at this hand for example:

- ♠10832 ♥A93 ♦A72 ♣A54. It has 9 losers - 2 in three suits and 3 in the ♠ suit.
- The previous hand, ♠KQxxxx ♥x x ♦AQxxx ♣x, has only 4 losers - 1 in the two long suits and 1 each in the short suits, but has 1 point less than the hand above.

If you are going to raise partners suit:

- With 7 losers, raise to the 4 level
- With 8 losers, raise to the 3 level
- With 9 losers, raise to the 2 level

Be aware that using losers for slam bidding is flawed and can leave you with two losers but 12 *winners*.

A much fuller version of the Losing Trick Count is available on this website.

The aces and spaces hand.

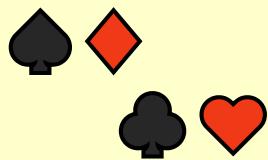
Should you open 1NT with ♠7532 ♥A63 ♦A72 ♣A54?

- After 3 passes, definitely yes because partner is likely to hold on average 9 points.
- Vulnerable against non-vulnerable? First in hand, a pass is not likely to cost, especially at teams. You take a view.
- Third in hand, you risk being doubled by the fourth player and this could be expensive.

Consider these three 13 point hands, which would you prefer to hold and open 1NT?

- ♠9843 ♥J73 ♦AJ6 ♣AQJ
- ♠A1094 ♥J73 ♦J63 ♣AQJ
- ♠A1095 ♥QJ4 ♦J64 ♣AJ9

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It is evident that the third hand is the better because the hearts and spades both combine better.

This following hand only contains 11 points but should be opened 1NT, especially when non-vulnerable.

- ♠K109 ♥Q1096 ♦AJ10 ♣J97

When partner has opened or bid a suit you can support, an 8 card fit increases the value of the combined hands and, more so, 4 card fits in two suits increases the value even further.

Consider this hand:

- ♠QJ1075 ♥3 ♦QJ1042 ♣K6.

If partner opens 1♣ and you respond 1♠, when partner re-bids 2♦ you are surely going to bid to game. On the other hand, if opener merely re-bids 2, then pass. You may miss a diamond contract, but bidding 2 could get you far too high. Your 9 points has a different value according to partner's re-bid.

Responding to a pre-emptive bid

Consider this 13-HCP hand:

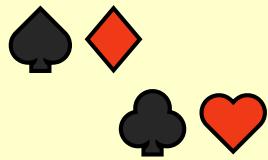
- ♠A62 ♥A853 ♦J54 ♣A86

Compare it with this 17 point monster:

- ♠K7 ♥KQJ95 ♦KQ10 ♣K97

If partner opens 3♣ and you hold the first hand, 3NT is an easy response, with an expectation of 7 tricks in clubs and two side aces. Whereas the second hand as dummy could easily lose the first 5 tricks and more on a spade lead. You are still going to bid over partner's pre-empt but may well get too high with this ace-less hand.

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In a suit contract, an extra trump (a 9 card fit) is worth an extra point. Also Kx or Qx in partner's second suit greatly increases the trick making potential of the hand. When partner has re-bid a major suit at the 3 level (showing 6 cards and around 16 points), either of these two above holdings in the trump suit would provide a raise to game with 5 points outside the trump suit in your hand.

Should partner open 1♠, then you should raise to 4 with this hand:

- ♠xxxx ♥AQxx ♦KQxx ♣x.

Only 11 points but the fit, plus the singleton, plus the side suits with their honour concentration, makes it worth at least 14 points.

Weak twos in the majors

These are pre-emptive bids showing a 6 card major suit and usually between 6 – 10 points. Hand patterns of 6-4-3-0, 6-4-2-1 and 6-3-3-1 are the stronger patterns. However, 6-3-2-2 is much weaker so caution is advised if you open 2 with a 6-3-2-2 pattern and less than 8 points.

If you are not likely to gain the contract, do not open 2 with a poor major suit like ♠964 ♥1086542 ♦AK ♣Q9. If you open 2♥ and the opponents win the contract, a lead from partner could be disastrous. Partner, with say K3, would probably lead the K. Far better to open 2♥ with KQ10653 in the suit. (Most opponents use *double* for a take-out so, provided the double is not left in for penalties, you may escape without serious damage on a poor hand)

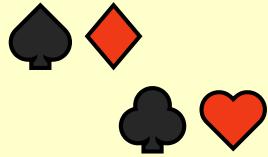
Texture

Texture is less exact than HCP or length but is equally important.

Texture considers the value of intermediate cards in your suits: 10's, 9's and 8's in suits of 4 or more cards. Such cards count even more in support of suits with honours, especially touching honours.

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Example: KJ9 counts 4 HCP but might not take any tricks, while QJ10 counts only 3 HCP but is a sure trick. Subtract 1 or 2 points for poor texture and add 1 or 2 points for good texture.

Look at these two holdings in the same suit:

- AJ1098
- AJ432

Clearly the first is better than the second because of the reinforcing by the 1098 cards

Position

You hold K3 in spades. If spades are bid on your right, you have a useful holding but, if they are bid on your left, you need to down grade your hand accordingly. So in a competitive auction, the position of your honours with respect to the opponent's bidding can be very important in valuing your hand.

Hand re-evaluation

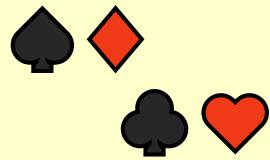
One of the commonest maxims is *one up, shut up* but unfortunately this leads to a number of missed games. You open 1♥ and partner responds 2♥. Remember that occasionally partner will only have 3 cards in the major suit. How do we decide whether to try for game?

Those who use losers as a method of hand evaluation, will then pass with a 7 loser hand and you really need a 5 loser hand to jump to game.

In general, to make a forward bid opener should have at least 16 points. Trial bids are probably the best way forward, making a bid in a new suit that you want help in. The responder needs three factors to then bid game:

- at least four cards in opener's suit
- help in the *trial* suit
- a maximum point count

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Help can be in the form of a singleton/doubleton or aces or kings. Make a trial bid if responder's hand needs only two specific cards to make game.

Example:

If opener holds

- ♠AQ985 ♥72 ♦5 ♣AQ1073 and responder raises your 1♠ to 2♠, then two kings in the black suits should be enough to make game. Note, despite the 12 points, it is 5 loser hand so make a trial in ♣s, that's where help is needed.
- If instead opener holds ♠AQ652 ♥K32 ♦Q5 ♣A72, despite the 15 points, you should pass.

Look at this mundane 7 point hand:

- ♠A7 ♥1098652 ♦8 ♣K943.

As dealer, you should pass and then partner opens 1♠. Not being good enough for a response at the two level you bid 1NT. Then partner bids 2♥.

How good are you now? Well you have a 10 card fit in ♥s, your A♠ reinforces partner's suit and the K♣ is in a useful side suit. Actually a 7 loser hand in ♥s. You would raise partner to 4♥.

- Supposing instead you had held:

♠75 ♥Q98652 ♦A8 ♣Q95

Now your chances of making 10 tricks in ♥s is much lower. One more point, same number of losers but your hand does not reinforce partners suit and the suit could be a source of losing tricks.

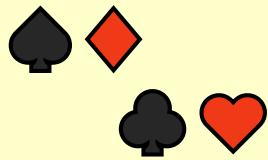
Basing your bids on points or losers is only part of hand evaluation

Supporting responders major suit

Opener bids 1♦ and responder bids 1♠, with opener then bidding 2♠.

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How should responder now proceed? If the hand is completely balanced, then look at your hand as if opener had opened 1NT and if you would have bid game, then do so.

For unbalanced hands, a *rule* of 19-20 is useful. Responder adds together the length of the two longest suits and the number of points and bids game if it is equal to or more than 20 points. When opener raises responder's suit to the three level, responder should bid to game with as few as 6 points outside the trump suit, with a shortage in an un-bid suit i.e. a *rule* of 16.

When opener makes a jump re-bid at the three level, especially in a major suit, even a bare K or Q in the suit solidifies the suit, but you still need some values elsewhere for game.

Ruffing in the long trump suit

This gains no tricks per se and is a common error by less experienced players. Ruffing in the shorter trump suit, usually dummy, always gains tricks.

It is a maxim that, if dummy does not hold 4 trumps, you should look at dummy's shortest suit to play before drawing trumps. Of course, you may need to ruff in the long trump suit to prevent opponents from scoring tricks to help establish dummy's long suit for later discards.

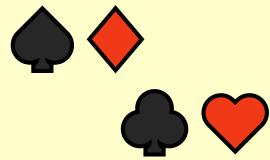
If you have a 3 card fit for partner's suit and a singleton/doubleton in a side suit, then your hand as dummy is normally worth an extra trick. So, if you play that an opening bid in a ♠ suit is at least 5 cards, then with 6 - 9 points and 3 cards in ♠s, it is better to bid 2♠ rather than 1NT, especially if you hold a side suit doubleton.

Re-evaluation in Competition.

Once opponents enter your auction, the meanings of many of your bids may change. Some responses will become unavailable to you because opponents have taken up bidding space. (1 – 3♣ – ?) But other responses will become available that were not before e.g. the negative double, a redouble and cue bids.

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In competition, the flatter your hand the more you should want to defend rather than declare, and vice versa. With a fit, and especially a double fit or a fit and a side suit of some length, compete strongly.

Acknowledgements

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