

Hand Evaluation

When you learned to play bridge, your first teacher taught you that an ace is worth four points, king, three, etc. If your hand contains 13 or more points, you open the bidding; if not, pass. This was fine for your first lesson, but hardly adequate in the real world. Most players today rely entirely too much on point count. Point count is certainly not the only (or necessarily best) method of hand evaluation. Let's look some examples:

Hand [A]

♠ KJ8
♥ QJ94
♦ KQ3
♣ J52

Hand [B]

♠ AK986
♥ A9432
♦ 93
♣ 2

Which is the better hand? Instinctively, you probably prefer the second hand despite the fact that Hand [A] contains 13 high-card points (HCP) and Hand [B] only 11. And you're right, too. Hand [B] is *much* better. Let's see why.

Quick Tricks

The way you were taught to evaluate a bridge hand, aces and kings are undervalued. Similarly, queens and jacks are not really worth what you think. Before Goren popularized the point-count method of hand evaluation we use today, which, incidentally, has been around at least since the 1910's, people used to value their hands by "honor tricks." Today honor tricks are known as quick tricks.

Holding	Quick Tricks
AK	2
AQ	1½
A	1
KQ	1
Kx	½

In the old days, an opening bid promised 2½ honor tricks. It's not so different today. Whenever you are undecided whether or not to open a particular hand, count your quick tricks. That will provide a very good measuring stick. More and more, people automatically open 12-point hands. And they wonder why they end up in trouble. Almost all opening bids should contain 2½ quick tricks. Any hand with 3 or more quick tricks is worth an opening bid, regardless of point count.

QUICK TIP: Count your Aces as 4½ points

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Concentration of Strength

Honors are always more valuable when they are accompanied by *other* honors in the same suit. An ace and king together is virtually the same as having two aces. Similarly, a king-queen or queen-jack combination is better than the same honors in different suits.

Hand [C]

♠ AK986
♥ A9432
♦ 93
♣ 2

Hand [D]

♠ A9863
♥ K9432
♦ 93
♣ A

Notice Hand [C]. It has virtually two spade aces (it could be: ♠ AA986) and three quick tricks. Hand [B] has only 2½ quick tricks. Yet we count both hands as 11 HCP.

Location of Strength

High cards are worth more in your long suits than your short suits. When located in your long suits, they help establish small cards in that suit. If your strength is mainly in your short suits, the honors may take tricks, but they don't help establish other tricks.

Hand [E]

♠ AK986
♥ A9432
♦ 93
♣ 2

Hand [F]

♠ 98654
♥ 98432
♦ AK
♣ A

Compare Hands [E] and [F]. In one case all the high cards are in the long suits. They will help to develop long-suit tricks. In the other, the high cards will take tricks, but that is all. Both hands have exactly the same distribution and exactly the same honors, but one hand is much better than the other.

Positional Considerations

The value of your hand changes as the bidding progresses. Your hand gets better when your partner opens the bidding. You know that he will have some high cards to compliment and reinforce yours. Your hand's value deflates when your opponents open the bidding, especially your left-hand opponent. When most of the strength is on your left, your finesses are more likely to lose because your left-hand opponent is sitting *over* you (gets to play after you). It is important to be aware of this dynamic quality to your hand's worth.

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Shape

Unbalanced hands are better (for offensive purposes) than balanced hands. Surprisingly, this even holds true, to an extent, in notrump contracts. Isn't it nice to have a long suit to run in notrump? Extra length in your long suit(s) often translates directly into extra tricks.

Hand [G]

♠ AK98
♥ A943
♦ 932
♣ 62

Hand [H]

♠ AK9862
♥ A943
♦ 93
♣ 2

Notice that Hand [H] has the POTENTIAL to develop six spade tricks and maybe even four hearts. The limit with Hand [G] is four tricks in each of its longest suits.

Spades Reign Supreme

An often-overlooked factor in the bidding is *which* suit(s) you hold. Look at the hands below. Which is better?

Hand [I]

♠ AK983
♥ A943
♦ 932
♣ 6

Hand [J]

♠ 6
♥ 932
♦ A943
♣ AK983

Despite the fact that spot-for-spot, the two hands are identical (only the suits have changed), Hand [I] is better. You probably have already thought that it offers a better chance of finding a game since you have the majors. But there is a second, more subtle, reason why the hand is better – in the auction itself.

Every bid consumes bidding room. Most bids, even non-jump bids, have some preemptive value. For example, if you open one notrump the next bidder must start at the two-level. You have made the one-level unavailable to him.

When you have higher ranking suits than the opponents, you can outbid them *without raising the level of bidding*. If they want to bid again, they must up the ante by bidding at the next level. Thus it is much safer for you to “bid one more” when your suit outranks theirs. For this reason, you should love hands which contain the spade suit, the highest ranking of all. Diamonds may be a girl's best friend, but spades are certainly a bridge player's! Many years ago, Edgar Kaplan and Alfred Sheinwold advocated adding a point to your hand whenever you hold four or more spades. Not a bad thought.