Out for the Count

By Rich Waugh

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"I had to bid it! You opened the bidding and I had thirteen points," explains partner after going down one in three notrump... then... you take twelve tricks in a three spade contract and partner moans, "We couldn't bid it. After all, we had only twenty-three points between us."

Sound familiar? Those excuses get rather tiresome after a while, don't they? Frustrated with your results, you decide to check the score after the game to see just where you went wrong. Examination of the travelers of these two deals reveals that a few pairs were somehow able to stay out of game on the first hand and some not only bid game, but one or two even managed to bid the cold slam on the other. Infuriating! How did the other pairs keep out of the unmakeable game with an opening bid facing an opening bid? Worse yet, how could they ever know to bid slam with so few points -- on a hand where you were languishing in a part-score? Was it simply a matter of luck? This column will deal with many factors other than point-count, which actually determine the true value of a bridge hand.

Charles H. Goren had a tremendous influence on the game of bridge. In addition to being the top-ranked player of his time, he was a prolific author of bridge columns, articles and books. Perhaps his greatest contribution to the game was presenting a simple method for people to use in evaluating a bridge hand. In the late 1940's, he popularized the "point count" method of hand evaluation so familiar to us all today. Although the 4-3-2-1 point count had been known for a long time (at least since 1915). Its origin is generally credited to Milton Work) already, Goren made it an integral part of his system, introducing it for the first time to the public at large. This had two profound effects on the game – one good, the other not so good.

The 4-3-2-1 point-count made the game comprehensible to the average person. It greatly simplified the task of teaching bridge to beginners and had the ultimate effect of spreading the popularity of the game throughout the general population, moving the game from the private province of an elite few into the public domain. There are a great many more bridge players today than there ever were before Goren appeared on the scene. Unfortunately, the methods advocated by Goren oversimplify the process of hand evaluation to such an extent that the majority of players learn to count their hands by rote and never learn to consider the many, both positive and negative, factors which affect the actual worth of each individual hand. In fact, most teachers never teach just what those factors are, let alone how they can influence the value of a hand. As a result, many bridge players look at the value of their hand as a static quantity which never varies, instead of as a dynamic quality, constantly changing. Yet this is exactly what separates the men from the boys at the bridge table.

It is important to realize that all the rules you have learned (and taught) about hand evaluation are just that – rules. And rules should be bent or broken when the occasion demands. We will see many general rules about things to look for and consider, but keep in mind that they are only rules, they are not written in stone, and there is no substitute for good judgment on the player's part. There is no area of the game where good old fashioned common sense plays a greater role. As Dorothy Hayden Truscott once said so aptly, "Points, schmoints!"

Concentration of honors: Other things being equal, honors in combination are worth more than isolated onors. Honors together support and reinforce one another. They are known values. Scattered honors may combine with values in partner's hand, but they may not. Their value is speculative. A couple of examples should suffice to demonstrate this principle.

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Suppose you have two three-card suits with one ace and one king. Which of these would you rather hold:

(A)	**(B)**
♠ A 3 2	♠ A K 2
♥ A K 2	♥ 4 3 2
♦ —	♦ —
♣ —	♣ —

Hand (A) is worth 1½ tricks. That is, the ♠A will always take one trick and the ♥K will score half the time (whenever the ♥A is onside). Hand (B) is worth two tricks. In effect, the ace and king are equals. Clearly, the hand with the honors concentrated in the same suit is better. Yet most players count both hands exactly the same: seven points. There's something wrong there, don't you think?

Now, let's take the same suits and put them across from a dummy. To be fair, we'll give dummy the same holding in each suit:

Dummy

♠ Q 6 5
♥ Q 6 5
♦ —
♣ —

In combination with dummy, the first hand becomes worth 2½ tricks. The spades are worth 1½ tricks and the hearts are worth one. Hand (B) is now worth 3¼ tricks, three tricks in spades and ¼ trick in hearts (the queen will take a trick when both the ace and king are onside -- about 24% of the time). Once again, the honors together rate to produce more tricks.