

Hand Evaluation – Beyond Counting Points

Hand Evaluation:

Knowing the strength of your hand is critical to deciding how many tricks you are likely to make. Bridge players have developed various strategies to measure the strength of different hands but all need some adjustments to take other factors into account. We are going to take a look at some ideas about this today.

High Card Points:

We use High Card Points (HCP) to evaluate the strength of hands and to provide a shorthand way of describing this strength to partner. HCPs work best for balanced hands – the more unbalanced your hand is the more adjustments need to be made to accurately reflect the trick-taking potential of the hand.

Aces and Kings:

In general Aces and Kings are good cards! They tend to be slightly undervalued in the 4-3-2-1 counting method. This particularly applies in suit contracts and high level contracts.

Queens and Jacks:

Queens and Jacks are, on average, slightly overvalued in terms of HCP. Notwithstanding this they are good cards in long suits and in NT contracts.

Number of Honour Cards:

In balanced hands and NT contracts the number of honour cards held can be relevant. More is good.

Long Suits:

Long suits are a very powerful source of tricks both as trumps and in NT contracts.

Short Suits:

Short suits are a good thing **only** in suit contracts and **only** if the hand also contains a reasonable number of trumps.

Intermediate cards:

Tens, nines and even eights sometimes take tricks but they get no value in the HCP scheme.

Honours in Combination:

When your honour cards are concentrated in suits they add power to each other and take more tricks. Unsupported honours have less value.

Honours Supported by Intermediate Cards:

Just as honours work well together, honours supported by intermediate cards in the same suit are strengthened. The smaller the gap between the honour card and the intermediates the more effective this is. So intermediates work best in combination with queens and jacks.

Fitting Honours with Partner:

It is best to have honour cards in suits that partner also has honour cards in. It is generally better to have lower honours (Qs and Js) in suits that partner has length in.

Degree of Fit with Partner:

The better the trump fit that you have as a partnership, the more tricks you will make for a given number of HCPs.

Mirrors:

A mirror is a hand where both players have the same distribution. This is a bad thing since you will not be able to trump anything in either hand!

An Introduction to Trial Bids:

When inviting game it would be good if we could get as much information as possible regarding the way that the two hands fit together as well as just the HCPs. One way of doing this is by using trial bids.

The most common situation for these is if the bidding starts 1H-2H or 1S-2S.

Long Suit Trial Bids:

A long suit trial bid is a bid of a suit lower than 3 of the major showing a hand that is invitational to game with length in that suit and needing some help in that suit. For this reason they are sometimes called Help Suit Trial Bids. For example 1S-2S-3C says that I am inviting game in spades, I have 3 or more clubs and need some help there.

What Sort of Suit Should a Trial Bid Show?

The suit should be something that will benefit from fitting honours in partner's hand. KJxx, QJxx, QTx, KTx are all suitable. AKQx is too strong – you do not need help in this suit. Xxxx is too weak – partner's honours will not be fitting with you.

What Should Responder Bid?

Responder bids 3 of the major to decline the invitation, 4 of the major to accept the invitation or bids a suit lower than 3 of the major (if possible) to express doubt.

What is Good Opposite a Trial Bid

Fitting honours are best showing that our honours are working together. Shortage can also be useful to cut down losers in the suit.

The Major Suit is Agreed!

We have agreed to play in the major suit so the trial bid is forcing. We must end up in the agreed major.

What does 2NT mean?

1H-2H-2NT shows an invitational hand with no suitable suit for a trial bid.

1-2-3 Stop

Since we will either make a LST in a suit or bid 2NT to invite we do not need to use the reraise to 3 of the major to be invitational e.g. 1H-2H-3H. Many partnerships choose to play this as preemptive, not invitational, trying to keep the opponents from entering the bidding. This should show a minimum opening bid with 6+ cards in the suit.

Other forms of Trial Bids:

Some partnerships choose to play Short Suit Trial bids where the suit that you bid shows a singleton. It is possible to play both sorts together but this is a little more involved.

Three Secrets of Winning Bridge (Nothing about Hand Evaluation!):

Concentration and focus.

Breast your cards!

Be nice to your partner – they are on your side.