



Adventures in Bridge

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This Week in Bridge

(329) Counting Points - Before the Auction Begins

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Level: 1

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General

Hand evaluation is one of the most difficult and complicated parts of bridge. When we attempt to properly evaluate our hand, sometimes we will get it wrong. An important thing to keep in mind is that hand evaluation is much more of an *art form* than a *science*. We need to practice this craft and we need experience working at it in order to get better.

The process of hand evaluation involves more than just the initial measure we take of our hand when we first pick it up. Our total evaluation is a constantly changing value that we adjust as we obtain more information. Before the auction begins, we only have the information about our hand to use in counting our points. The “point count” metric starts with *High Card Points* but then gets adjusted to consider all the aspects of our hand that give it playing strength. These adjustments do not add points to our hand for singletons or voids (shortness), but instead focus on long suits and the location of our honors. Let’s take a look at how to count our “total points” before opening the bidding.

High Card Points (HCP)

The *High Card Point* hand evaluation method was first devised in the 1920s by Milton Work. He described a 40 High Card Point deck consisting of 10 HCP in each suit:

- Ace 4 Points
- King 3 Points
- Queen 2 Points
- Jack 1 Points

Many players do not realize that these HCP were initially only used to evaluate balanced hands. This hand evaluation system was not designed to evaluate unbalanced hands. Thus, we will frequently need to make *adjustments* to overcome the HCP shortcomings of evaluating unbalanced hands. In the modern game, when we have 12 points, we open the bidding. On average, each player should have 10 HCP (40 HCP in the deck / 4 Players = 10 HCP per player.) By opening the bidding, we announce that we generally have “more than our fair share” of the HCP.



We will not spend too much more time discussing HCP (since we are all familiar with them.) But we should discuss the power of Aces. An Ace is an extremely powerful card. If we think about it mathematically, there are 40 HCP and 13 tricks. So each trick is worth roughly 3 points**. But the 4 HCP given to the Ace is considerably more than the 3 points we estimated for one trick. The Ace is given these more points because it takes its own trick and it does an excellent job of developing other cards in that suit into winners. For this reason, many players (and most bridge computer programs) value an Ace at slightly more than 4 points.

*Note: **We do not want to take the HCP-to-trick-taking estimation too far because developing a true mathematical model of bridge is an incredibly complex topic.*

Adjustments

Not all hands with the same number of HCP are equally valuable. Hands can vary in both their offensive and defensive abilities. We use *adjustments* to re-evaluate our hand for its playing strength. Adjustments are an effort to convert the other useful assets of our hand to points. We will do this by adding or subtracting points from our hand's valuation total. Our total points before opening the bidding are our HCP plus (or minus) our adjustments. Let's look at what our options are for adjustments:

- *Upgrade for honors in our long suits.* When our honor cards are located in our long suits, they help set up the little cards in those suits. This makes our hand more powerful for taking tricks.
 - *Length Points* – When we have a *quality long suit*, we need to add points to our hand because this long suit will take tricks as well as having extra HCP would (our hand will play better than its HCP suggest). If we have a weak long suit, it may be too difficult to set up and thus it will not be that useful. But if the suit is a decent quality suit (contains lots of honors), then it will produce extra tricks for us.
 - With a decent 5-card suit we generally add 1 point.
 - With a decent 6-card suit we generally add 2 points.
 - With a decent 7-card suit we generally add at least 3 points.
 - *Spot Cards* (Ts, 9s, ...) are also important in determining if our long suit is a “quality suit.” A good mental trick for deciding if our suit is worth an upgrade is to visualize how it will play if partner has a reasonable holding, something like honor doubleton (Hx). If the suit will play well opposite a reasonable holding from partner, then our hand will likely take more tricks than our HCP suggest.



- *Downgrade for honors in our short suits.* When honors are located in short suits, they do not help set up other cards as effectively as when they are located in our long suits. Thus, they are not worth as much as those honors that are located in our long suits.
 - *½ Value Guideline* - When we have holdings like singleton K, Q, or J then these cards are not worth their full values, but they are not completely useless either. We approximate their value by counting them for half their normal value.
 - Singleton Jack = 0.5 points
 - Singleton Queen = 1 point
 - Singleton King = 1.5-2 points
 - Singleton Ace = 3-3.5 points
 - *Doubleton holdings* like AK, AQ, KQ, KJ, QJ are a lot of HCP not taking many tricks. These holdings are not worth as much as the HCP value that we give them and thus should be slightly downgraded as well. It is more difficult to give an exact number, but if we have a close decision, we should be conservative when we have holdings such as these.
 - *Jacks are Reinforcements.* Jacks are normally given 1 HCP, but this is generally an overvaluing of the “little guy”. Jacks are worth their 1 HCP when they are accompanied by other honors (QJx+, KJx,+ or AJx+), but when they are in holdings such as Jx or Jxx they do not pull their full weight. We generally downgrade them to about half their values here as well.

As you can see there are a lot of decisions involved in properly evaluating a hand. Each time we have to make a decision, our experience plays a key role in how well we do so. Practicing evaluating our hand beyond the process of simply counting HCP is an important part of good bidding.

Conclusion

The modern style is to open most hands with 12 total points (HCP plus adjustments) that contain some defensive tricks. Partner is never happy when we open the bidding and can't take any tricks on defense (especially if partner doubles the opponents' final contract). But the trend is to worry about this less and less. Hands that have 12 total points but not many HCP often contain long suits and can be opened with a preemptive opening bid. We do not open the bidding at the 1-level with 8-9 HCP very often. Make sure that you consider all of the factors that provide playing strength to your hand (not just its number of HCP) when you evaluate before the bidding begins.