

*Standard Bridge Bidding  
for the Twenty-First Century*

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# CHAPTER ONE

## HAND EVALUATION

Evaluating the trick taking potential of a hand requires some guidelines. Yardsticks are available which will allow the bidder to have a feel for the hand before the auction begins. The earliest guideline was Ely Culbertson's system of honor count.

Culbertson assigned honor count points as follows: an ace equals one, a king equals one half, an ace-king combination equals two, an ace-queen combination equals one and one half, a king-queen combination equals one.

This is the table in chart form:

A = 1  
K = ½  
A-K = 2  
A-Q = 1 ½  
K-Q = 1

Although honor count is not the primary method of evaluation today, it is still used. Instead of being called honor count, it is now called the table of "quick tricks", or "defensive tricks".

The 4-3-2-1 point count used today as a hand evaluation measure was first publicized by Milton Work in about 1915. It rose to prominence in the late 1940's when it was adopted and promoted by Fred Karpin and Charles Goren. It assigns four points to an ace, three points to a king, two points to a queen, and one point to a jack.

In chart form:

A = 4  
K = 3  
Q = 2  
J = 1

This system overvalues queens and jacks, and undervalues aces. It also gives no due to tens and other high spot cards that are extremely valuable.

Goren also assigned points for short suits. One point for a doubleton, two points for a singleton, and three points for a void. It is clear that distribution affects hand evaluation. However, short suits do not take tricks. They provide controls. When a player runs out of a suit trumps can be used, but it is the trump cards which take the tricks, not the shortness. If your trumps have been drawn, your short suit will not take tricks.

Consider the value assigned to a singleton ace. This card will take one trick, but the holder has no control over the trick on which it will be played. The ace must be played on the first round of the suit or there would be a revoke. In fact, this ace will take one trick but it does nothing to help create extra tricks. Would not this ace would be far more valuable if it were in a long suit, where it would help small cards in that suit to become winning tricks?

Using the Goren method, bidders usually assign four points for the ace and two for the singleton, giving the singleton ace the value of six points. What a distortion! As a singleton, this ace actually loses value. It is truly worth about three points, rather than six. It is inflexible because it must be played immediately when the suit is led, and does nothing to contribute to the creation of additional tricks in any suit.

It makes far greater sense to add points for long suits. In the trump suit, in notrump, or if there is a trump suit and trumps have been drawn, the fifth, sixth and longer cards in a suit will become tricks when no other player can follow. In the evaluation process used by experts today, no points are assigned for shortness, but adding points for long suits is a common practice. To make it easy, after counting your high card points, add a point to your hand for every length card more than four in a suit. **DO NOT ADD POINTS FOR SHORT SUIT HOLDINGS!!**

## **The Numbers Game**

In using the point count, specific numbers have been established for certain actions. Minimum opening bids generally contain twelve or more high card points (HCP) with at least two quick tricks. If the hands of the partnership are to be able to make a game either in notrump or with a major suit as the trump suit, the partnership needs about twenty-six points. For a minor suit game, the assumed requirement is twenty-nine points; for a small slam it is thirty-three points, and for a grand slam the number is thirty-seven points.

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The rationale for these numbers has to do with the defensive cards left for opponents to hold. When the bidding side has thirty-seven points, the opposition cannot have an ace. When the bidding side has thirty-three points, the opposition cannot have two aces. When the defenders cannot defeat the contract with fast tricks, the bidding side will usually be able to use its assets to fulfill the contract.

If it were always true that both hands were balanced, and all tricks would need to be generated by high cards, this scale would be reasonably accurate. However, the point count is not a panacea. Certain conceptions are necessary if one is to understand and use the point count with any accuracy. Look at three hands, all with the same distribution and high card content to understand how just counting points does not express uniform evaluation.

### Example 1:

a	b	c
♠ Axx	♠ AQx	♠ xxx
♥ Kxx	♥ KJx	♥ xxx
♦ Qxx	♦ xxx	♦ xxx
♣ Jxxx	♣ xxxx	♣ AKQJ

**All three hands in Example One contain ten high card points—one ace, one king, one queen, and one jack. They all have exactly the same distributional pattern.**

**In hand 1a, the ace will win a trick, the king will win a trick about half of the time, and the queen and the jack are nebulous factors.**

**In hand 1b, when the queen is in the same suit with the ace, it will take a trick about half of the time, and when the jack joins the king, its potential for taking a trick changes from nebulous to real.**

**In hand 1c, the combination of all four honor cards presents four tricks. Despite the fact that the point count rates all three hands equally, the third hand has more than twice the trick taking potential of the first hand.**

Ergo, our first axiom for evaluation:

**HONOR CARDS ARE WORTH MORE WHEN COMBINED THAN WHEN ISOLATED.**

Just as important:

**Example 2:**

a	b	c
♠ 65432	♠ AQ432	♠ AQ1098
♥ 5432	♥ AK32	♥ AK109
♦ AK	♦ 32	♦ 109
♣ AQ	♣ 32	♣ 109

All three hands in Example 2 have the same distributional pattern, and the same high card points. If the point count is at all accurate, these three hands should all have about the same trick taking value. Obviously, this is not true!

In 2a, the honor cards will take tricks, but do not help create additional tricks.

In 2b, the honor cards are working since they are in long suits, but the spot cards, for which there is no point count value, are terrible.

In 2c, the spot cards have been upgraded to usefulness.

It is clear that despite the fact that all three hands have the same distribution and high cards, and all count the same when the point count is applied, 2b is a far better hand than 2a, and 2c is better than either of the others.

This leads to more axioms regarding evaluation:

HIGH CARDS ARE MORE VALUABLE IN LONG SUITS THAN IN SHORT SUITS.

GOOD SPOT CARDS ENHANCE TRICK TAKING POTENTIAL EVEN THOUGH NO POINT VALUE IS ASSIGNED TO THEM.

Throughout this text when reference is made to high card points, a plus or minus sign will accompany the number. The plus sign refers to a good hand for the number of HCP because of the location and combination of honor cards, the presence of good spot cards, and good shape for the hand. The minus sign refers to a bad hand for the number of HCP because of isolated honor cards, honors in short suits, bad spot cards and balanced distribution. Bear in mind that plus fac-

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tors make a hand worth several more points than initially assigned, while minus factors can cause the HCP to be an overstatement of the value of the hand.

The numbers game has cast a completely wrong impression with players who rely only on counting their points to know whether or not to bid onward. The true secret of bidding is that of finding suit fits. **FITS, NOT POINTS, TAKE TRICKS.** Try this ultimate example of that fact.

### Example 3:

a	b
♠ AQ108642	♠ KJ9753
♥ 853	♥ —
♦ —	♦ 8765432
♣ 762	♣ —

**With spades as trumps, if these two hands are declarer and dummy, all thirteen tricks will be won on a cross ruff. Although they have only ten high card points, the ultimate fit produces all of the tricks. Note that the opposition holds thirty of the forty high card points and is powerless.**

Do you still feel that you should evaluate by counting points? Well, it is a starting point, but in order to evaluate your hand appropriately, you must listen to the auction. When you discover fits, you will have the wherewithall to take tricks. Fits take tricks. You may have lots of points, but when the two hands do not fit, taking tricks is difficult.

You are seeing the emphasis on finding fits, rather than counting points. Don't fall for the numbers game. Understand that often hands with few points will take a lot of tricks, while hands with lots of points and no fits will routinely disappoint the bidder who gets too high just because of points.

The best approach to accurate hand evaluation is to use both the Culbertson table of "defensive tricks" and the 4-3-2-1 point count. Begin by counting your high card points (HCP). If you are about to open the bidding or make a takeout double and you have the HCP requirement, then look to your defensive tricks. To either open or make a takeout double your hand should contain about 12+ HCP and at least two defensive tricks. Make a further assessment based on the axioms. Upgrade or downgrade your HCP holding based on placement of honor cards, combination of honor cards, absence or presence of good spot cards, and good or bad distribution.

Give attention to your distributional pattern. The more balanced your pattern is, the less value you should assign to your hand. If you have length in one or more suits, particularly when you have high cards in those suits, the value of your hand increases.

As the auction progresses, the value of your hand will increase or decrease based on what you can learn about fits in your partner's hand. Both you and partner will express your holdings. Listen and learn when you have fits. Upgrade hands with fits; downgrade hands that do not have fits. Most bidding errors are made by those who overbid hands with good values and underbid hands with meager values because they have not listened to the auction. Sometimes hands with lots of HCP lose value due to lack of fits, while hands with very few HCP grow astonishingly in value when fits are discovered.

Bidding by the opposition will also allow you to determine the value of the cards you hold. When you hold honor cards in a suit that is bid by the opponent in front of you, those honors increase in value because of their placement. If the opponent behind you bids a suit in which you hold honor cards, they decrease in value because of their placement.

## **Splinter bids**

One of the best of modern bidding tools which expresses a fit is the **splinter** bid.

The **splinter** is a bid that indicates two very important things:

1. A good fit for a suit that has been bid by partner.
2. Shortness (a singleton or void) in the suit identified as a splinter.

**Splinter** bids are made in one of two ways:

1. Conventional sequences which by agreement show shortness.
2. Unusual jumps that have not been assigned other specific meanings.

Of all modern bidding tools, none is as useful for hand evaluation as this one. When partner shows a fit for your suit, and indicates shortness in another, you have instant ability to know the value of every card in your hand.

The high cards you hold in partner's short suit lose value. Because partner is short in the indicated suit and has a fit for your suit, you would rather hold only small cards facing that shortness. You will be able to ruff those small cards in

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partner's hand and thereby eliminate your losers in that suit. But why should you want to ruff your honor cards?

It would be far better to have small cards in the suit where partner is short. Those small cards are losers that you will be happy to ruff. But, the payoff is that when you hold only small cards facing partner's short suit, the honor cards that you do have will face honors in partner's hand. This means that your honor cards will combine with partner's honor cards to produce tricks (remember—FITS TAKE TRICKS).

### Example 4:

a	b	c
♠ K5	♠ AJ6	♠ AJ6
♥ 853	♥ KJ92	♥ 6
♦ AQ65	♦ 6	♦ KJ92
♣ K1094	♣ AQ853	♣ AQ853
d	e	f
♠ AJ853	♠ KQ96	♠ KQ96
♥ K95	♥ 763	♥ AQ8
♦ 5	♦ AQ8	♦ 763
♣ A1086	♣ KQ4	♣ KQ4

Looking at Example 4, we see how the degree of fit determines the number of tricks that can be taken. When 4a faces 4b the diamond queen has no value, and there may be as many as three losers in hearts. But when 4a faces 4c shortness faces losers and the KJ92 holding faces fitting honor cards. With 4a facing 4c, a slam in either diamonds or clubs is a practical certainty.

The situation is similar with Example 4d facing 4e. The diamond queen is again wasted and there may be as many as three losers in hearts. But when 4d faces 4f, the singleton is opposite losers and the AQ8 in the heart suit solidifies the heart holding.

Note that both 4b and 4c are the same hand with suits switched, as are 4e and 4f. The point count and high card holdings are exactly the same. **IT IS THE DEGREE OF FIT THAT DETERMINES THE NUMBER OF TRICKS THAT CAN BE WON.**

When you hold good high cards in partner's short suit and your fit is in a minor, it is likely that the best contract will be in notrump. If partner has made a **splinter** bid and then hears you bid in notrump, bad news, your high cards face shortness. This does not augur well for taking a lot of tricks as you probably do not hold high cards that mesh with partner's high cards. The good news is that you can assure partner that notrump will be a safe place to play because of your concentration of high cards opposite shortness.

We emphasize finding fits at every opportunity. The use of bids which show a fit for partner and specific shortness is a major bidding tool. You will see many examples in which those who live by the "numbers game" get it wrong. They will bid to the level indicated by the points that they hold. Point counters miss games and slams which make because of fits, and they bid games and slams which fail because of the lack of fits. By finding fits you will get it right more often than not.

Because the **splinter** is a modern tool you will not find it in most bidding texts that are intended for the relatively new player. Older texts do not refer to it at all. Newer texts present it for those who are considered advanced students. Rectification of this omission is necessary for the serious student. **Splinters** in action will be included in most of the following chapters.

The matter of hand evaluation is ongoing. In each chapter that follows reference is made to the principles outlined here. Let them guide you to more accurate appraisal of the value of your hand as the auction grows around you.

A wise man once said, "Good judgment comes from experience, and experience is often created by bad judgment." The more experience you acquire, the better your judgment will become. Learn from the errors you make and do not repeat them.