

Hand Evaluation

Hand evaluation? A hand is worth whatever the point count says it is, no?

NO!

It's 'worth' something only in context of the bidding at the time.

You may start with point's, but they're only useful until the bidding starts. Then the value of your hand changes with every call by partner or opponent.

Drop any habitual counting of points and then sticking with that number throughout the auction. Relative point value of a hand can easily go up and/or down 100% during an auction.

Hand evaluation - - actually hand *re-evaluation* -- is a skill you must develop and work on every time you play.

Hand Evaluation

Outrageous! Good bridge players make bids that often seem outrageous to intermediate players, yet the cards in the dummy are magic and opponents are helpless to defeat the contracts. How does this happen?

Points, Smoints ! Dorothy Truscott, one of the finest players in the world, said this years ago, and it's still true. Good bridge players know and remember one fact: Bridge is a game about tricks, not points. Understanding this is especially important during the bidding and it requires hand evaluation. Actually, it's hand re-evaluation.

Start With Point Count. The Point Count System is a good way to begin the evaluation of a bridge hand. Virtually every player in the world uses it. So should you.

The good players remember that it is only a place to start; novices count points before the bidding starts and hang on to that number for dear life. This persistence leads to conversations, repeated thousands of times, that start one of two ways:

"But partner, I only had 10 Points!"

"But partner, I had 10 Points!"

Notice the difference is the word "only". This indicates whether the failed contract was too high or too low.

Use the Point Count System to start the evaluation of your hand, but alter your evaluation of it with every bid, including all passes. Every bid gives you information -- use it or you too will repeat these conversations forever.

Suppose you start with 10 HCP -- an Ace, a King, a Queen and a Jack. This is a perfectly average hand. If your partner has exactly the same, you and your opponents will each take 6 or 7 tricks if the distribution around the table is flat.

Play With A 30 HCP Deck. But as soon as you find a fit with your partner and can name trump, your hands are both worth more, as your side can take tricks with little cards that don't have any Point Card Value: 6's and 3's and 2's. If your side has 8 or 9 trumps and one of you has a void, how many points can the opponents use in that suit to take tricks against you? None. In that case, aren't you playing with a 30 point deck and not a 40 point one? If they have 8 high card points in your void suit, your points have gone up in value because they will still take tricks: theirs have gone to zero value.

For the same reason, when opponents have bid and raised their suit, is your Qx of their suit really worth 2 points to you? Is it worth half an Ace? Hardly.

Aces and Kings

Big Promoters. Aces and Kings are especially wonderful cards when they support each other. To illustrate, what's the worth of these two combinations?

♦ AKxxx □□□♦ Ax

♣ - ♣ Kxx

Clearly, the first is more valuable on offense than the second, yet both contain the same number of 'points' and the same high cards. With the second combination, your side may take only one trick -- with the first, it may be worth as much as 4 or 5 tricks.

Promotion. Aces and Kings, especially in combination, provide the ability to set up small cards to take tricks -- Queens and Jacks are usually too slow to provide much small card promotion by themselves.

Consider:

♠ Axx	♠ AKxxx
♥ Kxx	♥ xx
♦ Axx	♦ AKxxx
♣ Kxxx	♣ x

As declarer with the first hand you may take only two tricks, but with the second one, you can take lots of tricks, even with as little as this hand in dummy:

♠ Qx
 ♥ xxxx
 ♦ J10xx
 ♣ xxx

Is this dummy worth only three points? If Hand 2 has bid Spades and Diamonds, this dummy is worth about 10 points, not three. On a good day, these two hands will make 10 tricks. Points, Smoints!

Long Suits. Aces and Kings in long suits are worth more on offense because they can set up little cards. Aces and Kings in short suits are better suited for defense because they take the first round or two of the suit and are therefore unlikely to be ruffed.

Do you think this holding is worth two tricks at defense? Do you think it is worth 4 - 6 tricks as declarer at Two Clubs?

♣ AKxxxx

How many tricks do you think this hand will take at either offense or defense?

♥ Ax

♣ Kxx

Aces are worth more than 4 points for several reasons:

- They take tricks on both offense and defense
- They take Kings and Queens

- They take the first trick in each suit
- They keep the lead
- They can help set up long suits

Fast and Slow Winners and Losers

Fast Aces and Kings are primary honors, also known as 'fast' winners.

Not-So-Fast Queens and Jacks are secondary honors that may or may not win tricks after the Aces and Kings are gone, so they are 'slow' winners. Declarer and defenders both try to get their tricks before the opponent gets theirs: so timing in bridge is, as in most things in life, everything.

You Gotta Get Your Tricks At duplicate this is more important than at rubber bridge, as you can get a bottom board if you don't get your tricks, regardless of whether you set the contract or not. You have a better chance to get your tricks if they are fast rather than slow. On the other hand, slow losers are better than fast ones if you are declaring the hand.

This is an important factor in hand reevaluation:

Are my winners fast or slow?

Are my losers fast or slow?

Your opponents' Aces and Kings are sure losers for you -- their Queens and Jacks may not be.

Magic Cards. On the other hand, Queens and Jacks in support of partner's suits are 'magic' cards, worth far more than their point card value: they solidify the trump suit, provide transportation to dummy, etc. A Qx in partners suit is usually worth as much as an outside Ace.

Following is a 7 HCP hand. How many tricks might it take as declarer? As dummy?

- ♠ Qxx
- ♥ Jxxx
- ♦ QJx
- ♣ Jxx

Actually, this hand is a good 7 point dummy, as it is difficult to lead through or toward. It's a poor defensive hand, not because it is weak, but because the winners are all slow.

Hand Evaluation in Action

Hand re-evaluation is a subtle art, not a science

No Prizes, but . . . All the factors of hand evaluation represent pluses or minuses from the straight point count hand evaluation. However, re-evaluation is only meaningful in context - in the actual competitive situation. There are no prizes for perfect hand re-evaluation -- only if it helps you make better bids than your opponents does it do you any good.

But it must become a habit on every hand for winning competitive play.

A sequence of . . .

N E S W

1♠ P 3♠ P

4♠ P P P

. . . doesn't represent a problem in hand evaluation. The Card Gods want N/S to play 4 Spades and they are going to do so.

A Low Level Art Form. Generally, re-evaluation is most important at low level and competitive auctions. However, these contracts are the bread and butter of winning competitive bridge -- almost everyone in Duplicate competition bids games and slams correctly.

This is an auction where the better competitive hand evaluation may win:

N	E	S	W
1♠	P	1NT	P
P	2♦	P	P
2♠	P	P	???

What's the value of this unbid West hand now that East has bid 2♦?

♠ Ax
♥ xxxx
♦ Qx
♣ Kxxxx

Analysis in Depth. The Spade Ace is a winner, but is no help to East to develop extra tricks. The Queen of Diamonds is a magic card, worth more than 2 points on offense. The King of Clubs is the critical card if you assume the plus and minus of the Queen of Diamonds and the Ace of Spades balance out. In this case, South bid No Trump and may well have the Ace of Clubs, making the King possibly worth a trick - as much as an Ace - or then, maybe not.

North bid Two Spades even though he passed 1 No Trump. This indicates real weakness, as he didn't chose to defend, but rather chose to try for 8 tricks even without any Spade help from South . . . interesting. Maybe he sees down 1 as better than letting East try Two Diamonds.

Options. The options available to West are: pass and try for a defensive win by beating North at 2 Spades; bid Three Diamonds, hopefully to make and possibly better at minus 100 than minus 110 for North making Two Spades; and, some days, bid Two No Trump or even Double.

On balance, a hand with this many values - not points -, that has not bid at all, should think about saying something.

Theoretically Correct Bid

They're Gonna Be Close. Remember, against competent opponents, every hand will be close to the theoretically correct bid. When opponents chose to defend or declare, they are evaluating their hands as well as possible given the bidding they hear.

You Gotta Be Close. You must do the same, and you must, of course, temper all these decisions with the scoring possibilities -- vulnerability is always foremost.

There is a bridge theory called the Law of Total Tricks which is worth understanding when you get deeply into Duplicate. It relates to the theory of competing auctions when both sides have a fit, and is a must for advanced Duplicate players. It's not included in this series, however.

Hands and Gloves. Hand evaluation and balancing are hand-in-glove concepts -- the reason to work so hard at hand evaluation is to determine whether to balance, defend, declare or double in close contests.

Bridge doesn't get any better - after all, it's only a game.

Rule 1 of Hand Evaluation

Your high cards go UP in value if they're in your suits and DOWN in value if they're in your opponents' suits.

Your hand goes UP in value if you find a fit with your partner, and DOWN if you don't.

Fits and Misfits. This is the reason good players stop at low levels with misfit hands but bid like crazy with good fits: they know and remember this rule every time they bid.

Question: How many points does my hand go up or down?

Answer: It's not a matter of points. It's more about "pluses and minuses" and they are useful only when facing a close decision. For example, when deciding to bid game or pass at three, a Qx of your partner's suit is a magic 2 points - worth much more than if the opponents had bid that suit and you had to defend.

Before and After. If your LHO deals and opens 1 Spade and ends up in a 4 Spade contract, how much is your Kx of Spades worth? Is it the 3 or 4 points you started with? or 0? 2?, 1?

Obviously, the correct answer is "It depends upon where the Ace is". Where is the Ace likely to be? Opener has at least 5 Spades; you have 2 and opener's partner has enough to bring their total to eight or nine; your partners Spades don't matter. So, of the missing cards, 5 of the 8 are behind you, so the odds of the Ace being there are not even; they are stacked heavily against you. If you have bid, some HCP's must be in your hand, so that may also steer declarer in the right direction to finesse you, or to end-play you if you are behind the Ace.

Rule 2 of Hand Evaluation

Honor cards in your opponents' suits are diminished in value if they are in front of the opponent most likely to have a higher honor - except for the Ace.

Vulnerable Honors. Kings and Queens are vulnerable to a finesse if they are located ahead of declarer. If located after, they are less vulnerable, but they still don't carry full weight for your side, because you can't lead them - they carry their weight for defense, but probably not for offense. They can also be end-played by skilled declarers.

4,3,2,1 -- Not. The Point Count System is an approximation of strength indicating that an Ace is worth 4 'points', a King 3, etc.

In fact, Aces are worth more than 4, maybe $4\frac{1}{3}$, and Queens and Jacks are worth less, maybe $1\frac{2}{3}$ and $\frac{6}{7}$. But, of course, we don't use such unwieldy numbers; 4,3,2,1 is tough enough sometimes.

Aces More; Queens Less. However, because we don't use fractional numbers doesn't mean that it isn't true: Aces are worth more than their assigned point count, and Queens and Jack are worth less. Some examples:

Do you think these three 12 point hands are of the same value? Close? How many tricks do you think they will take on offense? on defense?

♠ AKxxx	♠ KJx	♠ Ax
♥ x	♥ QJxx	♥ xxxxx
♦ KQxxx	♦ Qx	♦ Ax
♣ xx	♣ QJxx	♣ AXXX

Rule 3 for Hand Evaluation

Aces and Kings are worth more than the normal point count and Queens and Jacks are worth less.

Combo's Aces and Kings in combination with each other or in combination with partner's Aces and Kings are worth even more, as they will develop tricks in long suits if you are declarer. They are worth less in short suits -- such hands are more valuable at defense than offense.

Opponents' Ace. What's the value of an Ace of the opponent's trump suit? Is it ever going to take more than one trick? Rarely will it be of much additional value to the defense.

Partner's Queen. A Queen of your partner's rebid suit is a magic 2 points - it helps set up little card winners. An Ace is great, but you already counted it for 4 points.

Magic Card Combinations

There are some magic combinations of cards:

- Any honors in partners bid suits are magic as they fill in sketchy suits. This is true on offense but queens and jacks are of little value on defense.
- A fourth trump, of any size, is powerful -- it has no point count value, but it's great for declarer's purposes.
- 10's and 9's, especially in important suits, are worth more than the zero assigned to them in the point count system. Which of these two would you rather have for a dummy opposite your ♥ Kxxxx?

♥ 1098x or ♥ 6543

10's and 9's are "pushers" as they 'push' honors from the opponents' hands. They have real value but usually only as declarer's cards.

- Singletons in opponents' suits are also magic -- voids are even better. The worst combination is two of opponents' suits -- chances are that both you and your partner will have two, so opponents will take the first two tricks.