

3: Hand Evaluation: upgrades and downgrades

Excellent book: *Hand Evaluation: Points, Schmoints* by Marty Bergen

In the A = 4, K = 3, Q = 2, J = 1 point counting method, aces, tens and even nines are underrated, queens and jacks are overrated, kings are about right. So upgrade when aces and tens outnumber queens and jacks significantly. If you want some more exact numbers and don't mind fractions, use A = 4½, K = 3, Q = 1½, J = ¾, 10 = ¼. Note that the point total for any suit is still 10; an ace is worth three queens, not two.

“Quick tricks” are important. AK = 2; AQ = 1½; A = 1; KQ = 1; Kx ½. Jacks are never “quick”, queens only count when with the ace or king. No suit can have more than 2 quick tricks. **A one-level opening hand usually has at least 2 quick tricks.** Compare these two hands, both with 12 HCP:

♠A64 ♥A864 ♦83 ♣A542 vs ♠QJ7 ♥QJ43 ♦K5 ♣QJ65

Whether you look at quick tricks, “quacks” or realistic point count, the first hand is a rule of 20 opener, the second one should not be opened.

Honors in short suits should be devalued. Subtract one point for the following: singleton K, Q or J; doubleton QJ, Qx, Jx.

Honors in long suits are far better than honors in short suits:

♠64 ♥AK864 ♦8 ♣AK542 vs ♠AK ♥86432 ♦A ♣K7653

Same distribution, same HCP, but the hand on the left is way better than the one on the right. And if hearts are going to be trumps, the difference is even bigger!

Honors in partner's long suit(s) should be upgraded. In other suits, only aces are “proven”. Unprotected queens and jacks might end up being worth very little. Evaluate and compare these two hands after partner opens 1♥:

♠KJ65 ♥864 ♦QJ ♣QJ42 vs ♠8642 ♥KQ2 ♦A653 ♣43

Upgrade or downgrade? Why?

Your hand has a heart holding of ♥J6. Initially, count this as 0 HCP (see above). If partner's bid promises four hearts, you can restore this holding to 1 HCP; if partner opens 1♥, showing at least five cards, your heart holding can be upgraded to 2 points.

Partner opens 1NT. You have a long suit. What is it worth?

Add 1 point for each card beyond the 4th. Add another if the suit has 3+ honors. But subtract one if the suit has no honors:

♠65 ♥864 ♦AKT95 ♣T42 Bid 2NT. 7 HCP + 2 (1 length, 1 honors) = 9 pts
♠Q5 ♥A64 ♦87543 ♣QJ4 Bid 2NT. 9 HCP + 1 (length) – 1 (topless) = 9 pts
♠965 ♥K4 ♦65 ♣AJT842 Bid 3NT. 8 HCP + 3 (length, honors) = 11 pts

Look at the last hand again. Partner with 15-17 HCP is very likely to hold a club honor. Even if she doesn't, she can take the club finesse twice and likely only lose one club trick. Then too, the heart king is a probable side entry, if needed, to run the clubs.

Dummy points. When you have a fit for partner's suit, add points for shortness in side suit(s). Void = 5; singleton = 3; doubleton = 1. This of course assumes you plan to play with that suit as trumps. And don't forget that honors in partner's suit get upgraded too.

When partner has supported your long suit. Now you should add points for length and shortness. Length points: 1 for the 5th card, 2 for every extra card. Add another point if you have ten or more cards in your two longest suits.

Shortness points (note: these are not dummy points!): void = 3; singleton = 2.

♠AK9765 ♥4 ♦65 ♣KT82 As dealer, you count 10 HCP. You have a rule of 20 opener. You open 1♠ and partner raises to 3♠. What now? (hint: reevaluate!)

When an opponent has bid a suit. Consider your holding in the suit, **and** whether you sit in front of or behind the opponent who has called:

With **shortness** in opponent's suit, try hard to compete

With **length** in opponent's suit, compete conservatively – it may be better to defend.

With honor(s) in opponent's suit, it is much better to sit behind the caller than in front.

Overall distribution is important: Length and shortness are both important, but what about the other suits?

4-3-3-3 is not a good distribution, even in NT contract. Some people subtract a point.

In suit contracts:

5-4-4-0 is better than 5-4-3-1 better than 5-4-2-2 better than 5-3-3-2

6-4-3-0 is better than 6-4-2-1 better than 6-3-3-1 better than 6-3-2-2

7-4-2-0 is better than 7-4-1-1 better than 7-3-2-1 better than 7-2-2-2

Suits with 4 honors: You can safely count such a suit as being one card longer than it actually is. Your right hand opponent opens 1♣ and you hold:

♠AQJT ♥6 ♦8754 ♣AQ94 What do you bid?

You open 1♥, holding ♠QJT7 ♥AKQJ8 ♦4 ♣974 Partner bids 1NT. What now?

Intermediates are important, especially in the trump suit. If you are unsure whether to bid on or pass, consider your tens, nines and eights.

Compare these holdings, each with 6 HCP: AQ432 AQ984 AQT98

What about this trump suit?: QJT9874 That's 5 tricks guaranteed, but just 3 HCP!