Ask Jerry

by Jerry Helms

*Well-known teacher and player **Jerry Helms** answers your bridge questions. Send your questions to "Ask Jerry" c/o Jerry Helms, 500 Montclair Avenue, Charlotte, North Carolina 28211, USA.*

Dear Jerry: *Why can't we always value hands with either points for long suits or with points for short suits? And why do the points for short suits keep changing!*

—*P. Dalton*
Hartford, CT

Dear P.D.: Let's start with some history about valuing distribution. In the 1940's, Charles Goren, while promoting Milton Work's 4-3-2-1 point count system (4 for an Ace, 3 for a King, 2 for a Queen, and 1 for a Jack), introduced the concept of adding value for short suits. *Prior* to finding a fit, he suggested the total worth of a hand be the sum of high card points plus short suit values.

Pre-Fit Short Suit Values	
Doubleton	1 point
Singleton	2 points
Void	3 points

♠ —
♥ K 8 6 5
♦ A K 9 4 3
♣ A 10 6 2

Using "Goren" the total value of this hand is 17 points: 14 high-card points plus 3 for the void. What happens to these presumed values if the final contract becomes either spades or no-trump? They vanish!

So, some theorists suggested the alternative of valuing long suits:

Long Suit Values	
Five-card suit	1 point
Six-card suit	2 points
Seven-card suit	3 points

Look at the following examples, remembering that point count should be an attempt to "guesstimate" trick-taking potential.

WEST	**EAST**
♠ —	♠ A K J 2
♥ K 8 6 5	♥ J 7 3
♦ A K 9 4 3	♦ Q 8 6 2
♣ A 10 6 2	♣ Q 5

In 3NT the spade void is worthless. The ♠J should actually be devalued since you can't attempt a finesse. In contrast, West's fifth diamond will be a winner roughly 90% of the time.

WEST	**EAST**
♠ —	♠ A K Q J 10 9 2
♥ K 8 6 5	♥ —
♦ A K 9 4 3	♦ 8 6 2
♣ A 10 6 2	♣ K J 5

In 6♠, East has eleven winners: seven spades, two diamonds and two clubs. West's spade void is not an asset. However, West's five-card diamond suit can be established for a twelfth trick 82% of the time. This is superior to the 50% option offered by the finessing the ♣J.

So, when opening the bidding, before a fit has been found, it became popular to count length rather than shortness.

Once a fit has been found, Goren suggested that the value of short suits increases:

Post-Fit Short Suit Values	
Doubleton	1 point
Singleton	3 points
Void	5 points

However, it can make a difference which hand has the short suit. Consider this layout where spades are trumps and declarer has a singleton heart:

DUMMY
♠ 4 3 2
♥ 5 4 3

DECLARER
♠ A K Q J 10
♥ 2

There are five spade winners. Trumping hearts in the hand with the long trumps prevents heart losers but doesn't create an extra winner.

Now look at a similar layout with the shortness in the dummy:

DUMMY
♠ 4 3 2
♥ 2

DECLARER
♠ A K Q J 10
♥ 5 4 3

There are five spade winners in declarer's hand but *two more spade winners can be found by trumping declarer's heart losers in dummy*.

These examples illustrate the need to evaluate short suits differently based on their location. Short suits in the hand with the long trumps—typically declarer—prevent losers but rarely create winners. Short suits in the hand with the fewer trumps—typically dummy—both stop losers and create extra winners.

♠ —
♥ K 8 6 5
♦ A K 9 4 3
♣ A 10 6 2

You open 1♦ with this hand. Consider how your emotions might vary depending on partner's response.

YOU	**PARTNER**
1♦	1♠

A response of 1♠ is not stimulating. But suppose the auction begins:

YOU	**PARTNER**
1♦	1♥

James Brown's "I feel GOOD" comes to mind. First, 50% of your bidding problems are over since the final contact will be hearts. Second, if the opening lead is the ♠A, a trump from your dummy will win the trick, making the void more valuable than the ace…perhaps 5 points?

This all boils down to a reasonably accurate method of hand evaluation:

- Count high card points (HCP).
- Add values in the "short hand" for shortness after the bidding reveals a trump fit.
- Devalue shortness in the hand with the long trump suit but continue recognizing the inherent potential of long suits.