



## Hand Evaluation

Your partner just made 11 tricks in 1♥. You missed bidding an easy game contract. You say “I didn’t think I could bid, partner. I only had 5 points”.

You’ve just failed in a 3NT contract, making only 7 tricks. Partner says “Well, I had enough points to put you up to 3NT. It was just unlucky”.

These things happen all the time. But often they’re AVOIDABLE. The key is **hand evaluation**.

OK, we can all count up our high card points – but what is our hand REALLY worth, in terms of trick taking potential? Counting high card points is very useful, but it’s FAR from the whole story!

Hand evaluation is one of the trickiest, but most important, parts of how to play good bridge. It’s well worth the effort to get your head around.

We’ve already seen a really powerful tool for hand evaluation, called LOSING TRICK COUNT

It’s superb for getting a much better handle on the value of a hand than HCP count, when the hand is unbalanced (ie shapely).

I hope we’re all using it! It’s far easier and more accurate than adding points for shortages and length. But it only really comes into its own when we have a fit with partner, and we are the opening side.

Today we’re going to look at some other ways of valuing your hand. And these are essential to take your game to the next level.

Here are a couple of examples:

### Example 1

You pick up this hand, as dealer: ♠A 5 4 3 ♥Q 5 3 ♦A J 4 ♣A 6 4

You count 15HCP, and have a 4-card major suit. Say you open 1♠, and partner responds 2♣, showing a minimum of 10HCP and 4 clubs, or 9HCP and 5 clubs, or 8HCP and 6 clubs (“Rule of 14” for responding at 2 level). You have opened 1 of a suit, so you’ve promised a rebid. You are not going to rebid your 4-card spade suit, so you have to say 2NT, promising 15 or 16 HCP. Partner has 11HCP and 4 clubs, so counts at least 26 HCP between you, and raises to 3NT.

Here is partner’s hand: ♠K 6 2 ♥7 4 2 ♦K Q 2 ♣K 8 7 5

You make 7 tricks (or 8 if you’re very fortunate and the ♥Q makes a trick). What went wrong? Your hand turned out not to be good enough to rebid 2NT, and you had no other rebid. Was that just bad luck, or was there something you and partner could have done differently?

## Example 2

This time you pick up ♠K 10 9 ♥K 9 ♦K J 10 9 4 ♣A 9 7

You count 14 HCP. You think “I have a choice between bidding 1♦ and 1NT, but, remembering what I’ve been taught, if I have a hand which qualifies for 1NT, I should bid it”. So that’s what you do. Everybody passes, and you play in 1NT.

Here is partner’s hand: ♠A 4 3 ♥A 10 5 3 ♦Q 2 ♣10 5 4 2 - a fairly balanced 10 HCP. Even if you’re a maximum, there’s no more than 24 points between you, so Pass is the right thing to do.

You make 10 tricks (or maybe even 11, depending on the lead). A 3NT game was cold, and you missed it. Was that also just bad luck, or was there something you and partner could have done differently?

The answer in both cases is **YES**. The key is evaluating your hand. But how do we do that?

It’s one of the hardest parts of Bridge, but fortunately we can offer some handy tips.

## SHAPE / LENGTH

For dead flat hands 4-3-3-3, deduct a full point!

Long suits are often gold dust for generating extra tricks, even if missing some high cards, as once the opposition high cards are gone, your remaining little cards in a long suit can be worth a trick each.

That’s true in NT, and also in a side suit in trump contracts, once you’ve drawn trumps.

If you don’t have any long suits, your hand will not have this trick taking potential.

And if you don’t have any short suits, your hand won’t have any ruffing potential.

## INTERMEDIATES and SEQUENCES

10’S and 9’S don’t count towards your high card point count, but they contribute to the strength of your hand, especially in a suit where you have some high cards.

Which of these 3 point 5-card suits is worth more tricks?

♦ K 7 6 4 2

♦ Q J 10 9 8

If your hand has no intermediates – just high cards and little ones, and no useful sequences, it will be worth AT BEST the high card point count.

If it does have some intermediates and/ or sequences, especially with some high cards in the same suit, shade up in valuation: count your hand as **worth more** than its HCP face value.

Let’s look at our two examples again in the light of this information.

**Example 1** ♠A 5 4 3 ♥Q 5 3 ♦A J 4 ♣A 6 4

We have 15HCP, but it’s 4-3-3-3, so we deduct a point, and count it as worth 14.

There are no intermediates or sequences to shade it back up. We open 1NT.

Here was partner’s hand

♠K 6 2 ♥7 4 2 ♦K Q 2 ♣K 8 7 5

Same reasoning, we count this 11HCP hand as worth 10 points. With partner opening 1NT, a max of 14, we know we haven’t enough for 3NT, so we pass.

Contract 1NT, making 7 tricks (or maybe 8 if we’re lucky).

**Example 2**     ♠K 10 9    ♥K 9    ♦K J 10 9 4    ♣A 9 7

We have 14HCP, but a lovely 5-card diamond suit worth more than its 4 HCP (length & sequence).

We also have ♠10-9 and ♣9. So we count this as worth at least 15 points, and open 1♦, with a view to rebidding 1NT.

Here was partner's hand

♠A 4 3    ♥A 10 5 3    ♦Q 2    ♣10 5 4 2

and it's clear to respond 1♥. When opener rebids 1NT, and we are liking our 10 point hand, so we raise to 3NT. Game makes easily.

That was all about shape/length, sequences and intermediates. All important stuff. But there are some other things we should consider as well:

### Isolated honours

Honours you hold in a suit where you have no other high cards are often worth less than face value.

Honours together work better than if they're in separate hands

	You (W)	Partner (E)
1	♠ K Q 4	♠ 7 6 5
2	♥ K 6 4	♥ Q 7 5

In both hearts and spades, you and partner hold 5 HCP, the K and the Q. But in the spade suit, if the missing ace is in the South hand, your K and Q make 2 tricks. In the heart suit, however, your K and Q will only make 1 trick, as the Ace will kill one of them whichever opponent holds it (unless of course an opponent chooses to lead out an unsupported ace – see why that is often a bad move?)

A suit containing one honour on its own is a bad sign – often it won't pull its weight.

### Partner bids a suit in which you hold some high cards

Any honours you hold in that suit increase in value – they solidify partner's good suit.

This is also true if you hold a singleton K or Q. It's a good idea not to count the full HCP value of such a singleton, as it might well be worthless and fall under opponent's Ace; but if partner bids that suit, you can count it at its face value.

(when initially evaluating a hand, before any bidding has happened, I like to count a singleton K or Q as half the face value. I can then adjust the valuation as the bidding proceeds)

### Position

If you hold an honour in a suit opponents bid, it is often critical whether you are sitting above or underneath the opponent who has bid that suit.

If you hold ♥K 5 2 as West, say, your ♥K might well be worthless if North bids hearts, but worth a trick if South bids hearts.

## Misfits

If your long suits are those where your partner is short, and vice versa, the hands are mis-fitting, and will make fewer tricks than the HCP count suggests.

It will be unlikely you can establish any length winners, and communications between your hands (entries) will be more difficult. If the bidding suggests you are mis-fitting, downgrade your hand and try to keep the bidding low.

Example: you are East, and hold a 10 HCP hand as follows

(a) ♠Q 3 2    ♥J 9 3 2    ♦K 6    ♣A 10 9 5

(b) ♠J 3 2    ♥A 7 3 2    ♦8 6    ♣A J 7 5

Partner opens 1♦, you respond 1♥, and partner rebids 1♠. What do you bid now?

With hand (a), you like your ♦K in partner's opening suit, decent support for partners' second suit, and a robust club holding. You UPGRADE to ~11points, and bid 2NT. Partner raises to 3NT.

With hand 2, you are mis-fitting with partner and just rebid 1NT.

Here is partner's hand

♠A K 7 6    ♥10 6    ♦A Q J 5 2    ♣8 3

The hands might not at first sight look much different, but **look at the difference in how they play!**

With your hand (a), 3NT is highly likely to make, but with hand (b), there is little chance.

## Summary

We've seen the importance of hand evaluation, and what a difference it usually makes to the simple HCP count.

We've seen it's something you should start to apply as soon as you pick up your hand, but then **continue to adjust as the bidding proceeds**:

- a hand can often start off looking quite meagre, but then grow hugely in value as partner and/or opponents bid
- a hand can start off looking quite promising, but then reduce in value as partner and/or opponents bid (eg a misfit with partner)

Jim Steele, April 2022

