Length Points Counting Method

By Marcia West

The modern trend in bidding is to count high card points (HCP) together with length points(LP) for the purpose of opening the bidding. With a long suit, five or more, and at least one of the top 3 honors in the suit, add one point for the fifth and each subsequent card. With two five-card suits add one point in addition to the points for the fifth card.

Honors are A,K, or Q. Thus J9842 is worth one point for the J and Length Points are not counted.

a) s: AQT973 h: 4 d: AJ5 c: 832 = 11 HCP + 2 LP=14 total points. OPEN 1S
b) s: AQ43 h: K874 d: 8 c:K932 = 11 HCP + 0 LP=11 total points. PASS
c) s: A53 h: KQ874 d: 2 c: K973 = 12 HCP + 1 LP=13 total points. OPEN 1H
d) s: 32 h: AT8743 d: AK2 c: 93 = 11 HCP + 2 LP= 13 total points. OPEN 1H
e) s: T97542 h: Q d: AJ5 c: A32 = 11 HCP + 0 LP(no honors). PASS
f) s: AK862 h: QJ974 d: 2 c: 73 = 10 HCP + 3 LP (one for 5th spade and one
for 5th heart and one for two 5-card suits) = 13 total points. OPEN 1S
g) s: KQ9853 h: Q84 d: A2 c: 74 = 11 HCP + 2 LP = 13 total points. OPEN 1S

When a trump fit is found & provided that you have at least eight cards in combination, responder uses the 5-3-1 count for FIT POINTS (FP): doubleton=1; singleton= 3; and, void = 5 FP. Responder also counts LP's as a long suit is always a bonus as a source of tricks or for discards. Thus to get a full valuation for responder's hand, add together the high card points, length points and with a fit, your fit points.

HCP + LP + FP = TOTAL POINTS (TP)

Opener should only count Fit Points if there is a known 9-card fit as s/he can use some trumps for ruffs and still have enough left to draw the outstanding trumps. In an 8-card fit it is best for opener not to count FP's for typically declarer's trumps are needed to draw the opponent's trumps. However even in an 8-card fit there is the possibility of a cross-ruff play. So this is a murkier area than 9-card fits

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Dealer: North
Vul: None    NORTH
           S AJT43
WEST       H QJ73    EAST
S K92      D K54     S Q875
H4      C 3          H T82
D AQJ63              D T8
C KQ94     SOUTH     C JT75
           S 6
           H AK965
           D 972
           C A862
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Here is our first example of LENGTH POINTS which will see North opening the bidding with one spade (11 HCP+ 1 LP =12 TP). While South will now bid two hearts, East, with good distribution and 12 HCP, may overcall two diamonds. North should invite with a three heart bid. South's hand upgrades to 11 + 1 LP + 3 FP = 15 TP and he/she should bid game. Possible losers are three diamonds. However with the DA

sitting well, eleven tricks should be made.

(Experts disagree on precisely how to value length points. One scheme which is popular in some circles is to count one point for the 5th and two points for the 6th and subsequent cards)

HCP and LP's only are added together for the purpose of opening the hand. As the bidding develops and "if" a fit is found, we then add Fit Points.

An example:
North   AT752   AQ97   J96   7

South   3   K1052   AQ843 985

Here we have a cold 4H game with HCP opposite 9. It would be difficult to find this without using LP's and FP's?
The bidding would go: 1S 1NT
                     2H ?

West would value his hand as 11 HCP + 1 LP = 12 TP and open 1S. Then rebid 2H, to show the shape of the hand. East has 9 HCP initially, but when he hears 2H his hand blossoms out to 13 TP's (9 HCP + 3 FP + 1 LP) and would now bid 4H. On a normal trump division losers are 1 club and maybe a diamond (even slam is not impossible, though an undisciplned bid)

Some experts argue that once a fit is found Length Points should be excluded from the equation. According to this argument, West should devalue to 11 and East to 12 for a total of 23. Presumably East would invite with 3H and West would pass as the hand is worth 11 + 3 FP's = 14 TP opposite 9 points at best (in view of the 1NT limit bid).
So how does one ever find this game?

WEST KQ654 K9 764 A83
EAST A832 63 8   K97654

Bidding is: 1S 4S

West has 12 HCP + 1 LP = 13 TP. East has 7 HCP + 2 LP + 4 FP = 13 TP and so should jump to 4S (as a 2C bid would allow South cheap entry into the auction - they clearly have a 9-card heart fit). Now if East subtracts the LP's and considers his hand worth 11 TP's, he would invite with 3S and if West does the same and downgrades back to 12 TP he should pass.

Another example:
WEST   K862   K4 AT83 754
EAST   AQ9753 A6 2   AK62

Bidding is: P 1S 3S P

        6S

East is worth 17 HCP + 2 LP = 19 HCP. West's jump to 3S is 10-12 in standard methods. East now adds 3+1 = 4 FP making 23 TP and jumps straight to 6S as s/he's confident of a combined total of 33. If East takes off LP's the total is 21 and s/he can only be confident of a combined 31 points. If s/he decides to bash the slam, s/he will be rewarded but we have lost some degree of certainty. LP's should be taken off whenever there is a misfit.

For example: NORTH 83   AQT83 Q   AQJ52

http://www.fifthchair.org

SOUTH AJ742   72   AJ82   43

Bidding is: 1H 1S
        2C 2D
West initially values the hand as 18 TP (15HCP + 3 LP's, 1 for each 5-card suit and 1 for two 5-card suits). Partner has shown 10+ HCP and 5 spades. On hearing the 2D bid West would smell a misfit and downgrade the hand back to 13 HCP (even the stiff DQ can be discounted) and give a simple preference to 2S. East is likely to lose 2 spades, 1 heart, one diamond and one club.

Remember that the concept of LENGTH POINTS is a tool to help you in assessing the value of the hand and don't expect Length Points to work on all hands. All bridge decisions are based on probabilities and what works best in the long run - not on one specific hand or result. Almost every maxim or theory in bridge has exceptions and this will be so for the use of Length Points. LP's are even useful for no-trump bidding where a long suit is needed as a source of tricks. Thus if partner opens 1NT (15-17 HCP) and you hold 8 points
Hand A: s: A3 h: K6 d: J83 c: T97542
Hand B: s: 93 h: 76 d: 983 c: AKJ942
With hand A you should pass (working with the average of 16 for partner).
With hand B, invite with 2NT because it has 9 TP's: 7 HCP plus 2 LP's.
Put it opposite an average sort of 1NT opening:

s: KJ8 h: AQ3 d: KJ42 c: Q86
and the second hand makes 6 clubs, one heart, and only needs 2 more tricks to make 3NT. It will only go down if all finesses fail. An aggressive jump to 3NT would not be wrong. Even if the 1NT opener does not have the cQ they may be 2-2 or s/he can take the safety play of losing the first club trick in order to increase the chances of getting 5 club tricks (For the same 16 HCP partner will have a Q in another suit).

Using LENGTH POINTS to evaluate your hand to reach the optimum contract, be it part-scores, games and even slams. As experienced is gained other methods of hand evaluation such as "honors with length", "honors together", "suit texture", & "value of intermediates", may be added to your arsenal of ways of evaluating hands.