Contents

CHAPTER 2 BIDDING DECISIONS   **53**

Chapter 1

HAND EVALUATION

1.1. FACTORS IN HAND EVALUATION

The ability to evaluate one's hand accurately is the key to winning bridge. It can be learned, but it requires plenty of work and discussion within your partnership. Interestingly, it is not so important to assess one's hand in exactly the same way that your partner does, or even in a similar manner. You just need to know partner's way of doing it.

Hand evaluation reflects what is happening inside and outside us. It mirrors our sensibility – this complex, ever-changing feature of our souls. Our sensibility results not only from our bridge past – both distant and near – but also from the present, the reality that surrounds us.

Factors in hand evaluation include:

1) Strength in HCP (A=4, K=3, Q=2, J=1);
2) Shape – from 4333 to 7600;
3) Possession of tens and high spot cards (9, 8);
4) The quality of honors: in suit contracts aces and kings are more desirable, in notrump – usually lower honors.
5) The distribution of honors: evaluation of this factor will change as more information from the bidding becomes available.
6) Suit quality: the trump suit in suit contracts, the main source of tricks in notrump.

The analysis will be based on concepts of **positive and negative deviation** – in other words, the deviation from average for each of the above factors.

```
    ♠ A K Q        ┌─────────┐      ♠ J 7 6
    ♥ A 6 5        │    N    │      ♥ K Q J
    ♦ Q 4 3      W │         │ E    ♦ J 7 5 2
    ♣ 7 5 3 2      │    S    │      ♣ J 10 4
                   └─────────┘
```

After a start of 1NT – 2NT, many partnerships would play the hand in 2NT, where taking seven tricks is a challenge in itself. There is clearly a negative deviation here, both in shape of both hands and in distribution of honors.

Slight changes in both factors improve the contract considerably:

```
♠ A K Q          N          ♠ J 7 6 5
♥ A J 6 5    W       E      ♥ K Q 2
♦ J 4                       ♦ Q 7 5
♣ 9 5 3 2        S          ♣ J 10 4
```

Eight tricks are there, and the ninth may come with the diamond lead.

Now let's imagine we possess all the side-suit honors and the only problem is the trump suit. How good will a small slam be with the following trump suits:

A) A 7 5 2 – J 6 4 3   – very bad;
B) A 7 5 2 – J 10 4 3   – poor;
C) A 9 5 2 – J 10 4 3   – good;
D) A 9 8 2 – J 10 4 3   – very good;

The next couple of examples illustrate the significance of the honor distribution.

```
W                        E₁              E₂

♠ A K 6 5 4      N       ♠ Q 7 2         ♠ 7 3 2
♥ A Q 7 5    W       E   ♥ K 8 6 4       ♥ 8 6 4 2
♦ 7 5 4                  ♦ 10 8          ♦ Q 10
♣ 2              S       ♣ 9 8 5 4       ♣ K Q 5 4
```

Thanks to the wonderful distribution of honors on hand **E₁** (5 HCP) the heart game is a reasonable contract – it requires a 3–2 split in both majors. With the stronger (7 HCP) **E₂** hand it will be hard enough to make eight tricks.

```
W                        E₁              E₂

♠ K Q 7 6 4      N       ♠ A J 10 8 2    ♠ A J 10 8 2
♥ K Q 3      W       E   ♥ 4             ♥ A 10 9
♦ 6 5 4                  ♦ A 10 9        ♦ 3
♣ K 8            S       ♣ A 7 6 3       ♣ A 7 6 3
```

A disastrous distribution of honors on the first hand makes a slam virtually hopeless. Even if declarer is spared a diamond lead and the heart ace is onside, the contract cannot be made if South knows enough to duck the first heart trick. With hand **E2** the honors are located favorably and a slam is a walk in the park.

On the next hand shape plays the key role.

```
W                        E₁              E₂

♠ K 10 9 6       N       ♠ A 4 3         ♠ A 4
♥ A K Q 6 4  W       E   ♥ J 10 7 5      ♥ J 10 7 5
♦ 6 4                    ♦ A 7 2         ♦ A 7 3 2
♣ Q 8            S       ♣ A J 5         ♣ A J 5
```

Due to the flat distribution of **E₁** hand (3–4–3–3) the chances for slam are very slim. From the point of view of the shape factor, therefore, there is a negative deviation. Moving one card from spades to diamonds (**E₂**) improves the contract dramatically, making it dependent on the club finesse after a diamond lead, while it is practically cold with any other lead. The positive deviation in shape – ♠ Ax accompanying four trumps – should affect our evaluation of this hand, especially after learning about spades being partner's second suit.

1.2. THE RANKING METHOD OF HAND EVALUATION IN THE SLAM ZONE

There are two areas where hand evaluation is of critical importance: slam bidding and competitive bidding. To clarify the analysis of slam bidding I propose to rank the hands on a *0–10 scale*. Let's say partner invites us to bid slam. **How should we react?** It will obviously depend on the evaluation of our hand. There are four cases:

1) If I rank my hand at the bottom of the scale, **from 0 to 2,** I decline straight away. For instance (using standard bidding):

1♠ — 2♣
2♦ — 2♥
3♣ — 3♠
4♠

I don't want to engage in any conversation concerning slam. Example hands:

A)	**B)**	**C)**	**D)**
♠ J 7 5 3 2	♠ Q 5 4 3 2	♠ K 8 7 4 2	♠ A 10 9 5 4
♥ A	♥ 6	♥ K	♥ J
♦ K Q J 7	♦ A K Q 5	♦ Q 6 5 3	♦ K Q 9 5
♣ J 5 3	♣ 8 6 4	♣ A 9 8	♣ J 5 2

A) Extremely bad location of honors, weak trump suit – ranking zero. That means that even if partner continues to the five level, we will refuse again.
B) Negative deviation in strength, weak trumps, reasonable honor location – ranking two. If partner repeats the invitation, we should accept.
C) Bad honor location, lack of high cards. An optimist would rank it one, a pessimist – zero.
D) Acceptable trump suit and honor location, although a weak hand in terms of HCP – one. One more try from partner would convince us to cue bid.

2) If I rank my hand *3 to 5*, I initiate an exchange of cue-bids up to the game level.

1♠ — 2♣
2♦ — 2♥
3♣ — 3♠
4♦ — 4♥
4♠

The message is: *I want to talk, but I'm a bit nervous about slam prospects*.

A)	**B)**	**C)**	**D)**
♠ A J 6 5 4	♠ A K 10 5 3	♠ Q 10 6 4 3	♠ Q J 9 4 2
♥ 6	♥ 5	♥ 10	♥ J
♦ K Q J 7	♦ K J 10 5	♦ A K J 7	♦ A K 10 3
♣ 6 5 3	♣ 8 7 2	♣ Q 10 4	♣ Q J 10

A) In spite of minimum strength the excellent location of honors allows us to rank the hand three. One cue-bid is all we can afford. Even if partner goes to the five level, we shall discourage him.
B) The assets of this hand are similar to those of the previous one, save for two nicely placed tens. Our rank – four, which means we will respond positively to another invitation from partner.
C) Four again, two black tens being an important factor.
D) Club sequence, decent trumps, good diamonds – ranking five. If partner moves forward, we will make it to the slam (perhaps even a grand slam).

3) I rank my hand **6 to 8**. I will surely not stop at the four level.

```
1♠  —  2♣
2♦  —  2♥
3♣  —  3♠
4♣  —  4♦
5♣
```

These are four opener's hands corresponding to the above auction. **How would you evaluate them?**

A)	**B)**	**C)**	**D)**
♠ K 7 6 5 4	♠ K J 10 4 3	♠ A Q 10 9 7	♠ K Q 10 4 2
♥ 9	♥ 5	♥ 3	♥ 8
♦ K J 9 6	♦ Q J 8 7	♦ J 10 3 2	♦ Q 10 6 3
♣ A K 5	♣ A K 6	♣ A K J	♣ A K 10

A) Poor trump suit should make us cautious – ranking six. We will continue cue-bidding at the five level. A long sequence of cue-bids indicates problems in the trump suit.

<table>
<tr><td>♠ K 7 6 5 4
♥ 9
♦ K J 9 6
♣ A K 5</td><td>N
W   E
S</td><td>♠ Q 9 3
♥ A K 5 4
♦ A Q 10
♣ Q J 9</td></tr>
</table>

Even such strong a hand as East's in the diagram above does not make slam a good contract. How can you avoid it? There are two ways: either by bidding 5♠ instead of 5♣ (making slam dependent on the quality of partner's trumps), which is, though, not fully justified by the actual West cards; or by:

```
(…)  —  5♦
5♥   —  5♠
```

We have all the necessary controls and lots of good intentions, but the trumps are far from solid.

B) Decent trumps, good honor distribution, but we need to find partner with plenty of key cards – ranking six.
C) Diamonds are the major problem. If partner confirms concentration of values here with 5♦, we will risk a slam. After 5♥ – we will discourage him. Ranking seven.
D) All the honors seem to be working, plenty of tens, especially ♦10 may prove golden – ranking eight. Only a negative 5♠ from partner may stop us from bidding slam.

4) I rank my hand at the top of the scale, **9 to 10**, and partner will have to find serious arguments to dissuade me from a slam. I aim to explore grand slam opportunities.

Most hands from this range qualify for Blackwood.

A)	**B)**	**C)**	**D)**
♠ K Q J 9 4	♠ A K 10 8 6	♠ A Q 9 7 5	♠ K J 10 9 4
♥ 6	♥ 5	♥ 9	♥ 8
♦ K Q 10 5	♦ A Q 7 6	♦ A 10 8 6	♦ K Q J 10
♣ A Q 6	♣ K J 7	♣ K Q J	♣ A K 6

```
1♠  —  2♣
2♦  —  2♥
3♣  —  3♠
4♣  —  4♦
```

4NT   – Blackwood

A) If partner shows three key cards, we will continue with 6♣, asking for a club honor.
B) After the 5♥ response (two key cards without trump queen) we should give up on grand slam. After 5♠ (two key cards with the queen) we will ask for an extra club honor. We shall of course be equally content with a 6♥ response (showing ♥K).
C) Similar theme. Three key cards out of five (four aces and the trump king) make a grand slam a real prospect. We will continue with 6♦, expressing our uncertainty about this suit and passing the final decision to partner. The following are his possible hands:

1)	**2)**	**3)**	**4)**
♠ K J 6 4	♠ K 10 6	♠ K J 2	♠ K 8 6 4
♥ A 10 5	♥ A J	♥ A 8 7	♥ A K Q
♦ K 5	♦ K 5 3	♦ K Q 4	♦ K 7 5
♣ A 7 5 3	♣ A 10 7 3 2	♣ A 4 3 2	♣ A 10 9

7) **7♠**. Not to worry, trumps will help us out.
8) 7NT. Thanks to the long clubs we can count 13 tricks.
9) **7♠**. The diamond queen and the fourth club make a grand slam a good bet (we don't know about the club jack in opener's hand).
10) 7NT. Two additional heart tricks and the total is 13.

1.3. HAND EVALUATION IN COMPETITIVE BIDDING

Now let us look at the typical competitive auction. When cue-bidding in such situations, it is of utmost importance to be able to determine whether the control is based on shortness (void or singleton) or an honor. This difference is the key to successful hand evaluation.

Here is a common sequence:

W	N	E	S	
1♠	2♥	3♥*	Pass	* – Game forcing with spade support.
?				

- A) 3♠ – No shortness. We might be considering slam (having some positive deviations) or be willing to consent to 3NT.
- B) 3NT – To play.
- C) 4♣ – Singleton or void in clubs.
- D) 4♦ – Singleton or void in diamonds.
- E) 4♥ – Singleton or void in hearts.
- F) 4♠ – No shortness and lack of positive deviations (minimum hand).

The above pattern of rebidding allows us to distinguish between honor controls and shortness controls, thus fulfilling our basic requirement for competitive bidding. Its weakness, on the other hand, lies in the fact that singletons and voids are bid within a wide range of strength. This is especially troubling when the cue-bid is just below game in the agreed suit. In this case it is a heart cue-bid. Let's take a look at some examples.

1.

♠ A Q 8 7 4	N	♠ K J 10 3
♥ 3		♥ 10 4 2
♦ K J 9	W E	♦ A Q 6
♣ Q 10 9 4	S	♣ K 5 3

With all the HCP outside the suit of partner's shortness, it is only natural for **East** to positively reevaluate his hand after heart cue-bid from **West**. And yet even 5♠ is in danger – it depends on finding the ♣ J.

2.

♠ K J 6 4 2	N	♠ A Q 9 8
♥ 6		♥ J 8
♦ A Q 4 3	W E	♦ K J 10
♣ K 8 7	S	♣ Q 6 5 3

5♠ is even worse now.

3.

♠ A K 8 7 3	N	♠ Q J 10
♥ 7		♥ Q 4
♦ Q J 8	W E	♦ A K 10 3
♣ A 8 7 4	S	♣ Q J 3 2

This time five is the safety level, provided **EW** can end the auction here.

4.

```
♠ Q J 10 9 5 3        N        ♠ A K 7 6
♥ 10                           ♥ K 9
♦ A 8 7          W       E     ♦ J 10 6
♣ A K 8              S          ♣ Q J 9 5
```

Slam is very good here. The question is whether opener will make another try after responder's discouraging 4♠.

5.

```
♠ A K J 7 5 3         N        ♠ Q 10 9
♥ 9                            ♥ K Q 10 5
♦ K 10 4         W       E     ♦ A 8 7
♣ A 4 3              S          ♣ K 8 7
```

Slam is guaranteed if North puts up the ♥ A or declarer successfully finesses the ♥ 10.

The problem outlined above can be solved if we sacrifice the natural (to play) meaning of 3NT rebid.

W	N	E	S	
1♠	2♥	3♥*	Pass	* – Game forcing with spade support.
?				

3NT   – shortness, lack of positive deviation in strength.
4♣/♦/♥ – shortness in the suit bid, positive deviation in strength.

W	N	E	S	
1♠	2♥	3♥*	Pass	* – Game forcing with spade support.
3NT	Pass	4♣**	Pass	** – Waiting.
?				

4♦ – shortness in diamonds;
4♥ – shortness in hearts;
4♠ – shortness in clubs.

The advantage of this convention is that it sticks to the camouflage principle: with an average hand partner will not ask for shortness, but will simply bid 4♠. The drawback – it is not possible to play 3NT.

The following example illustrates the complexity of hand evaluation.

W	E₁	E₂	E₃
♠ A Q 10 8 6	♠ K 7 5 2	♠ K J 7 5	♠ K J 7 5
♥ K J 7	♥ Q 4	♥ 10 9	♥ 4 3 2
♦ A J 8 2	♦ K Q 9	♦ K Q 9	♦ K Q 9
♣ 6	♣ A 10 4 3	♣ A 10 4 2	♣ A K 4

The West hand is difficult to assess due to the uncertain value of heart honors. They would gain dramatically if supported by an honor in partner's hand – the queen or ace. **E₁** and **E₂** are weaker than **E₃** in terms of HCP, but they fit the opener's shape and values better, making slam an excellent contract. With **E₃**, despite its strength, slam is practically doomed.

W	N	E	S
1♠	2♥	3♥	Pass
4♣	Pass	4♦	Pass
4♥	Pass	?	

Holding **E₁**, responder is fond of every possible opener's hand, i.e.

	N	
♠ A Q 10 8 6 4		♠ K 7 5 2
♥ K 5 2	W E	♥ Q 4
♦ A J 10		♦ K Q 9
♣ 6	S	♣ A 10 4 3

♥Q solves the heart problem, so it's time for Blackwood. Two key cards with the trump queen will take us to the six level.

With **E₂**:

	N	
♠ A Q 10 8 6		♠ K J 7 5
♥ K J 7	W E	♥ 10 9
♦ A J 8 2		♦ K Q 9
♣ 6	S	♣ A 10 4 2

A slam is a great contract owing to the ♥10. Without this card it would depend on the 2–2 trump break.

The following opener's hands:

W₁	W₂		E
♠ A 10 6 4 3 2	♠ A 10 6 4 3 2	N	♠ K J 7 5
♥ A 7 5	♥ A 7	W E	♥ 10 9
♦ A 8 2	♦ A J 3 2		♦ K Q 9
♣ 6	♣ 6	S	♣ A 10 4 2

guarantee a decent small and grand slam, respectively. As the above analysis indicates, the problems are plentiful and they require some intelligent bidding. It would not be possible to bid these hands accurately, had the information on club shortness not been passed.