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(54) Hand Evaluation: Counting Points - Before the Auction Begins

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Level: Intermediate / Advanced

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General

Hand evaluation is one of the most difficult and complicated parts of bridge. When we attempt to properly evaluate our hand sometimes we are going to get it wrong. An important thing to keep in mind is that hand evaluation is much more of an *art form* than a *science*. We need to practice this craft and we need experience working hard at it in order to get better.

Hand evaluation is more than just a metric that we put on our hand when we pick it up. It is a constantly changing value that we are adjusting as we obtain more information. This “point count” metric starts with *High Card Points* but then gets adjusted to try to take into account all the aspects of our hand that can take tricks.

High Card Points (HCP)

The *High Card Point* hand evaluation method was first devised in the 1920s by Milton Work. He described a 40 High Card Point deck consisting of 10 HCP in each suit:

- Ace 4 Points
- King 3 Points
- Queen 2 Points
- Jack 1 Points

Many players do not realize that these HCP were initially only used to evaluate balanced hands. This hand evaluation system was not designed to evaluate unbalanced hands. Thus, we will frequently need to make *adjustments* to overcome the HCP shortcomings of evaluating unbalanced hands. In the modern game, when we have 12 Points (usually 12 HCP) we open the bidding. On average each player should have 10 HCP (40 HCP in the Deck / 4 Players = 10 HCP per player.) By opening the bidding we announce that we generally have “*more than our fair share*” of the HCP.

We will not spend too much more time discussing HCP (since we are all familiar with them.) But I do want to discuss the *Power of Aces*. An Ace is an extremely powerful card. If you think about it mathematically there are 40 HCP and 13 tricks. So each trick costs roughly 3 points**. But the 4 HCP given to the Ace is considerably more than the value of one trick. The Ace is given 4 HCP because it



takes a trick and it does an excellent job of setting up the other cards in its suit. For this reason, many players (and most bridge computer programs) value an ace at slightly more than 4 points.

*Note: **We do not want to take the HCP to trick taking estimation too far because developing a true mathematical model of bridge is an incredibly complex topic.*

Adjustments

Not all hands with the same number of HCP are equal. Hands can vary in both their offensive and defensive abilities. We will use *Adjustments* to Re-Evaluate our hand for its playing strength. Adjustments will be an effort to convert the other useful assets of our hand to HCP. We will do this by adding or subtracting points from our hand's valuation total.

- Upgrade for honors in our long suits.
 - When our honor cards are located in our long suits they help setup the little cards in those suits. This makes our hand more powerful for taking tricks.
 - *Length Points* – When we have a *quality long suit* we need to add points to our hand because this long suit will take tricks as well as our HCP will – our hand will play more strongly than just the HCP it contains. If we have a random long suit it is going to be too difficult to setup and thus it will not be that useful. But if the suit is a quality suit (contains lots of honors) then it will produce extra tricks for us.
 - With a quality 5-card suit we generally add 1-point.
 - With a quality 6-card suit we generally add 2-points.
 - With a quality 7-card suit we generally add at least 3 points...
 - *Spot Cards* (10s and 9s) are also important in determining if our long suit is a “quality suit.” A good mental trick for deciding if our suit is worth an upgrade is to visualize how it will play if partner has honor doubleton (Hx.)
- Downgrade for honors in our short suits.
 - When honors are located in short suits they do not help set up other cards. Thus, they are not worth as much as those honors that are located in our long suits.
 - *½ Value Rule* - When we have holdings like singleton K, Q, or J then these cards are not worth their full values. But they are not completely useless either. So we approximate their value by counting them for half their normal value.
 - Holdings like AK, AQ, KQ are a lot of HCP not taking many tricks. These holdings are not worth as much as the HCP value that we give them and thus should be downgraded.
 - *Jacks are Reinforcements*. They are given 1HCP, but these are generally overrated. Jacks are worth their 1 HCP when they are partnered with other honors, but when they are in holdings such as Jx or Jxx they do not pull their full weight. We generally use the ½ Value Rule here as well.
- As you can see there are a lot of decisions involved in properly evaluating a hand. Each time we have to make a decision our experience is going to play a key role in how well we do so.



Conclusions

The *Modern Style* is to open most hands with 12 total points (HCP with adjustments) that contain some defensive tricks. Partner is never happy when we open the bidding and aren't able to take any tricks on defense – especially if partner doubles the opponents. Hands that have 12 total points but not many HCP and thus not much defense usually contain long suits. These hands are best opened with a preemptive opening bid.