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This Week in Bridge

(430) Hand Evaluation and *The Law of Total Tricks*

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Level: 4 of 10 (1 of 6)

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General

Developing good hand evaluation skills is an important part of improving our bridge bidding. It is a craft that takes time, experience, and effort to learn. One of the most important parts of developing good hand evaluation skills is to understand the power of fits (8 or more cards in a suit). It is much easier to produce tricks if we have a fit. It is even easier to take tricks if we have a large fit or a double fit. We usually attempt to measure the value of these fits by adding length points and/or support points to our hands. This can sometimes be an effective estimate of the additional playing strength of fit, but large fits are generally difficult to evaluate, and these tools are often not effective. With large fits, we end up guessing as to how many tricks we can take or how many tricks the opponents can take. Here we look at our tools for evaluating and re-evaluating these hands with large fits and try to develop some judgment in these large-fit auctions.

The Law of Total Tricks - LOTT

When it comes to evaluating our hand and deciding how high to bid in a competitive auction, the most important consideration is not our number of points but the size of our fit. Our guiding principle for making decisions is the *Law of Total Tricks*.

(Simple Version of the LOTT) In a competitive auction we should compete to the size of our fit: 8-card fit to the 2-level, 9-card fit to the 3-level, 10-card fit to the 4-level, etc.

This general rule (poorly named a law) is most useful in lower levels. As we get to higher levels (5-level or higher) this simple rule becomes less accurate. At these higher levels, we need to consider other information that may be difficult to obtain. We will be left to make educated (and sometimes less-than educated) guesses at these high levels. These high-level competitive bidding decisions are some of the most difficult in bridge and they are often why preempting the bidding is so effective.



Hand Evaluation -- 8-Card vs. 9-Card Fit

Fits are important in constructive auctions and in competitive auctions. The larger our fit, the more trump we will have if we end up declaring the hand. The more trump we possess, the more control we will have of the hand – we will be able to ruff more losers or more easily set up our long side suits by ruffing them out.

Many bridge players treat this a small difference, but the power of the 9-card fit over the 8-card fit is enormous. Interestingly, most bridge players already have ways of showing an 8-card fit (3-card limit raise) vs. a 9-card fit (4-card limit raise), but often do not know what to do with the information once they receive it. The key is to be more aggressive in bidding game or slam with a 9+card fit and far more conservative when we have only an 8-card fit.

Here are some ways in which a 9-card fit is far more powerful than an 8-card fit:

Bad Breaks

When we have a 9-card fit we are far less likely to suffer bad trump breaks than when we have only an 8-card fit. In an 8-card fit, a 4-1 trump break can be devastating and often is enough to sink our entire contract. But in a 9-card fit, a 3-1 trump break is much easier to handle (even a 4-0 trump split is survivable because both of our hands have as many trump as the pesky opponent.)

After Drawing Trump

When we have a 9-card fit (say a 5-4 fit) we can draw all of the opponents' trump and still be left with trump in the short side, usually the dummy, to ruff our losers. In contrast, when we have an 8-card fit we will often not be left with many trump after we draw trump.

Examples

- When we have a 5-4 fit:
 - If the trump suit breaks 2-2 then after drawing trump, dummy (the short hand) will be left with 2 trump that we can use to our great advantage.
 - If the trump suit breaks 3-1 then after drawing trump, dummy (the short hand) will be left with 1 trump which will be helpful for maintaining control of the hand, especially if we must give up the lead.
- When we have a 5-3 fit:
 - If the trump suit breaks 3-2 then after drawing trump, dummy (the short hand) will have no trump left for ruffing.
 - If the trump suit breaks 4-1 then after drawing trump, dummy (the short hand) will have no trump left for ruffing and the long hand will almost be out of trump.



- When we have a 4-4 fit:
 - If the trump suit breaks 3-2 then after drawing trump both hands will have a trump left for ruffing – this is why a 4-4 fit often plays better than a 5-3 fit.
 - If the trump suit breaks 4-1 then after drawing trump our trump are exhausted. This often means we must do our ruffing before drawing all of the trump – providing additional danger and difficulty in declarer play.

LOTT -- Preempting the Auction

There are many useful implementations of the Law of Total Tricks. Competing to the size of our fit quickly can be extremely valuable when we have a large fit and bids that allow us to describe our hand properly.

When we open the bidding with 1-Major and partner has a bad hand (0-8 pts) with 5-card support, they jump to 4-Major – showing a “weak freak”. This is an example of getting to the 10-trick level with a 10-card fit. One of the reasons partner can make this bid is that we will not confuse it for a good hand. With a good hand and support, partner would start with a 2/1 auction (with 3-card support) or a *Jacoby 2NT* or *splinter* auction (with 4+ card support.)

In competition, we can also preempt the auction by jumping to the 3-level in partner’s suit with a weak hand (0-5 pts) and a 9-card fit or to the 4-level in partner’s suit with a weak hand (0-8 pts) and a 10-card fit. The reason that we can do this in competition is that we have other ways to show a good hand with support (*Jordan* when the opponent makes a takeout double or *cuebid* when the opponent makes an overcall).

Conclusion

Evaluating your hand is key part of good bidding. Learning to properly take into account the existence of a fit and the size of that fit is another skill that can take experience to properly evaluate. The Law of Total Tricks is an excellent guideline for helping you judge what to do based on the size of your trump fit. Make sure that you make this tool a part of your hand evaluation process and as you gain more experience make sure you learn about when the LOTT is most effective and when it tends to break down. This is a key part of improving your judgment at the bridge table!