

## Hand Evaluation

There are several hand evaluation algorithms – the one you have had drummed into you over and over again is counting High or Honour Card Points – HCP – Also known as Milton Work count (after its protagonist Milton Work).

### HCP

The Ace=4, King=3, Queen=2, Jack=1 point counting system is simple and remarkably effective when dealing with no trump type hands. If you and your partner have the requisite number of HCP in you combined hands – then most of the time you get the equivalent number of tricks. Not every time, bridge is not like that, but about 95% of the time get the point count right and if you are playing in no-trumps you will succeed. Playing in a suit contract the HCP is not so accurate – but still pretty good. This is why beginners are always advised to use this method. The reason for less accurate results if in a suit contract, relates to the fact that shortages in suits (not the trump suit!) are an asset provided a trump fit has been found – but may not contain any honour cards.

To compensate for this inaccuracy the concept of distributional points can be introduced.

### Distributional Points

When evaluating a hand as an opening hand, extra length in the likely trump suit(s) is considered an asset – and to the normal HCP points 1 point may be added for the 5<sup>th</sup> and subsequent card in the trump suit. Note these distributional points are normally only used to justify bidding on a hand which otherwise would not qualify for a normal opening 1-level bid (i.e. less than 12 points). Of course freakish and pre-emptive hands are often opened at the 3 or 4 level; but otherwise quite modest hands can be justified as opening 1-bids because of the extra length.

When responding to an opening bid, one may also reassess the value of the hand based upon distributional values, but, **and it is a very big but**, this can only be done based on the certain knowledge of a fit with partner's suit. If you have a good fit with partner's suit (4 or more cards) then you can add distributional points in assessing your hand as a response on the following scale – for each doubleton – add 1 point; for each singleton, add 3 points; for each void, add 5 points.

One point must be stressed – opener should not re-evaluate his hand based on shortages if he has already 'added' points for length in his trump suit. The only exception to this is when opener bids a suit, and responder offers a second suit. If opener has support for this second suit, then he can treat his hand as 'responder' to his partner – and then add points for shortages etc – but not for extra length in any suit.

Distributional points are also far from perfect – the points for shortages assume that you will be able to ruff that suit – if partner has no losers in that suit (he has AKQ and you have a doubleton for example, then you will not be ruffing).

## Losing Trick Count

The losing trick count is another method of hand evaluation. It is particularly suited to suit contracts (in fact unreliable in no trump hand evaluation).

In essence, one considers each suit in turn – and tests for the presence of the A K Q in that suit. If absent then the losing trick count is updated accordingly

If you have all three (or a void in a suit) then you have no losers in that suit; if you are missing any and have at least three cards in that suit then the number that are missing is the losers in that suit.

If you have a singleton, then you have at most 1 loser in that suit – none if the singleton is the Ace.

If you have a doubleton, then you have at most 2 losers in that suit. If the doubleton is AK then you have no losers; if the doubleton is Ax or Kx or KQ then you have one loser. Any other doubleton is two losers.

So add up your losers in the four suits – if it is 7 or less you probably have a sound opening bid. I say probably – it is possible to have 7 or 8-point hands that are not sound openings. For example

♠ J 10 9 8 6

♥ A 5 3 2

♦ –

♣ K 6 5 4

8 points and 7 losers (3 in Spades, 2 in Hearts, 2 in Clubs). I would pass and hope partner can bid something other than Diamonds – those Spades are just too anaemic. You do not have a sound rebid.

But

♠ A 10 9 8 7 6

♥ A 5 3 2

♦ –

♣ 6 5 4

Then I definitely would want to say something – still 8 points 7 losers, but non-vulnerable I would be placing 1♠ on the table. Vulnerable I would think about it for about 2 seconds longer, and then put 1♠ on the table.

Why do we choose 7 losers as a basis for opening? Well one can go into the arithmetic - 24 losers in the pack between the two hands maximum – if you have 7, partner on average will have 10 or more accurately 9.67 (there are 36 losers around the table – if you have 7 that leaves 29 between the other three hands). So between you and partner you have on average 17 losers. Therefore, since there are 24 between you and partner as a maximum, and you only have 17, then you ought to have 7 winners and can make a one level contract – so open the bidding. Or, just take my word for it!

The value of the losing trick count comes when you are responding and have a trump fit (this is most important). With a trump fit, responder adds his losers to the opener's assumed 7; if he takes that number away from 24 he should arrive at the number of tricks the partnership can make and bid accordingly.

So taking our absolutely rubbish 8 point opener above. Give responder a perfectly reasonable 11 point hand (remember there are 32 outstanding) and 4 Spades

♠ K Q 5 4  
♥ K Q 3  
♦ J 6 5 4  
♣ 9 8

Count the losers 1 Spade, 1 Heart, 3 Diamonds, 2 Clubs = 7.

$7 + 7 = 14$ . Take away from 24 you get 10. So the partnership can make 10 tricks. Reply 4♠. Only 19 points but the game is almost certain, and you might even make 11 tricks.

Give our opener a more 'normal' hand for 1♠.

♠ A 10 9 8 6  
♥ A 5  
♦ K Q 3  
♣ 6 5 4

Perfectly sound 13 point, 1 Spade opener – 7 losers again. Same bidding sequence – Same game made. 24 points enough for game?

Rather than taking the total number of tricks away from 24 (to get the tricks you can make), you might prefer to take away from 18 to get the level to which you should bid. Thus with 14 losers take from 18 – bid to the 4 level.

Finally consider a non-game example. Suppose our responding hand was a tad weaker – say 6 points with 4-card trump support.

♠ K 6 3 2  
♥ K 5 3  
♦ 8 6 5 4  
♣ 9 8

Count the losers 2 Spades, 2 Hearts, 3 Diamonds, 2 Clubs. Total 9. Add to partner's presumed 7 – you get 16. Take 16 from 18 and you get what you should bid to, that is no more than 2♠. And 2♠ is the right contract with either of our openers.

Losing trick count is not perfect, but no bidding algorithm is – but with a fit found it is a 20-1 on favourite. Incidentally it is just not good enough for no trump contracts – a typical weak no trump opener has 8 losers. Often if you have 12 points and 8 losers it is by definition a weak no trump – try it out on a few hands and you will be surprised how accurate the losing trick count is.