

HAND EVALUATION

(Seminar given by Mike Ferguson on 20 February 2024)

BACKGROUND

There are a number of factors which you need to consider when you are assessing how good a hand is. The 4321 point count system is used extensively, both in teaching learners and by experienced players. However it is acknowledged to be ineffective for unbalanced hands, and is at best a starting place for evaluating a hand.

If you don't know the James Bond/Duke of Cumberland hand, look it up, it's a perfect example of why you shouldn't trust point count alone.

This seminar will look at other methods of evaluation.

1. Distribution

Even if you don't want to consider losing trick count, or the Law of total tricks, or bidding to the level of the fit, distribution will be a major guide in deciding what to bid. The bigger the fit, the better the hand, irrespective of points. For example, your LHO bids 1 Heart and your partner bids 2NT (Unusual) to show at least 5-5 in the minors. The next hand doubles.

You hold:

♠ 76543

♥ 7

♦ 3

♣ QJ10852

Should you bid 3C (only 3 points and both opponents bidding), bid a competitive 4C, or go to 5C?

Answer: bid 5C. This might be a good sacrifice, but there is a strong possibility of it making. And in such auctions, it is always best to take action immediately – don't bid 4C then later bid 5C. Partner held:

- ♠ 8
- ♥ 86
- ♦ AJ987
- ♣ AK743

5C made 11 tricks.

Having a shortage is often much more important than points. That is why there are so many bidding tools designed to investigate for singletons and voids, such as splinters, and responses over Jacoby 2NT.

Consider these hands after partner opens a spade.

♠ Q98732	♠ KJ98
♥ 3	♥ KJ102
♦ AJ976	♦ 86
♣ 4	♣ AQ2

One has 7 points and the other has 14. But the first hand is likely to make as many tricks opposite a typical opener.

2. Location of points

When partner has shown two suits, downgrade anything except aces in other suits in your hand. This is because partner is quite likely to have shortage in those suits.

But do put great value on cards which will help partner. An example – partner opens 1 Spade and you bid 1NT, partner now bids 3 Hearts.

You have

♠ K73
♥ QJ107
♦ 8643
♣ 43

This hand is worth 4H in every situation.

Whereas with

♠ J85
♥ 83
♦ KJ52
♣ KJ97

You should bid 3S.

Another common mistake is overvaluing trump support. If partner opens a weak 2S, you might think having KQJ6 would make excellent support. It does for trumps, but won't help elsewhere, and is wasted value.

A much better hand would be four small spades and KQJ6 in another suit. That's because the strong trumps will only add one trick, while the other could add 2 or even 3.

3. Prime points

The point count system undervalues aces and kings, and overrates queens and jacks. When evaluating your hand, take into account the prime cards (A/K).

A good rule of thumb is to look at how many of your points are prime. A good hand will have more than half, while if you have less than half you should downgrade your hand.

For example

♠ A32	♠ QJ8
♥ K64	♥ Q73
♦ 9875	♦ A643
♣ K104	♣ QJ5

The first hand is 100% prime points, and is worth much more than the second, which only has 33% prime points.

4. Position

Your holdings in suits can vary during the auction as you hear more bids.

For example, LHO has bid hearts, so you should downgrade points other than the ace in that suit. If you hold KJ6, you can no longer expect to make tricks with those cards.

Conversely, if your RHO has bid a suit, you can upgrade suitable holdings (e.g. KJ7, AQ5). Even Q105 may be upgraded.

5. Impletion

When deciding whether or not to overcall, or bid on, another factor is impletion – what intermediate cards you have.

For example, overcalling 1 Spade when vulnerable you need to look at the risk. If your club suit is AKJ432 you may suffer a bad break, and could easily have two or even three trump losers.

Whereas with QJ10985 you are likely to only lose to the ace and king, as you expected when you bid. The question to ask is

“How will the suit play opposite a singleton?”

6. The auction

Listen to the auction. It may also give you clues about the lie of the cards. If one opponent has bid strongly but had no support – e.g. an opening bid is passed, or one has made only forced bids – you have an advantage as you can place many of the cards.

Another example is where both opponents have bid and neither suit is supported - there is a strong danger that they may get ruffs. Having a holding of KQJ3 in RHO's suit may be a very poor holding as it will not prevent them from getting ruffs.

7. Displaced bids

The other effect of the auction can be to take away a bid you were going to make, or force you to bid at a higher level than your hand deserves. For example, the bidding goes 1S – X – 2S to you. You should normally stretch to bid, especially with a major. So with:

♠ 743
♥ QJ1086
♦ K63
♣ 74

You should certainly bid 3H, and you might also consider doing so if not vulnerable with:

♠ 743
♥ QJ108
♦ Q1086
♣ 74

However, some bids retain their meaning. In the auction 1D by partner – P – 1H by you – 2C, a bid of 2S is a reverse, so you should double on hands without those values (16 plus points) or rebid your suit.

Another guideline to follow is that if your partner has opened and you have an opening hand, you should either be in game, or be doubling the opponents.

8. The opponents

The final factor is the opponents. The questions to consider are:

- Are they known to be aggressive bidders – then be more prepared to double them rather than bid on
- Is it likely you will be doubled if you stretch on the hand - then go cautiously? Playing pairs most strong players are always looking for +200 by doubling a vulnerable bid and taking it one off.
- Take account of their demeanour - if someone looks especially interested in your bidding they may well have potential tricks.
- Against less experienced players you are usually safe to bid one more (less experienced players please consult rule 1 above).