

## 22) Hand evaluation

All too often a hand strength is evaluated **only** by the HCP count.

In reality a hand strength should be measured by its capability to generate a certain number of tricks.

The criteria to be used are the following :

- 1) **Quantity** of HCP.
- 2) **Quality** of HCP . We all know that Q and J are defined as uncertain honours because they can not guarantee a trick unlike A and K that are defined as certain honours.
- 3) **Fit** with partner. It is intuitive that a hand with a fit , that is at least 8 cards in a given suit , will guarantee more tricks than a hand without fit.
- 4) **Distributional strength**. While in a 4333 shape, the strength is limited to HCP , in an unbalanced hand like 5521 or 6502 , long suits, once established, can generate additional tricks .

Above mentioned concepts are certainly nothing new but Marty Bergen , in his book “ **Slam bidding** “ , that we highly recommend, had the brilliant idea to substitute numerical values to qualitative evaluations. We are not talking about a trivial idea because , generally, for the average bridge player, the message is much clearer when we say that a given hand is worth 16 HCP instead of saying that that hand has 12 HCP but is worth more.

We should in fact make 2 evaluations :

- a) Evaluation **before** partner has bid .
- b) Evaluation **after** partner has bid. .

### Evaluation before partner has bid

- a) For every 3 cards composed by A or 10 add 1 point.
- b) For every 3 cards composed by Q or J subtract 1 point.
- c) For every 5, 6, or 7 carder add respectively 1,2 or 3 points.
- d) For every suit at least 4th containing A and K or 3 of the 5 honours add 1 point .
- e) For every doubleton ( DT) composed by KQ, KJ, QJ, Qx, Jx deduct 1 point.
- f) For any stiff honour , ( except A ) deduct 1 point.
- g) Presence in a suit of a couple of good interiors , like 10 or 9, allows for a qualitative reevaluation.

Let us see some examples :

1     ♠ KJxxx     ♥xx     ♦Q10xxx     ♣A             HCP = 10

Evaluation : two 5 cards suits , so add 2 points 10+ 2 = 12 points

With this hand we should open 1♠ .

2     ♠Axxxx     ♥QJ     ♦10xxxx     ♣K             HCP = 10

Evaluation : two 5 cards suits = + 2 points , stiff K = -1 point , QJ doubleton = - 1 point

Total  $10 + 2 - 1 - 1 = 10$  points. With this hand we better pass.

**3**    ♠AQxxx    ♥xx    ♦KJ10xx    ♣x                    HCP = 10

Evaluation : two 5 cards suits = + 2 points , 1 suit with 3 honours /5 = + 1 point

Total  $10 + 2 + 1 = 13$  points. With this hand we should open 1♠ .

**4**    ♠AQ2            ♥AQ105            ♦K1097            ♣A7                    HCP = 19

3 A = + 1 point

Total  $19 + 1 = 20$  points. We should open 2NT = 20-21 balanced.

### **Hand evaluation after partner has bid and a fit has been identified .**

When partner opens and we have a fit in his suit , we have to revise our hand evaluation as follows :

- a) add 1 point for every doubleton ( DT ) we have.
- b) add 2 points for every singleton. In case we have a fit of 4+ cards in partner suit, we should add 3 points for every singleton.
- c) If we have a void we shall add a number of points equal to the number of cards of our fit.

We shall call Bergen points ( **BP**), the sum obtained in the evaluation before partner bids and after he has bid.

Let us suppose that partner opens 1♥ and we have the following four hands :

**5**    ♠76543            ♥AQ6            ♦ -            ♣AK543                    HCP = 13

Evaluation before partner bid 13 HCP + 2 points ( two 5 cards suits ) + 1point ( one suit with AK) = 16 points

Evaluation after partner has bid : + 3 ( one void with 3 cards fit )

**Bergen points = 16+3 =19 BP**

**6**    ♠76            ♥AQ62            ♦7            ♣AK5432                    HCP = 13

Evaluation before partner bid 13 HCP +2 points ( one 6 cards suit) + 1point ( one suit with AK) = 16 points

Evaluation after partner has bid : +3points ( singleton with 4 cards fit) +1 point ( one doubleton )

**Bergen points = 16 + 3 + 1 = 20 BP**

7    ♠7654                    ♥AQ62    ♦ -    ♣AK543                    HCP = 13

Evaluation before partner bid 13 HCP + 1 point (one 5 cards suit) + 1 point (one suit with AK) = 15 points

Evaluation after partner has bid : 4 points ( void with 4 cards fit ).

**Bergen points = 15 + 4 = 19 BP**

8    ♠76                    ♥AQ62    ♦ 75                    ♣AK543                    HCP = 13

Evaluation before partner bid 13HCP + 1 HCP ( one 5 cards suit) + 1 point ( one suit with AK ) = 15 points

Evaluation after partner has bid: +2 points ( 2 doubletons)

**Bergen points = 15 + 2 = 17 BP** . We have 17 BP , partner has promised an opening hand and we then have about 28+ BP on our side : our slam expectations are legitimate.

## Conclusion

It happens , from time to time , that we bid 4♥ or 4♠ and we make 6 .

Usually the comment that follows is “ *this slam is unbidable , how can we bid slam with 22 HCP ??* “

The secret lays in a correct hand evaluation . HCP **are not the only factor** to measure a hand strength. Whether it is a matter of upgrading or downgrading a hand strength , there are 4 factors that contribute to the process of hand evaluation and all of them should be kept in due count.

In the above few examples we have seen hands with only 10 HCP that represent a solid opening and hands with 12 HCP where pass is the best option.

By the same token we can say that bidding a forcing relay with 12 HCP is a gross simplification : not all 12 HCP are worth the same and each hand should be evaluated on its own merit.

Marty Bergen innovative approach , can be very useful not only in slam bidding but also in other circumstances.

I believe that , although at the beginning we would not be able to make an accurate evaluation , if we keep on trying to evaluate the hands we are playing , we can not but improve our evaluating ability to the benefit of our bridge level.