Learning Points – What's a King Worth?   **January 7, 2010**
by Steve Moese (Mike Purcell ed.)   *Bidding Theory* LEVEL: Basic/Intermediate

Point Count
One of the 1st things we learn about Bridge is how to bid a hand. Almost everyone starts with A=4, K=3, Q=2, J=1 High Card Points (HCP). If you think that a King is always worth 3 HCP read on! What follows might surprise you.

Bidding and Valuing Our Hands
How to bid a hand depends on your bidding system. How to value a hand is intertwined and dynamic, and depends on what partner and our opponents do in the auction. What a hand is worth changes over time.

HCP
HCP offer a useful starting point, but are far from the entire story, especially in a trump contract. HCP are static. Game and slam HCP thresholds (25, 26, 28, 33, 37) are static too, and they overemphasize HCP. *Fit, distribution (extra length, useful shortness), working points* and *counting our potential tricks* are much more important to correct bidding decisions. We bid to maximize our score on a hand. We want a clear view of how many tricks we can take and how we might take them, and not just HCP.   No one scores HCP on today's duplicate scoring slip! So let's focus on how we transform HCP to tricks using our bridge judgment. Let's look at how tricks come from length and strength working together, from shortness working with trumps, and from small cards that at least initially have no HCP value whatsoever.

From where do *extra* tricks come?
1) Top winners (A. K. and Q in that order)
2) Suits 4 cards and longer (assuming breaks are favorable).
3) Long suits that we can ruff several time so that the remaining small cards are winners.
4) Ruffs in the short trump hand.
5) Ruffs in the long trump hand if and only if the short trump hand can draw trumps (Dummy Reversal).
6) Cross ruffing – scoring each of our trumps individually.
7) Squeezes and End Plays (*not discussed here*)

Distribution and Working Points
1) Long suits are a useful source of extra tricks. Extra length in their suit is bad for us (let's defend) as this length takes cards away from our other suits – cards we might have developed into length winners.
2) Honors in long suits are better than honors in short suits. Connected honors in long suits are even better.
3) Honors in our long suits help create extra tricks. Honors in their suit or a short side suit do not.
4) Honors in their suit are bad –our opponents have strength in outside suits – strength we need to succeed at making a contract in our suit. That outside strength will make developing length tricks harder.
5) Secondary honors are better in partner's suit and Prime honors are better in outside suits. Honors in their suits are never good.
6) Wasted length in opponent's suit is a negative. This length cannot develop into extra tricks and takes away from length cards in other suits partner is expecting from you.
7) Useful shortness. Shortness in their suit means we have more cards in other suits that we might be able to develop as winners. Shortness opposite great length might let us establish length tricks by ruffing.
8) *Working Points* – Honors that take tricks and establish extra tricks in our long suits.
9) Wasted Points – Honors in opponent's suit, or honors opposite partners known shortness (singleton or void, 1/0), or redundant with partner's HCP, or singleton honors in outside suits, or in a short suit with no small cards. Wasted points **subtract** value from our combined holding.

Long suits are a useful source of extra tricks. Fitting long suits are even better.
4 cards are better than 2 or 3, and 5 better than 4, and so on. Why is an 8 card fit so much better than a 7 card fit? If you hold A, K, & Q , opponents will take at least 1 trick in a 7 card suit 48% of the time (4-2 split is 48% likely but 32% of the time the J will fall in 2 rounds – 5-1 and 6-0 splits make up the rest). This includes the risk you might face when one opponent is short (16% of the time) and can ruff the 1st or 2nd round.   In an 8 card fit the feared 4-1 split happens 28% of the time and opponents will take one or more tricks 28% of the time (when the J is not singleton; more if they can engineer ruffs). In a 9 card fit, losing a trick to the Jxxx happens only 9.6% of the time, but the threat of a ruff is still high – 59% of the time one opponent will hold 1/0.   With a 10 card fit you will take

as many tricks in the suit as the longest length in either hand, assuming only there are sufficient entries and neither opponent can ruff and opening lead of that suit (22%).

Honors in long suits
Assume partner bids 1♠. Which hand is better? Why?

Case 1:
A: ♠xxxxx, ♥Axxx, ♦x, ♣xxx   B: ♠Axxxx, ♥xxxx, ♦x, ♣xxx   C: ♠xxxxx, ♥xxxx, ♦A, ♣xxx

Hand A: The ♥A is a sure additional trick, while the ♠A does not necessarily add an *extra* trick to tally. With A: you expect to score 5+ tricks (the ♥A and 3 or more ♦ ruffs, plus perhaps the 4th ♥). A subtlety, but if you hold A:, then partner needs only AKxxx to likely have no trump losers. However *extra* trump tricks will come only from the ruffs available from small trumps in either hand.

Hand B: only the 3+ ♦ ruffs are likely. The ♠A might not be an additional trick if partner already holds the ♠KQ. Yes, we have 1 fewer trump loser, but no *extra* tricks. There might not be enough time to develop the 4th ♥ if we don't own 2 or more top ♥s between us.

Hand C: We might not have a ♦ loser and we can still get 3+♦ ruffs. The ♦A contributes 1 extra trick in ♦s but cannot help develop length tricks (as the ♥A would in ♥s).

Honors that Work
If left hand opponent (LHO) opens 1♠ and you hold the ♠Kx, you are unlikely to win a trick with your king. You should expect LHO's ♠A to be waiting over your ♠K. The ♠A might be in RHO's hand, but that is less likely. Your ♠ K is not wasted necessarily but it is not a sure trick. If your hand is:

Case 2:
D: ♠xxxx, ♥AK, ♦Qxxx, ♣Kxx   and partner holds   E: ♠AKQxx, ♥xxx, ♦xx, ♣AQx

you will likely make 11 tricks in spades. However change partner's hand slightly and look what happens:

Case 3:
D: ♠xxxx, ♥AK, ♦Qxxx, ♣Kxx   and partner holds   F: ♠AKxxx, ♥Qx, ♦xxx, ♣AQx.

Even 4♠ might be in jeopardy if opponents can get 3 ♦ tricks and the ♠ split 3-1 or worse (59% chance).

Case 4:
D: ♠xxxx, ♥AK, ♦Qxxx, ♣Kxx   and partner holds   G: ♠AQJxx, ♥QJ, ♦KJx, ♣Jxx.
4 possible losers are ♠K, ♦A, and ♣AQ. You'll need help making this contract. (You see why jacks are overrated!).

We didn't change the HCPs among Cases 2, 3, and 4, just how well the honors **work**. In all cases there are a total of 27 HCP between 2 hands. For Case 3: we see that the ♥Q is completely wasted – it is not working because it is gobbled up by the ♥AK! Likewise the ♦Q might or might not be working. It depends entirely on where the ♦ honors are (especially if the opening lead is a ♦. Opponents always seem to get their opening leads right….). Case 3: has only 24 working points because of duplication and length issues – 3-4 HCP are not pulling their weight toward building winning tricks for declarer.

Primary and Secondary Honors
A primary honor is generally more valuable outside partner's suit than inside. A secondary honor is more valuable inside partner's suit than outside. An Ace is always more primary than a King, and the King more than the Queen. While this might seem confusing, remember our focus is on extra tricks. Here's a simple example:

Case 5: Assume Partner opens 1♠.   As a simple 9 HCP ♠ raise for partner

H: ♠xxxx, ♥Ax, ♦Qxxx, ♣Kxx is less valuable than
I: ♠Qxxx, ♥Ax, ♦xxxx, ♣Kxx, which is less valuable than
J: ♠Qxxx, ♥xx, ♦xxxx, ♣AKxx.

Since partner has 5 ♠s or more, <mark>H:</mark> offers partner 1.5-1.75 tricks, <mark>I:</mark> offers 2.5 tricks, and <mark>J:</mark> offers 3 tricks (not including potential ♥ ruffs). The simple idea? Q's are more likely to be extra tricks in our suit, and less likely to be tricks when outside our suit. Aces are always tricks but your ace of trumps might not add more than 1 trick (itself). An Ace with length outside partner's suit might leverage more tricks by helping develop small cards.

Wasted Points

Honors in opponent's suit, or honors opposite partners known shortness (singleton or void, 1/0), or redundant with partner's HCP, or singleton honors in outside suits (think Splinter bids), or Honors with no small cards can be wasted. Remember we want Honors to work to establish long suit tricks for us. Let's look at a few auctions to see how the value of a hand changes.

Opener's Hand <mark>D:</mark> ♠xxxx, ♥AK, ♦Qxxx, ♣Kxx

Auction	Comment
1♦-P-1♠-P 2♠-P-3♠-P ?	An easy pass. Partner won't like lack of small ♥ cards, and the ♦Q and ♣K are not working for certain. Simple auction simple decision. HCP fans will get this one right too.
1♦-P-1♠-P 2♠-P-4♥-P ?	Partner's splinter bid caught you with concentrated strength opposite his shortness. This means you do not have 7 working points partner wants in the OTHER SUITS. Bid game and hope partner passes.
1♦-P-1♠-P 2♠-P-4♦-P ?	Partner's splinter in ♦ is more interesting as you are sure you have 10 working points and only one ♦ loser. Cue bid 4♥ and see if partner cooperates toward slam.
1♦-1♥-1♠-2♥ 2♠-3♥-3♠-4♥ ?	Whatever you do, do not bid 4♠! You have 7 wasted HCP in their suit opposite partner's shortness. Partner expects these 7 points to be in ♣s and ♦s. Double - so that partner doesn't move toward slam holding ♠AKxxx, ♥-, ♦Kxxx, ♣Axxx or better. Your double simply says you have duplicated values in their suit. Partner will know to bid 4♠ and not slam, or pass. Points in opponent's suits **subtract** value from partner's hand (ok this is abstract and sounds strange). A few more examples might help.

What's a King Worth? - Would you believe anywhere from "4" to "-6" HCP??

Auction	Your Hand	Comment
1♥-1♠-P-?	♠xxxx, ♥Kxx, ♦Qxxx, ♣Ax	9 HCP but only 6 WP. Make a simple raise rather than a constructive or limit raise (if you have those methods). You cannot count the ♥K as a trick. This ♥K is worth "0".
1♦-1♠-2♠*-? *Limit raise or better	♠xxxx, ♥Kxx, ♦Qxxx, ♣Ax	Opponents appear to have 12+11= 23 HCP or the distributional equivalent. That leaves only 8 HCP for partner. Your ♥K might not be working so you can count 14 working points at most between your 2 hands. Pass or pick a safe preempt according to vulnerability. This ♥K's worth "1.5 HCP" - ♥A is on either side .
1♦-2♦*-P-? *55 Majors	♠Qxxx, ♥Kxx, ♦xxxx, ♣Ax	Not only are every one of your HCP working, partner might just be short in ♦. Bid 2N to show a good raise, and let partner help set the right level. Partner will bid 3♥ with a weak hand and 4♥ with a hand needing 3 cover cards – just what you offer. Your ♥K is worth the equivalent of the Ace or "4 HCP".
1♥-*-2N-P 4♥-*- P-?	♠xxxxx, ♥Kx, ♦xxxx, ♣xx	♠xxxxx, ♥xx, ♦xxxx, ♣xx would be better! Holding the ♥K means partner has 3 HCP less that you had hoped. Opponents 25+ HCP contain a K or equivalent that we need to succeed. The ♥K is worth "-6 HCP": -3 since it is not working and -3 for the King it takes out of partner's hand. Bid 4♠ and hope for the best.

Learning Points
1. HCP are a wonderful tool to help determine your 1st and maybe 2nd bids. Don't be a slave to numbers. **THINK!**
2. During the biding, be sure to adjust the value of your hand based on what partner and the opponents say.
3. Once you communicate a value range for your hand, use the subsequent bidding to refine where you are in that range. The auction offers clues to where their high card points are.
4. For trump contracts, focus on *useful length, working points,* and *useful shortness* to help estimate the tricks you can take in BOTH hands. Don't rely on HCP alone – they are misleading.
5. Choose a bidding system that you like and can use effectively (remember, apply and interpret).
6. Choose treatments that help you communicate *useful length, working points,* and *useful shortness* as simply as possible.

Bibliography
There are many great books written on hand evaluation. Here are several you should consider reading:

Author	Reference
Mike Lawrence	The Complete Book on Hand Evaluation in Contract Bridge. Max Hardy, Pub. Las Vegas, 8th printing (1991) 194pp. ISBN # 0-939460-27
Mike Lawrence and Anders Wirgrin	I Fought the Law of Total Tricks. Mikeworks, Brentwood TN. (2004) 271pp. ISBN # 0-9762999-1-7
Jeff Rubens	The Secrets of Winning Bridge. Grosset & Dunlap New York (1971) 241pp. ISBN # 0-448-02094-7
Marty Bergen	Points Schmoints!: Bergen's Winning Bridge Secrets. (2002) Hand Evaluation: Points Schmoints. Guaranteed to Make You a Better Bidder. (2002) More Points Schmoints. (1999)

How to apply hand valuation to different contexts can also be found in published panel discussions like the Bridge World's Master Solvers monthly quiz.

Keywords: Fit, Working Points, Primary and Secondary Honors, Useful length and shortness, Counting Tricks