

Learning Points – When 16 HCP Are Worth More

By Steve Moese

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Bidding Level: Intermediate

Thursday Club Game, August 26, 2010 Mr. & Mrs Marvin and Annaeae Comer, Directors. Cincinnati Bridge Association Bridge Center, 2860 Cooper Road, Cincinnati, OH 45241 (513) 631-8070 . Mike Ma is my partner. We play Precision.

Many playing some form of a strong 1 NT opening bid (14-16 or 15-17 HCP) wouldn't think twice about opening any 16 HCP hand 1NT. Marty Bergen published a wonderful booklet on hand evaluation that makes the case: **“Not all 16 and 17 HCP hands are created equal.”** See if you agree

The Bidding

The discussion here is NOT about whether you should play Standard American, 2/1 Game Force, Precision or some other bidding system. The question we will explore is: **“When is it right to upgrade your hand to the next level?”**

| | | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|--------------|
| West Deals EW Vul MPs | Mike ♠ 6432 ♥ J87 ♦ J2 ♣ AJ98 | | |
| ♠ 9 ♥ K942 ♦ 873 ♣ KQ753 | N W 16 E S | ♠ AQJ10 ♥ 65 ♦ Q9654 ♣ 62 | |
| | Steve ♠ K875 ♥ AQ103 ♦ AK10 ♣ 104 | | NS: 2♥,2♠,3N |

| West | North | East | South |
|------|-------|------|-------|
| Pass | Pass | Pass | ??? |

2/1, Standard, Precision (14-16 HCP)

| West | North | East | South |
|------|-------|------|-------|
| Pass | Pass | Pass | 1N |
| Pass | Pass | Pass | |

Standard and 2/1:

| West | North | East | South |
|------|-------|----------|-------|
| Pass | Pass | Pass | 1♦ |
| Pass | 1♠ | Pass | 2N??? |
| Pass | 3N | All Pass | |

Our Precision Auction:

| West | North | East | South |
|------|-----------------|------|-------------------|
| Pass | Pass | Pass | 1♣ ¹ |
| Pass | 1♦ ² | Pass | 1N ³ |
| Pass | 2♣ ⁴ | Pass | 2♥ |
| Pass | 3N ⁵ | Pass | Pass ⁶ |

1= 16+ HCP Artificial and Forcing
2= 0-7 HCP any shape
3=17-19 HCP Balanced Shape
4= Stayman 5=Game strength (implying 4 ♠s)
6= NT game looks better than ♠s.

West leads the ♣K

There is no doubt that North's hand will not even consider a raise over a (14-16) 15-17 1NT. However all 3 popular bidding approaches can choose to upgrade South's hand to the next NT

level (17-19) 18-19 HCP. Does the South hand qualify for an upgrade? South chose to upgrade the hand to the next level. That brought an ambitious game contract that no one else reached.

The Play

West attacked with the ♣K. Declarer ducked (preserving the tenace in dummy and a later entry should West oblige). The ♠9 was continued and won by East with the ♠A. East switched to a low ♦ and declarer chose to finesse the ♦10 which held. Now a ♠ back would test the suit for a 3-2 break and create a long ♠ trick. ♠s did not behave. The discovery work was done on this hand – declarer knew that East could not hold the ♥K (or an opening bid of some sort would have been forthcoming). Declarer wins the ♠ continuation and leads a low ♥ toward dummy's ♥J. West is in with no good continuation. The marked ♣ finesse remains. In all South lost 2♠s and 1♥ and 1♣. Making 3 was par and scoring the nonvulnerable game was top board.

| Pair | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
|--------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|---|---|---|----|------|-----|
| MPs | 3 | 5.5 | 1 | 7 | 2 | 4 | | | | | 0 | 5.5 |
| Result | 110 | 150 | -90 | 400 | -50 | 120 | | | | | -150 | 150 |

Importantly, bidding 1 or 2 N and making 3 on this hand would have been worth 5 of 7 match points. You don't always have to bid 'em to get a great score if you play 'em better than your opponents!

HCP and Expert Points

We are all very familiar with HCPs, credited to Milton Work and popularized by Charles Goren in the USA. Many experts know that Aces are undervalued and Q's and J's are over-valued in this approach. Experts also know that 10's and 9's contribute importantly (good intermediates make a suit more likely to win length tricks than weak intermediate cards).

| | HCP | Expert |
|-----------|-----|--------|
| A | 4 | 4 ½ |
| K | 3 | 3 |
| Q | 2 | 1 ½ |
| J | 1 | ¾ |
| 10 | 0 | ¼ |

Marty Bergen has published an adjustment credited to others that improves how we evaluate trick-taking potential. As you can see, the total number of HCP per suit is still 10 (and 40 for the deck).

| | |
|---------|---|
| ♠ K875 | Why did South choose to be more aggressive? |
| ♥ AQ103 | Standard HCP count to 3+6+7=16. |
| ♦ AK10 | Expert Points count to $3 + 6 \frac{1}{4} + 7 \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{4} = 16 \frac{3}{4}$. |
| ♣ 104 | This hand holds 2A's and 2K's or 4+2=6, half of the deck's 12 controls – another reason to upvalue. |

Bergen changes the RELATIVE VALUES for honors:
 2 Aces are worth 3 Kings,
 1 Ace is worth 3 Queens or 6 Jacks.
 1 King is worth 2 Queens,
 1 Queen is still worth 2 Jacks, and
 1 Jack is worth 3 10's.

System Fix

It looks like EW got fixed by NS's chosen NT range. Upgrading the South hand to the next NT range meant 17-19 HCP. Expert evaluation supports that choice. However upgrading the hand to 18-19 (2/1 or Standard's next level) is not supported. This hand is a "Seam Hand" in one system, and a normal hand in another.

When a hand falls at the seam between two possible valuations you decide which way to bid it. If you play 11-14 1NT then evaluating 11 and 14 HCP hands might cause you to upgrade or downgrade. 14-16 means you look at 14 or 16. 15-17 means you look at 15 or 17, and so on.

Small differences can have big consequences. Notice how North's intermediates (8s & 9s) matched well with South's 10s. Because South already stretched to upvalue the hand, bidding 4♠ instead of 3N was not attractive. Often when stretching, 9 tricks is the limit of the hand in both the major and NT. South's ♠s were not strong enough. Here are some 17 HCP hands. Do you upgrade?:

| Hands | HCP | Bergen | Comments (2/1 or Standard) |
|--------------------------|-----|--------|---|
| ♠KJ75 ♥AQ103 ♦AK10 ♣104 | 17 | 17 ½ | 1♦ then jump to 2N! (or raise partner's major strongly). |
| ♠KJ75 ♥AQ103, ♦A109, ♣QJ | 17 | 17 | Open 1 NT. The ♣QJ is a liability. |
| ♠AK75 ♥AKQJ3 ♦1093, ♣102 | 17 | 17 ¾ | 1♦ then jump to 2N! (or raise partner's major strongly). |
| ♠KQJ7 ♥QJ2 ♦KQJ2 ♣Q2 | 17 | 14 ¼ | 1♦ then rebid 1N! (or raise partner's major simply). No Aces, too many QJs, no intermediates. |
| ♠AJ105 ♥A1093 ♦A109 ♣A10 | 17 | 19 ¾ | Open 2NT!!!! (Jump to 2NT with no 4-card major). |

Learning Points

1. Not all Notrump hands are created equal. Look to adjust value up or down based on the quality of the points and the texture of the hand.
2. Valuing Aces, paired honors in 4, 5, and 6-card suits helps support a decision to upgrade your hand.
3. Devalue Qs and Js. Devalue honors in short suits, doubleton QJs and honors with no small cards.
4. The Bergen HCP method is a useful refinement. You decide if it's worth the effort at the table.

Keywords: HCP, Bergen Point Count, Upvaluing your hand

Bergen, Marty, Hand Evaluation: Points, Schmoits! Guaranteed to Make You a Better Bidder, (2002) Berge Books, Palm Beach Gardens FL ISBN 0-9716636-5-3