

♠♥♦♣ Learning Points – Competitive Bidding Basic Hand Evaluation

By Steve Moese

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Bidding Level: Basic

Tuesday Night Lecture Series

Here's our learning plan:

- **Hand Evaluation: HCP & shape → tricks**
- Estimate tricks available for both sides.
- Estimate our tricks.
- Competitive bidding challenge: What's 10 HCP worth?
- The 2 Competitive Auctions.
- Best Competitive bidding practices.
- Key Bidding tools.

Ask a group of bridge players what's the toughest part of this game. If competitive bidding isn't among the top 2, play a lot of bridge against them. They don't know bridge as well as they think! If we could only know how many tricks the opponents can make and how many we can make. We'd know when to bid and when to stop. While we can't have perfect knowledge, we can get pretty close.

If you think that Competitive Bidding starts with reviewing a laundry list of conventions, think again. Instead we'll start with developing our competitive judgment. Let's review goals, learn how to analyze situations, choose the key information to exchange with partner, and learn how context affects our bidding approach.

Hand Evaluation

HCP are like the keys to your car – great for getting started, but you don't touch them much while you're driving. Indeed HCP help for the 1st 2 rounds of bidding. They are less useful in later rounds. The more distribution you encounter the less likely HCP alone will be accurate.

The Value of Honor Cards

A 4 – K 3 – Q 2 – J 1 HCP Count is simple, useful and easy to remember. This approach misses key points: Aces are undervalued; Qs and Js are overvalued; and 10's are missing in action. A better estimate is A 4½ – K 3 – Q 1½ – J ¾ – 10 ¼. This is too complicated for frequent use. Use this when facing a close decision to up- or down-value your hand.

Classic HCP Targets:

25 HCP 3N
26 HCP 4 Major
28 HCP 5 Minor
34 HCP 6N
37 HCP 7N

Tricks and HCP

We bid to translate HCP and length into tricks. If we consider HCP only, we will miss our goal. Look at these hands 6 HCP responding to partner's 1♠ opening bid (RHO passes). They are **NOT** the same¹:

- 1) ♠Qx, ♥Qxxx, ♦Qxxx, ♣xxx – The ♠Q is your only likely trick. You have no ruffing side suit possibilities. You are the short trump hand. Extra tricks come from ruffing in the short trump hand, not the long trump hand.
- 2) ♠Kxx, ♥xxxx, ♦xxx, ♣Kxx – Your ♠K is almost a certain trick, and the ♣K is likely to help, but you have now ruffing tricks for partner.
- 3) ♠Axx, ♥Qxxx, ♦xxxx, ♣xx – This hand is better than hand 2 only when partner has a ♥ honor for your Q to produce a trick. Otherwise you rate to contribute the ♠A and a ♣ ruff.
- 4) ♠Qxxx, ♥Axx, ♦xxxx, ♣xx – This is the best of the bunch. You likely contribute 3 tricks (♠Q, ♥A, and ♣ ruff) and might contribute 4 (2nd ♣ ruff).

Power Rank:

4 > 3 ≥ 2 > 1

NT Contracts

HCP are a reasonable predictor of tricks for two balanced hands approaching a NT contract. Indeed if 25 HCP is enough to make a NT game, then 19 should make 1N, 22 should make 2N, 28 should make 4N, 31 should make 5N etc. Here are key exceptions to pure HCP count:

- 1) Duplication – 4 Honors take 4 tricks. If they are 2-opposite-2, the limit is 2 tricks; AKQJ opposite a void takes 4 tricks. AK opposite QJ takes only 2 tricks. The QJ are not working.
- 2) Honors without small cards block access to tricks or limit long suit development. Qxxxxx, xx, xxx, xx can take 6 tricks most of the time opposite AKx, but only 2 opposite AK in NT.
- 3) The Q & J might be completely useless if the A & K are with 9+ card length; Axxxx opposite Kxxxx offers 5 tricks with any 2-1 split. 7 HCP? No, 10 working points 78% of the time.
- 4) Length tricks are valuable, so mirror shapes (both hands have the same pattern) hurt. ****, **, ***, **** opposite ****, **, ***, **** will likely go down in 3N if there aren't 2 stoppers in the ** suit, as long as declarer must lose a trick in another suit. Ugly.
- 5) Unsupported Aces make weak stoppers for NT. Ax opposite xxx means we pray for 4-4 split. Axx opposite xx allows a hold up play to protect against a possible 5-3 split.

- 6) HCP in their suit are *less valuable* to our suit contract – they must have HCP in our suit or a side suit important to our success. Points in opponents’ suits are not working to promote length tricks in our suits. Think NT (or Doubling their contract). Opponents bid ♥s. We respond to partner’s opening ♠ bid holding: ♠Qxxx, ♥AKx, ♦KJxx, ♣xx Opponents have an A & K in the 3 remaining suits. The ♥AK will take 2 tricks but will not promote tricks in ♣s or ♦s. Note how ♠Qxxx, ♥xx, ♦AKJx, ♣Kxx means all our points are working in ♠s.

Marty Bergen⁵ reports that analysis of more than a million hands from on-line bridge, hands where there is a choice between NT and playing in an 8 card fit, the 8-card trump fit delivers on average 1.5 more tricks than NT.

Good Matchpoint players know that there are 3 times when we choose NT over the 8+ card major fit:

- 1) Combined you and partner have 24-25 HCP, no useful shortness and are stretching for game
- 2) Combined you and partner rate to have 9 tricks and opponents cannot run more than 4 on the opening lead.
- 3) Combined you and partner have 28-30 HCP, no useful shortness and will take the same tricks with or without trumps.

Suit Contracts

The decision making for suit contracts is more complicated. Marty Bergen⁵ and Larry Cohen³ teach the Law of Total Tricks as a guide to how high to bid. Mike Lawrence and Anders Wirgren⁴ point out that the Law is only 80% accurate and can easily be ± 2 tricks depending on honors and where opponents’ honors are. They propose **working points and useful shortness** concepts (their analytical formula is cumbersome and hard to apply at the table). We will approach the Law as a reasonable gauge of COMBINED trick taking for BOTH sides, but choose a better tool for hand evaluation. Ron Klingner² updated a 75 year old expert technique, the Losing Trick Count, we will use to guide how high we bid suit contracts.

Working Points and Useful Shortness⁴⁵⁶

The most convincing assessment of how many tricks we can take comes from Working Points and Useful Shortness. Working points carry their full trick taking power AND create length tricks in our long suits (BONUS).

Working points are not HCP. Working Points set up long suit tricks or cover short suit losers. If you can take all tricks in the suit missing any honor, it is the same as if you hold those honors. A well know extreme example is the 5 HCP Grand Slam Hand. As long as ♠s split 1-1 (52%) and ♣s split no worse than 4-2 (84%) you can make 7♠.

Draw 1 round of trump and cross ruff until ♣s are established.

♠ 1098765	♠ AJ432
♥ -	♥ 9876
♦ -	♦ 5432
♣ 9876543	♣ -

How does this hand inform our Working Points and Useful Shortness discussion? There are 40 HCP in the deck. 26 will yield a game and 37 a grand slam. *For each zero-loser suit a useful void opposite no HCP, we can subtract 10 working points from the total we need to make a grand slam.* Here we have useful voids in ♥, ♦, and ♣ → 37 HCP - 30 or 7 Working Points will make a Grand slam. We have only 5 HCP you say? Not so fast – when we have enough length and key top honors to extract other honors from opponents, we can count the full 10 Working Points. In summary: Useful shortness says we need 7 working points to make a grand slam in spades here. We have 10 working points, not 5, because we hold the ♠A & an 11 card fit. The ♠K & ♠Q both fall under the ♠A. *By extension, for each singleton only the A is working so we can subtract 6 HCP. For a Doubleton only the AK are working, so we can subtract 3 HCP.* Where distribution allows us to win all the tricks in the suit, we hold 10 WPs in that suit by default.

Useful Shortness reduces the number of working points we need to make our contract in predictable ways. Useful shortness reduces losers in opponents’ suits and can increase our tricks count by scoring our trumps separately. Useful shortness is more valuable in the short trump hand. Note when you are 4-4 in trumps, you choose which hand to make the short trump hand. You might score 2 or more ruffs in that hand with planning and luck. Useful shortness means no strength or length is wasted opposite partner’s hand.

Take for example a common hand with a combined 23 HCP. HCP only bidders might stop in a partial. Only 28 WP are needed to take 13 tricks - 10 in ♠s, 10 in ♦s, and 4 each for the 2 remaining aces. ♣ and ♥ HCP other than the Aces are not working. They do not contribute materially to the success of our ♠ contract because of useful shortness (singletons). We hold 24 of the 28 WPs. We are 1 Ace short of 13 tricks. We should be in small slam. How can we improve our judgment at the table so we can bid better? Fit, trump length & splinter bids.

♠ AKxxx	♠ Qxxx
♥ xxx	♥ x
♦ KJxx	♦ AQxx
♣ x	♣ Axxx

Let's study how useful shortness affects the Working Points necessary to make 13 tricks.

♠AKJx ♥xxx ♦KQx ♣AKx	Qxx AKQ Axxx Qxx	Two 4333 shapes (not mirrors) we have 37 HCP, 37 WP and 13 Tricks. If either pointed suit breaks 3-3 then we don't need the ♠J.
♠AKxxx ♥xx ♦KQx ♣AKx	Qxx AKxx Axxx Qx	With an 8-card S fit, we have 10 WP in S. 7 WP in ♥; We have 9 WP in ♦; We have 9 WP in ♣s (no length to develop so we can't claim 10). Total = 35 WP for 13 tricks.
♠AKxxx ♥xx ♦Kxx ♣Axx	xxx AKxx Axxx xx	How little do we need to a 10 trick game? $26/37 = 70.27\%$ of Grand Slam Points are needed or a game. $70\% \times 35 = 25$ WP. ← Here we have 25 WP and 3 likely losers.
♠AKxxx ♥x ♦KQx ♣AKxx	Qxx Axxx Axxx Qx	We no longer need the ♥K. Total = 32 WP for 13 tricks.
♠AKxxxx ♥- ♦KQxx ♣AKx	Qxx xxxx Axxx Qx	We no longer need the ♥A. Total = 28 WP and 13 Tricks.
♠AKxxxx ♥x ♦AKQxx ♣x	Qxx Axxx xxxx Ax	Total 28 WP (26 HCP) and 13 Tricks.
♠AKxxxx ♥- ♦AKQxxx ♣x	Qxx xxxx xxxx Ax	Total 24 WP (22 HCP) and 13 Tricks.
♠AKxxxx ♥- ♦AKQxxxx ♣-	Qxx xxxx xxxx xx	20 WP (18 HCP) and 13 Tricks.
♠AKxxx ♥x ♦KQx ♣AKxx	xxx AKQ xxx xxxx	Need $10+4+9+9 = 32$ WP for 13 tricks We have $7+4+5+7 = 23$ WP (and 28 HCP). The difference of 8 WP is 3 tricks. We stand to lose 1♦, 1♠, and 1♣. ♥ honors are not working. We need honors in ♦, ♣, and ♠.
♠QJxxx ♥x ♦KQx ♣AKxx	xxx Axxx Axxx Qx	We need 32 WP to make 13 Tricks. We have 25 WP. The difference of 7 WP is 2 or 3 tricks less. We might not get to ruff a ♣ in dummy.

Working Points is the theory – we will look at Modern Losing Trick Count as a way to apply this theory that's simple and easy to remember.

Shape

The most common shape is 4432 (21.55%). The worst shapes for a bridge hand are 4333 (10.5%) and 5332 (15.52%). Neither have side suit long tricks available to develop. It's wise to devalue shapes with no long suit and little useful shortness.

The best shapes have singletons and voids with longer suits. 4441, 5431, 5521, 5530, 5440, and 6331 are great shapes that improve the trick taking power of an 8+ card fit. Shortness in suit contracts is more useful when in the short trump hand than when in the long trump hand. About 35.5% of hands have a singleton or void. 5% have a void. "6-5 Come Alive" happens only 1.36% of the time.

Pattern	%	Total
4432	21.55%	21.55%
5332	15.52%	37.07%
5431	12.93%	50.00%
5422	10.58%	60.58%
4333	10.54%	71.11%
6322	5.64%	76.76%
6421	4.70%	81.46%
6331	3.45%	84.91%
5521	3.17%	88.08%
4441	2.99%	91.07%
7321	1.88%	92.96%
6430	1.33%	94.28%
5440	1.24%	95.52%
5530	0.90%	96.42%
6511	0.71%	97.13%
6520	0.65%	97.78%
7222	0.51%	98.29%
7411	0.39%	98.68%
7420	0.36%	99.04%

Tips:

- 1) Devalue 4333 shape and slow values.
- 2) Open hands based on the **Rule of 22**: Number of cards in the 2 longest suits + HCP + Quick Tricks. (Quick tricks are counted as follows: AK=2, AQ=1½, KQ=1, K=½). 2 4-card suits (8) plus 12 HCP and 2QT = 22.
- 3) Wasted points in opponents' suits or opposite partner's shortness reduce tricks we can take in our suit contract. Slow down. Not all our HCP are Working.
- 4) Support with Support. Do not fall in love with you 100 honors if you have good support for partner. Support first then tell partner about your source of extra tricks. *Corollary*: If partner doesn't support your suit, they don't have support! (We make an exception for the 3-card limit raise).
- 5) Strength with length (Working Points) is more powerful than Strength with shortness. How should you open this hand? ♠10xxxx, ♥xxxx, ♦KQ, ♣AK You don't –your HCP are not working to build tricks in your length. Pass and balance.
- 6) Learn to balance skillfully – you won't feel the pressure to show partner any hand with HCP. Balancing agreements are different from direct seat actions. Know the differences.
- 7) Distinguish between 3 card, 4-card and 5+-card support for partner's suit. It matters.
- 8) Show singletons and voids. Useful shortness is useful only if you share it with partner!
- 9) Tailor your bidding to the context. Constructive auctions use one set of tools. When They Intrude, we have the double, free bid and cue bid to add to our arsenal and some conventions turn off (e.g. splinters). When we intrude, we follow different conventions than when we bid constructively or when they intervene in our auction. Know the differences.
- 10) "6-5 come alive" (apologies to Marty Bergen). You likely have a 4 loser hand even if you have only 12 HCP (as long as all your HCP are in the 2 long suits). Your chances of 8+ card trump fit are excellent.
- 11) Singleton Aces Kings and Queens are worth less than face value. One of these 2 hands is a splinter for ♠s: ♠QJxx, ♥A, ♦KQxx, ♣xxxx or ♠QJxx, ♥x, ♦KQxx, ♣Axxx The ♣A works to develop length tricks. The ♥A does not. Partner expects 12 HCP in the other 3 suits. The singleton ♥A hand has only 8 HCP there.
- 12) Doubleton Honors with no small card are less valuable because they hinder suit development and risk duplication of strength (reducing Working Points) AK, AQ, KQ, KJ, QJ contribute less to WPs than their HCPs suggest.
- 13) Adopt bidding methods that share key information (fit, trump length, shortness, WPs) clearly and use sound valuation judgment for choice of strain and level.

Here are some hands to consider in a competitive auction (We open, they intrude): 1♠-2♥- your turn to bid:

Your Hand	Your Bid	The bidding Continues	Now what?
♠Qx, ♥Qxxx, ♦Qxxx, ♣xxx 6 HCP LTC: 9 losers	Pass	1♠-2♥-P-P-Double ¹ 1= We play negative doubles	You have no useful shortness and no clear 8 card fit. While you have 2 tricks on defense (♥Q and ♠ ruff), partner's 2 defensive tricks (for an opening bid) mean they might make 3♥. Bid 2♠ and hope to play it there. LTC and LoTT do not apply (no 8+ card fit).
♠xxx, ♥AKxx, ♦Qxxx, ♣xx 9 HCP LTC: 8 losers	2♠	1♠-2♥-2♠-P-3♦ ² 2=Help Suit Game Try	Here you have one cover card for partner's ♦s and 9 HCP. However the ♥ values are troubling. Bid 3♥ to show them and let partner decide among 3♠, 3N and 4♠. (LTC = 15 losers or 9 winners between us so far).
♠Qxxx, ♥x, ♦Qxx, ♣AKxxx 11 HCP LTC: 6 losers	3♥	1♠-2♥-3♥ ¹ -P-4♦ ² 1=Invitational Raise or better 2=Control Bid	Partner is interested in slam. Cue bid according to your style. The pointed suit AKs are enough for slam in partner's hand. Your side has 13 losers or 11 winners. (LTC: If partner is a K above dead minimum in useful HCP we can make slam).
♠Qxxxx, ♥x, ♦x, ♣AKQxxx 11 HCP LTC: 4 Losers	3♥	1♠-2♥-3♥ ¹ -P-4♦ ² 1=Invitational Raise or better 2=Control Bid	If after your 5♣ bid partner cue bids ♥s then bid 5NT (Grand Slam Force) to check on 2 top honors in ♠s. If s/he has them, s/he bids the grand slam. (LTC: 11 losers or 13 winners, if no Aces/Key Cards missing).

References:

- 1) "Inside Out Evaluation" by Jeff Rubens
- 2) Modern Losing Trick Count Bidding to Win at Bridge by Ron Klinger
- 3) To Bid or Not to Bid the Law of Total Tricks by Larry Cohen
- 4) I Fought the Law of Total Tricks by Mike Lawrence and Anders Wirgren
- 5) Hand Evaluation Points Schmoits Guaranteed to Make You a Better Bidder by Marty Bergen
- 6) Complete Book on Hand Evaluation in Contract Bridge by Mike Lawrence

Good

Fit $8 < 9 < 10 < 11 \dots$ Cards combined

Top Honors working in long suits $A > K > Q > J$

Rule of 22 for Opening Bids

Support with Support

Useful Singletons & Voids w/support

Law-ful methods:

Fast Arrival \rightarrow weakness; Slow \rightarrow Strong

Jump to Low Level quickly – Check WPs

Show $3 < 4 < 5 \dots$ card support

Splinter vs. Balanced raises.

Preempts: Rule 2-3-4-(5) then silence.

Bad

No fit for partner – **STOP**

Flat hands, no useful shortness

HCP and/or length in opponents' suit(s)

Singleton A, K, Q

Doubleton AK, AQ, KQ, KJ, QJ

Doubleton Qx, Jx

Beware AKQ with no small card.