

HANDOUT – Improving Level

HAND EVALUATION – OPENING ONE OF A SUIT

Opening one of a suit promises partner “a good bit better than average” hand.¹

This is about having a good bit better than average trick-taking potential
- not High Card Points (HCP)

High Card Points is a good shortcut way to help us decide about this promise.
It is important to be accurate with this message, as partner is going to act accordingly.

What gives us good trick-taking potential?

High Cards and Long Suits take tricks. Strength and length and things being in the right place, make for a good hand. In first seat, we know nothing about the other hands and in second not much more. Our assessment needs to rely on our own hand – we have little information to go on.

- Any hand with 13 HCP will be good enough. The promise of “a good bit better than average” is met no matter what the shape and no further assessment needed.
- A hand with less than 13 HCP is known as a Borderline Hand - strength, length and other matters need to be taken into account in the opening decision.

HCP and opening one of a suit

13HCP – always

12 HCP – almost always

11 HCP – often

10 HCP - sometimes

9 HCP – occasionally

8 HCP – rarely²

How do we know though?

ASSESSING BORDERLINE HANDS

HCP + Length Points

Beginning players have to start somewhere. Commonly they are taught to open with any 13 HCP hand and with less, to assess with HCP + LP's. This is HCP plus an extra point for a 5-card suit or +2 for a 6-card suit (12HCP and a 5-card suit, 11 and a 6-card suit or two fives).

Rule of 20

Most modern Beginning texts suggest moving on to the Rule of 20, said to be a bit more accurate. Rule of 20 is HCP + the length of your two longest suits = 20 then Open.

¹ Opening in 3rd and 4th seat can be different. Assume this promise though, until shown otherwise. There are various conventions that can be used when partner opens in 3rd and 4th seat.

² In Australia most of us play a Green System, requiring one level openings to contain at least 8 HCP (*ABF Regulations*).

IMPROVING ACCURACY

Improving-Intermediate players want to be much more accurate. This is especially so when good opening hands come along with only 11, 10 or even less HCP.

Sometimes instinct says you have a good hand but you are not sure why. Worse, you think you have one when you don't. Accounting for certain features around the Honours will help.

Whole books have been written on when we should with 12, 11, 10, 9 or even 8 HCP.

True value of Honours

As players become more experienced they start to realise that the location of their high cards effects their value or HCP allocation. They also hear that the experts all agree the 4-3-2-1 allocation for Honours has a few issues. Whilst the 4-3-2-1 count is by far and away the best (do not stop using it), some HCP's are well-deserved and others not.

Compare these two hands:

| HAND A | HAND B |
|--------|---------|
| ♠ QJxx | ♠ AKQJx |
| ♥ QJxx | ♥ x |
| ♦ QJxx | ♦ xxxxx |
| ♣ K | ♣ xx |

HAND A has 12 HCP and HAND B has only 10 HCP. Many experienced players would be reluctant to open with HAND A but would not hesitate to open with HAND B.

WHY?

HAND B meets the promise of a "a good bit better than average trick-taking potential"
HAND A does not meet this promise, despite that it has more points.

Some of the problems with HAND A include

- Honours are separated all over the place – HONOURS LIKE BEING TOGETHER
- Queens and Jacks make up more than 50% of the HCP – A QUACK HAND
- No Ace in the whole hand – ACELESS HAND
- King is a singleton – DUBIOUS HONOURS

It is quite possible that HAND A could end up taking zero tricks, yet some would consider opening with this hand. HAND B has Honours truly worth what they were assigned.

TRUE VALUE OF HIGH CARD POINTS

Accuracy of the 4-3-2-1 HCP allocation

It is well-accepted that this count is not completely accurate BUT it is a very good shortcut and probably the best we have.

Do not ever lose sight of your 4-3-2-1 HCP count as a highly effective method to begin evaluating a hand for opening.

In the good old days, the 4-Ace Method was common (3-2-1-^{1/2}). The author's great aunts loved this. Robertson's 7-5-3-2 was popular, as was the Bamburger 7-5-3-1.

Milton Works suggested the 4-3-2-1 count, now known as Goren Points, which is still in common use today. This method balances accuracy with ease. Who wants to fiddle with fractions?

Problems with the accuracy of HCP Count 4-3-2-1

Experts agree, though, that the true raw value of Honours is more like:

A = 4.5

K = 3

Q = 1.5

J = .75

10 can be worth something in certain situations but is assigned no value

Generally the HCP 4-3-2-1 undervalues Aces and 10's and overvalues Q's and J's.

For example

- A couple of usefully placed 10's are valuable yet we give them zero
- Doubleton KQ gets 5 HCP yet an Ace is only given 4 HCP
- Q singleton is not likely to take any tricks yet she gets 2 HCP no matter where she sits

That the raw worth of an ACE is closer to 4.5, a QUEEN more likely 1.5, and a JACK only about $\frac{3}{4}$ or less, is not in dispute but who wants to fiddle with fractions?

Likewise, trying to add Two Aces = 9, Two Queens = 3, Four Jacks = 3 and so on, could be bothersome. We do not have a calculator at the table and ten minutes to decide!

Location of Honours effect their value

Things to think about:-

- ☹ Honours being in shorts suits greatly diminishes their value
- ☹ A singleton Ace really is worth only 4 – being alone they cannot do their main job
- ☹ A singleton Q is assigned 2 HCP but is highly unlikely to win any tricks, same with Qx and Qxx
- ☹ Three J's without other honours = 3 HCP yet are probably worth 0 tricks
- ☹ 10's are awarded zero yet snuggled in with their QJ9 are valuable
- 😊 Put just one jack in with his family – KJ109 – and he is now worth more than 3 stray Jacks
- 😊 AKQJ together is almost priceless – worth more than the 10 HCP given
- 😊 Put a Q in with the AKJ of her suit and she is now worth her weight in gold
- 😊 Defensive tricks matter but we do not account for these in the HCP count (Quick Tricks)

4-3-2-1 works perfectly well if we make a few adjustments
for the location of Honours

DOWNGRADING AND UPGRADING A HAND'S WORTH

For the Purpose of Opening we know that 13 HCP will always be fine.

Assessing borderline hands

For hands with less than 13 HCP, the location of honours effects whether they are working for you or against you and the accuracy of their HCP count.

- Honours work best when snuggled together nicely with their other Honours. They do not work well when separated and spread out all over the place.
- With the 4-3-2-1 Count, you have already valued your Honours, perhaps with some over-inflation and perhaps with some undervaluing.
- There is no need to change your 4-3-2-1 HCP count but making a few simple adjustments for the location of honours will help.

SHORTCUTS TO DECIDE ABOUT A BORDERLINE HAND

Various methods developed by the experts

Some of these are easy and some are burdensome. Generally, the easier the method, the less accurate. 13 HCP is the easy one. Ways to assess Borderline hands include:-

- HCP + LP or the Basic Rule of 20 – both easy but less accurate.
- Rule of 22 – a bit harder but less accurate (included in this Handout)
- Bergen's -3 Adjustment to the Rule of 20 – probably more accurate than Rule of 22
- **Adjusted Rule of 20** – introduced in this lesson and more accurate (Bergen)
- More highfalutin methods exist such as *Zar Points*, *Optimal Point Count*, *Klinger Points*, *Bergen Points* - all probably more accurate but possibly not for the mere mortals at the Bridge table.

Adjusted Rule of 20

This is a shortcut method that balances ease with accuracy. If this is difficult at first, simply start with one or two downgrades and build on it over time, adding upgrades as needed. With practice you will be able to do this very quickly, just like counting HCP. Start off with the Rule of 20 and make some adjustments for the shortfalls of the 4-3-2-1 allocation.

STEP 1: Rule of 20 (HCP + length of two longest suits)

STEP 2: Downgrades

- Aceless hand minus 1
- Quack Hand minus 1
- Dubious Honours minus 1 for each dubious honour

STEP 3: Upgrades

- Quick Tricks = $2^{1/2}$ plus 1
- Useful 10's = 2 plus 1
- Long, strong suit plus 1 (Honours snuggled together)

If the total still comes to 20+ = OPEN.

What is an Aceless hand?

A hand with no Aces.

What are Dubious Honours?

Isolated Honours, not doing their job well.

- Singleton K, Q, J.
- Doubleton Qx, Jx, some say Kx
- Tripleton Qxx, Jxx

What is a long, strong suit?

Very good Honours together in *at least* a 5-card suit is worth an upgrade.

What do you call a deer with no eyes?

No Idea. Whoops!

What is a Quack Hand?

Q's and J's make up 50%+ of your HCP.

What is a Quick Trick?

Comes automatically with patience.

TABLE OF QUICK TRICKS

AK= 2, AQ = 1.5, A=1, KQ=1, Kx=.5, K=.5¹

What are useful 10's and intermediates?

Eg KQ10, Q1098, K1098, AQ108, J1098
A useful 10 in a three+ length suit.

See further notes at end of Handout

LET'S GO BACK TO OUR ORIGINAL HAND A and HAND B

HAND A

♠ QJxx

♥ QJxx

♦ QJxx

♣ K

HAND B

♠ AKQJx

♥ x

♦ xxxxx

♣ xx

HAND A has isolated Honours – HAND B has Honours snuggled together.

HAND A has more than 50% of HCP made up of Queens and Jacks – it is Quacking and overinflated.

HAND A has a dubious honour, the singleton King - probably not worth his 3 HCP's.

HAND A is Aceless – missing what would usually be closer to a 4.5 count.

HAND B should open with 1S, especially in 1st or 2nd seat, despite 10 HCP.

HAND A is not an opening hand, despite 12 HCP's.

Note that if you open with HAND B you should not sit there squirming, wondering how to tell partner you opened light. **WHY?** Because you **did not** open light.

- **HAND B** properly meets the opening promise made to partner.
- **HAND A** would be worth doing some squirming over if you opened.

ADJUSTED RULE OF 20 IN ACTION

Should you open in 1st or 2nd seat with these Borderline hands?

HAND 1

| | | |
|--|----------|--|
| | ♠A4 | |
| | ♥K1086 | |
| | ♦QJ10973 | |
| | ♣5 | |

STEP 1: 10 HCP + 10 for length = 20

STEP 2: Downgrade

- Aceless Hand = No
- Quack Hand = No
- Dubious Honours = None

STEP 3: Upgrade

No need for upgrades as the hand makes the Adjusted Rule of 20

No downgrades or upgrades

TOTAL 20 = OPEN

HAND 2

| | | |
|--|-------|--|
| | ♠KJ42 | |
| | ♥K | |
| | ♦K984 | |
| | ♣Q653 | |

STEP 1: 12 HCP + 8 for length = 20

STEP 2: Downgrade

- Aceless Hand = -1
- Quack Hand = No
- Dubious Honours = -1 for singleton K

STEP 3: Upgrade

- Quick Tricks 2.5 = No
- Long, strong suit = No
- Two Useful 10's = No

-2 Downgrade and 0 upgrade

TOTAL 20 - 2 = 18. NOT AN OPENING HAND.

HAND 3

| | | |
|--|-------|--|
| | ♠KJ42 | |
| | ♥8 | |
| | ♦AK84 | |
| | ♣J653 | |

STEP 1: 12 HCP + 8 for length = 20

STEP 2: Downgrade

- Aceless Hand = No
- Quack Hand = No
- Dubious Honours = -1 for singleton King

STEP 3: Upgrade

- Quick Tricks 2.5 = Yes. +1
- Long, strong suit = No
- Two Useful 10's = 0

Downgrades = -1 and Upgrades = +1

TOTAL 20-1+1 = 20. OPEN.

HAND 4

| | | |
|--|---------|--|
| | ♠AK1075 | |
| | ♥42 | |
| | ♦K752 | |
| | ♣102 | |

STEP 1: 10 HCP + 9 for length = 19

STEP 2: Downgrade

- Aceless Hand = No
- Quack Hand = No
- Dubious Honours = No

STEP 3: Upgrade

- Quick Tricks 2.5 = Yes. +1
- Long, strong suit = No
- Two Useful 10's = 0

Downgrades = 0 and Upgrades = +1

TOTAL 19 + 1 = 20. OPEN.

HAND 5

| | | |
|--|---------|--|
| | ♠KQ9753 | |
| | ♥832 | |
| | ♦Q4 | |
| | ♣KJ | |

STEP 1: 11 HCP + 9 for length = 20

STEP 2: Downgrade

- Aceless Hand = -1
- Quack Hand = No
- Dubious Honours = -1 for Qx

STEP 3: Upgrade

- Quick Tricks 2.5 = No (2 QT in this hand)
- Long, strong suit = No
- Two Useful 10's = No

Downgrades = -2 and Upgrades = 0

TOTAL 20 - 2 = 18. Not opening values

HAND 6

| | | |
|--|----------|--|
| | ♠AQJ1085 | |
| | ♥863 | |
| | ♦K76 | |
| | ♣3 | |

STEP 1: 10 HCP + 9 for length = 19

STEP 2: Downgrade

- Aceless Hand = No
- Quack Hand = No
- Dubious Honours = No

STEP 3: Upgrade

- Quick Tricks 2.5 = No (2 QT in this hand)
- Long, strong suit = +1. Strong spade suit (4 Honours)
- Two Useful 10's = No

Downgrades = 0 and Upgrades = +1

TOTAL 19 +1 = 20. OPENING VALUES.

Dubious Honours

Some authors include a Doubleton KQ, KJ and QJ as dubious honours. This is because they have been overvalued in the HCP count, for example a KQ doubleton has been awarded 5 HCP, more than for an Ace. A QJ has been awarded three but is unlikely to win anything.

- Some also suggest singleton Aces should be downgraded. One main job of an Ace is to take a King or Queen. If it is a singleton it is probably only going to take a x.
- These are just things to be aware for future development of your evaluations.

Quick Tricks (QT)

Some authors debate whether a singleton K is worth .5 QT. It is often what gets a Borderline Hand over the line in conjunction with an AK in another suit (2.5 QT is plus 1).

There is a Table of Quick Tricks on Side 2 of your Coaster. AK together is 2 QT, AKQ is three QT. Quick Tricks are probably worth learning over time as they can come into your other revaluing later on. Eventually it comes automatically, just like HCP.

Rule of the Coveted Coasters

No drink until the Coaster has been read.

Useful 10's

Intermediates are not given any values

in the 4-3-2-1 count yet they can be

very helpful. Two well-placed ten's located in suits of three+ length are worthy of an upgrade. Example: AJ10X, QJ10, KJ109, A109x

Rule of 22

If you find the Adjusted Rule of 20 is too hard, try Rule of 22.

This is the Rule of 20 plus 1 for every Quick Trick = 22 then OPEN.

Long, strong suit = Honours together

At least 5-cards in length with good honours snuggled together – these Honours are usually worth more than their assigned value. Example AKQJxx

Weak/Pre-emptive hands – use the same method to double-check if they really are Weak.

References and further reading

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