HAND EVALUATION

Almost every bridge player's first lesson or first bridge book had to do with basic hand evaluation. High Card Points (HCP) are assigned only to Aces, Kings, Queens and Jacks. Aces are 4 points, etc. Most often some mention was given to long suits and/or short suits.

Why did we start this way? As beginners we need a way to guess how many tricks our hand is likely to take, and point count is a simple, although slightly inaccurate way to make that guess.

That is what points are … a rough way to estimate how many tricks your hand might be worth. Soon after this introduction we discover the game and slam bonuses in the scoring table. A partnership's combined points help us gauge whether to bid three notrump or four of a Major (26 points), five of a minor (29 points), a small slam (33 points) or a grand slam (37 points).

Why is any of this important? The bidding is a key component of bridge. There are essentially two main aspects to bidding: 1) System: the language of bidding 2) Hand evaluation – perhaps the alphabet of the language (or maybe I'm stretching the point a bit much ☺).

One thing to always keep in mind is that some hands lend themselves more easily to actually trick counting, and points are not relevant.

S AKQJT954 H 65 D 9 C 83

S AKQT9854 H – D – C KQJT8

This hand is an 8 trick hand and not a 10 HCP hand. Even using length points to get this hand up to 14, 15 or 16 points does not do it justice. If we translate 13 tricks into the 40 HCP available, an 8 trick hand would be worth 24.2 HCP!

This hand has virtually 12 tricks with no help from partner; saying it has 15 HCP or some combination of HCP, long suits or short suits just makes the issue confusing. You will likely make 6S on your own, or seven if partner has that one important card: Ace of clubs.

To be a successful bridge player you must get beyond simple point count and look at hands more thoroughly.

Simple evaluation

High Card Points 4-3-2-1
Length points
Shortness points with fit

Intermediate evaluation

Aces & Kings are worth more than 4-3-2-1 suggests
Queens & Jacks – QUACKS are worth less than 4-3-2-1 suggests
10's 9's and 8's matter and help to take tricks
Married honours vs. isolated honours
High cards in long suits are better than high cards in short suits
Unguarded honours might be worthless (K, Qx, Jxx, QJ)
Sometimes high cards in big trump fits are not worth any HCPs

Reevaluation

Positional (some information from the opponents bidding)
Degree of fit (information from partner's bidding)

1) Aces & Kings

The 4-3-2-1 point count is simple. Unfortunately it is wrong. Extensive analysis over the years, including recently with the help of computers suggests that a realistic point count should be closer to 6 ½ -4 ½ - 2 ½ - 1 – arghh! Using halves is horrible: how about double that scale 13-9-5-2 or 116 points in the deck with 29 being an average hand. If we translate back to the 40 point deck we get a point count of: $4.48 – 3.10 – 1.73 – 0.69$. I agree; my head hurts also.

But, we can learn something from this. In 4-3-2-1 Aces are undervalued about ½ a point. Kings are slightly undervalued and Queens and Jacks are overvalued by about ¼ a point. Good enough for a rule of thumb.

2) QUACKS - See 1) above ☺

3) Spot Cards

If we use a point count as an estimate of trick taking it clearly should not end at Jacks. No bridge player would say the following two hands are identical. The trick taking power of the second hand is clearly higher. No book I read as a beginner years ago took that into account:

S A532	S AT97
H KJ43	H KJT8
D Q32	D QT9
C A4	C AT

4) Married Honours

Experience shows that holding two suits of KJx and xxx is **slightly** better than two suits of Kxx and Jxx. Like anything else there is no guarantee of this. KJx could take no tricks if the Ace, Queen are over top of them.

5) HCP in Long suits

Clearly to any real bridge player the first hand is **much** worse than the second, although the shape, high cards and spot cards are the same:

S 87532	S AK852
H Q8643	H AQ843
D AK	D 73
C A	C 6

6) Unguarded Honours

The definition of a guarded honour is something like this: if LHO has all the higher ones, you have a stopper. So Kx, Qxx, Jxxx all meet that criteria. K, Qx, QJ, Jxx, JTx do not and are therefore worth somewhat less than the point count would suggest.

7) Big Trump fits

If your partner opens 1S promising 5 cards, and you hold K5432 of spades, that is almost as good as KQJT9, so the point count idea that the 2nd holding is twice as good as the first is clearly wrong. KQJT9 is better and will survive bad breaks or allow high cross-ruffs, but the first holding should be upgraded and the second holding downgraded somewhat.

8) Positional Re-evaluation

One of the best positional hands contains AQT8 in all four suits opposite two or three small:

If the whole hand is as follows, you can make 13 tricks at Notrump:

	S AQT8	
	H 432	
	D AQT8	
	C 32	
S KJ97		S 65
H 65		H KJ97
D KJ97		D 654
C 654		C KJ97
	S 432	
	H AQT8	
	D 32	
	C AQT8	

Switch the opponents' hands and you are limited to 4 tricks at Notrump!

	S AQT8	
	H 432	
	D AQT8	
	C 32	
S 65		S KJ97
H KJ97		H 65
D 654		D KJ97
C KJ97		C 654
	S 432	
	H AQT8	
	D 32	
	C AQT8	

The problem with this hand is that you don't know how many tricks you will take without fore-knowledge of the opponents' hands. So the best we can do is suspect that we might take (13+4) / 2 tricks or 8 ½ on average. That fits in with our 24 HCP Notrump evaluation for the two hands.

The only thing you can actually do is upgrade high cards in suits bid on your right and slightly downgrade high cards of suits bid on your left. With the looseness of opponents bidding nowadays it would be a severe error to totally disregard Kx of a suit bid on your left, because a surprising amount of the time, the missing honours are on your right or in partner's hand.

9) <u>FIT</u>

This is the area where reevaluation plays the biggest role. One of the first basic bidding rules is to get out as soon as reasonable on misfits. Distributional points vanish when there is an indication of a misfit. Suit length points continue to count only when your long suit is very strong and almost self-sustaining.

The other side of the coin is that hands which fit well with partner can grow incredibly.

S 4 H AKJT65 D KJT87 C 8	We always like 6-5's or more distributional hands, but when you open 1H, if partner bids 1S, you are not surprised and are perhaps slightly less happy then when you opened. If partner bids 2C you are happy they have points, but if partner bids 2D, which in most systems guarantees 4+ or perhaps 5+ diamonds, your 12 HCP has just become about 20.

Give yourself a better 6-5:

S – H AKJ975 D K8643 C AJ	If the auction here went 1H-1S-2D-2S you would have some votes for persisting with 3D, but many would subside in 2S.

Even when we have a fit, holdings such as stiff Ace or doubleton KQ are not really as good as their point count suggests and adding shortness values for them may carry the error further.

One of the most important parts of reevaluation with fits (both of you have at least 4 trumps) is how well the rest of the hand meshes. If you play some methods which show shortness, splinters and other toys, your partnership can evaluate your holding opposite partner's shortness. In these cases xxx is the best holding. Why? Well, you can survive a trump lead, lose the lead and after another trump lead, still be able to ruff both losers. Axx is the next best holding. You might think that is better than xxx, but look at these 2 suit combinations (spades is our trump suit):

D 2 C KQ654	D 543 C A32	D 2 C KQ654	D A43 C 732

In the first case you are likely to lose only a diamond most of the time. In the 2nd hand, you have no diamond losers, but if the Ace of clubs is over the KQ, you have 2 club losers. Having your ace, or any honours in long suits or even our combined long suit is usually better. Carrying on; xxxx is next best, Axxx is next. As you add more honours the holdings are less useful, but remember KQJT opposite shortness is still 3 tricks and only one loser.