Hand Evaluation - The Opening Bid

By Neil H. Timm

What is the purpose, goals, or objectives of hand evaluation? The problem has confronted bridge players for years.

The hand evaluation method you employ must estimate the number of tricks a hand may generate whether you are playing in a suit contract or in notrump, a **hands trick-taking value**. The **bidding process** converts your initial estimate of a hands trick-taking value into its **trick-generation potential/accuracy for a final suit or NT contract.**

The ACBL has made hand evaluation more complicated because they have put constraints on the method one may use in the evaluation of a hand and the level of the bid with the release of their ACBL Basic, Basic+, Open, and Open+ Convention Charts as of April 15, 2024.

The ACBL has assigned pre-defined High Card Points (HCP) to honor (H) values defined: A=4.0, K=3.0, Q=2.0, J=1.0, and 10=0.0 and has defined minimal "hand strength" that depends on only **two variables: HCP and the Rule of N** (which includes not one suit but two suits).

ACBL definition of the Rule of N

The rule is defined as the sum of a hands High Card Points (HCP) plus the sum of the two longest suits, the final value is defined is N.

ACBL definitions of Hand Strength

- **"Weak":** A hand that contains less than Near Average Strength.
- **"Near Average Strength":** A hand that has at least 8 HCP or meets the "Rule of 17"
- **"Average Strength":** A hand that has at least 10 HCP or meets the "Rule of 19".
- **"Strong":** A hand that contains: (1) at least 15 HCP; or (2) at least 14 HCP and meets the "Rule of 24"; or (3) at least 5 Control Points and is within one trick of game assuming suits break evenly among the other hands.
- **"Very Strong":** A hand that contains: (1) at least 20 HCP; or (2) at least 14 HCP and is within one trick of game assuming suits break evenly among the other hands; or (3) at least 5 Control Points and is within one trick of game assuming suits break evenly among the other hands.

The rule of N in imposed by the ACBL because their value for honors is static/fixed and not dynamic when associated with other honors.

In addition, the ACBL has defined the meaning of a "Natural" opening bid, a "Quasi-Natural opening bid, and defined allowed NT opening bids.

Briefly

A Natural NT bid contains no VOIDS, no more than ONE singleton A/K/Q and does not contain 10 or more cards in two suits. It must show at least 10HCP with a range of no more than 5HCP (one more than the difference the Highest and Lowest HCP). The 1NT bid most often shows a balanced or semi-balanced hand.

A Natural major suit opening bid must contain 4+ cards; however, a bid is still "Natural" if it shows 4+card distribution in another suit. However, an opening bid at the 2-level or higher must include at least 5+cards.

A Quasi-Natural minor suit opening bid may be as short as TWO or meet the definition of a Natural NT opening bid (may contain a singleton but no voids). And any opening 2-level or higher bid must contain 4 or more cards in a known suit. If it is not the suit bid it must be alerted.

How do the above definitions effect opening 1-level bids in <u>SEATS 1 and 2,</u> a strong one level bid, a weak 2-level bid, and a strong 2-level bid when playing when Precision or 2/1 using the <u>Open Convention Card</u>?

<u>Hand Strength depend on TWO CRTERIA either HCP or Rule of N for Near Average or Average Strength and BOTH for a Strong Hand.</u>

A weak opening 1-level bid must have 8HCP or meets the Rule of 17 with a maximum range of 5HCP playing. Playing Precision or any STRONG club system the 1♣* bid must have at least 15HCP or have at least 14HCP and meet the Rule of 24 with a maximum range of 5HCP where *=pre-alert. A commonly used value for Precision is 16+HCP but may be 15HCP.

The strong club system called Fantunes requires only 14HCP with a distribution that meets and meets the Rule of 24 (e.g., any 5-5 hand with 14HCP).

Playing 2/1 the VERY STRONG 2♣ bid must have at least 20HCP or have at least 14HCP and is within one trick of game (this means the hand will normally have at least 4-quick tricks and no more that 4-losers).

Playing Precision, the 2♣* requires only AVERAGE STRENGTH (at least 10HCP) or meets the Rule of 19 (e.g., 5-clubs with a 4-card major and 10HCP). With 6-clubs and a 4-card major one needs only 9HCP.

A "weak" 2-level 2♥/2♠ bids need at least 5/6 cards and does not meet the Rule of 8; however, the range cannot exceed 5HCP.

Any STRONG 2-level bid (real or artificial) must have at least AVERAGE STRENGTH with 10HCP or meets the Rule of 19 with a range of 5HCP.

> Any 2-level opening bid showing **at least** Average Strength with at least 5-4 shape and both suits known is now permitted.

Hence if you use 2♦*/2♥* as Flannery with 5-Hearts and 4-spades it requires 10HCP or meets the Rule of 19 with a maximum range of 5HCP. A range of 11-15 HCP meets the requirement; however, so does 10-15HCP. But, with 9HCP, the distribution must be 6-4 or 5-5.

The bid of 2♣*/2♦* may be defined as artificial and one suited with 5/6+cards and 10HCP and no longer needs 11-15HCP. With 8HCP it requires a 6-5 distribution and with 9HCP two 5-5 suits to meet the Rule of 19 and a maximum range of 5HCP.

If 2♥*defined as Flexible Flannery with 5/6-Hearts and 4+spades it requires 10HCP or meets the Rule of 19 and 2♠* as Reverse Flexible Flannery with 5/6-Spades and 4+Hearts and requires 10HCP or meets the Rule of 19. Both require an alert and a maximum range of 5HCP.

The ACBL constrains hand evaluation by defining Hand Strength which depends on two variables High Card Points (HCP) and the Rule of N, whether a bid is made in a suit or NT, whether a bid is made in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, or 4th seat, the level of the bid, whether the bid is an overcall bid and finally their rules for some bids depend upon the Convention Chart being used for the bridge game.

With the above background, what methodology should you and partner employ to evaluate the trick-taking value for an opening hand? Or more importantly estimate the combined trick-taking generation potential/accuracy of your two bridge hands?

At the outset both you and partner estimate the value of your hand; however, bids by partner and the opponents may affect the initial trick-taking value. Yes, the bidding process is dynamic so the initial starting values for both responder and the opener will change.

Trick-taking value and trick-taking potential are the foundations of hand evaluation methodologies and have been further constrained by ACBL definitions of hand strength, the Rule of N, and the Convention Chart.

I will use some examples of the problem for just the opening bid in the 1st or 2nd seat in this bridge Tip. Additional problems/adjustments occur when the opponents interfere, or an initial opening bid is made in the 3rd or 4th seats for suit bids and NT.

Let's look at two balanced (4-3-3-3/5-3-3-2) hands when bidding 1NT=15-17HCP.

Hand (1) ♠KQx ♥Qxx ♦QJx ♣KQxx and Hand (2) ♠AKx ♥QJx ♦Kx ♣Axxx

Clearly Hand (1) has 15HCP but has no Ace and lots of Queens and Jacks while Hand (2) has 17HCP with many Aces and Kings and few Queens and Jacks.

Many may open either hand 1NT. In fact, neither hand should be opened 1NT, even though both meet the minimum ACBL requirement for a 1NT opening bid.

Hand (1) has only 12.5 points since the HCP ignores the fact that the hand is balanced (-1 pt), has no Ace (-1 pt) and the Qxx is isolated- has not associated honor (1.5 pt).

Hand (2) has 19 points since HCP ignores the true value of an ace (4.5 not 4.0) and suit Length (+1 pt).

What happened with these two hands? Aces are undervalued, isolated Qs and Js are overvalued, 10s associated with a K/Q/J has value while suit Length and Distribution are ignored in the evaluation of the two NT hands.

If the initial trick-taking value of your hand is incorrect, the bidding process may not accurately find the optimal final bridge contract.

To illustrate suppose the opening bidder has hand (3): ♠AQxx ♥A10♦Kxx ♣Axxx with 17HCP and partner has two 4-card majors with the hand (4): ♠ Kxxx ♥KQxx♦xx ♣xxx with 8HCP.

The bidding may go:	1NT (15-17)	2♣ (Stayman)
	2♠	3♠/Pass
	Pass	

What happened, the pair missed their 4-Spade contract. Why? They incorrectly counted their Hands and the bidding process ignored both Fit and Distribution!

The Opener has 18.5 points (3 aces=13.5pts+K=3+Q=2.0 since it is associated with an honor and not isolated). And partner has 8HCP (+1pt for 8-card spade fit +2pts for the diamond doubleton with a 4-card spades fit or **11HLfit points** NOT just 8HCP. The point total count for the two hands is 18.5+11HLD=29.5 pts. More than enough for a game in spades!

The bidding would go	1♣	1♥
	1♠	2♠
	3♣	3♠
	4♠	Pass

The number of points needed for a NT contract must include Honor +Length + Fit points not just HCP or HL or HD points (-1 for 4333 shape and -1 for Singleton A/K/Q).

The ACBL and even some bridge experts like Mary Bergen, Larry Cohen, Zar Petkov, Kit Woolsey, and Danny Kleinman among others have gotten hand evaluation wrong for simple NT contracts.

For example, Marty Bergen using his Adjust 3-method says that the following 16HCP hand is too strong to open 1NT ♠A10x ♥A10xxx ♦Axx ♣Ax. Using his Adjust 3-method, he claims that the hand has 19.5 points (4.5 pts for each ace+0.5 points for two 10s+1 pt for the 5-card suit) and recommends opening the hand.

With his evaluation method suppose partner had the hand: ♠KQx ♥xx ♦Kxxx ♣xxxx. With his 19.5 calculation and partner having 8HCP with no fit may bid 1NT showing 7-12 points or 7-9 points playing constructive raises. And with 19.5 points, opener may bid 3NT.

A contract that is doomed to fail since the opponents will take 3 club and 2 heart tricks for down one.

In the example, openers hand is only worth 16 points (18 for 4 Aces -2 pts for no K or Q and no points for two worthless 10s) NOT 19.5 as claimed by Marty Bergen aka his Adjust 3 Method. Partner has only 7 points after opener bids 1♥ since the 8HCP must be reduced by one point for no heart fit.

The bidding would go	1♥	1NT forcing/semi-forcing
	2NT (invite game)	Pass
	Pass	Pass

The estimate of the trick-taking value for suit contracts is more complex than in NT. Counting an opening hand with either HCP (H) or H + Length (HL) or H + Distribution (HD) is a very serious mistake.

The trick-taking value of a hand varies significantly with the distributional structure of a hand which is defined by both suit Length (L) and Distribution (D) points (Voids, Singletons, and Doubletons).

Consider the hand: ♠AKQJxxx ♥xxx ♦xx ♣x which has 10HCP or 13HL or 13HD points using "traditional" counting methods since HL=10+3 and HD=10+2+1.

The trick-taking value for this opening hand is not 13 points but 18.5 points (10.5H+2pts for suit Quality-3+honors in a 6+card suit+4Lpts for a 7-card suit+2 singleton).

Furthermore, suppose a heart is moved to spades to increase its length of spade suit to an 8-card suit. The HL or HD points becomes 14 (an increase of only one point) yet the trick-taking value for the hand is 21.5 pts (an increase of 3 pts - 2pts for the 8th spade +1 pt for two doubletons).

We next look at two hands with the same 14HCP points and opened 1♥ to evaluate trick-taking value and

Hand (A) ♠AKx ♥AKxxx ♦xxx ♣xx and Hand (B) ♠AKxx ♥AKxxxx ♦xxx ♣ -♦

Hand (A) has 15 points (2 Aces=9+2K=6-1No Queen+1Lpt) and but has no Ace and Hand (B) has 20 points (2Aces=9+2K=6+1Lpt+4Dpts for the void).

To evaluate the trick-generation potential/accuracy of the two hands suppose partner has hand (C): ♠Qx ♥Qxxx♦xxx ♣Kxxx with 6 points (2 isolated Queens=3 points + 3 for the K).

With hand (C) opposite hand (A) it is Clearly best to Pass and to Play in 1♥.

However, with hand (B) one may possibly play in either 4♥ or 4♠. The opening bidder must make a forcing 2♣ bid playing 2/1 or a forcing 1♣ bid playing Precision/Strong Club System.

What method do you employ when responding to 2♣ play the 2/1 System?

There are many options some may use 2♦ as waiting, others may use it to show an A/K where then 2♥ denies an A/K, and others use controls where 2♦=0/1 control and 2♥=2 controls where A=2 controls and K=1 control.
I prefer the following responses to the 2♣ bid playing 2/1.

2♦	Shows an A/K or 1/2 Controls (K=1 or A=or 2Ks=2)
2♥*	Denies an A/K
2♠*	at least 6HCP - may or may not include a King
2NT*	6+ clubs - invitational to game in clubs or 3NT
3♣*	6+ diamonds - invitational to game in diamonds or 3NT
3♦*	6+ hearts - invitational to game in hearts or 3NT
3♥*	6+spades – invitational to game in spades or 3NT

*= alert

With hand (B), hand (C) partner bid 2♠* with 6HCP. Opener next bid 3♥ to show a 5+cards suit. Having 4-hearts partner next bids 4♥ with 8HLFit points (6H pts + 2 fit points).

At this point the opening bidder passes. With slam interest, opener would bid 4♠ by agreement would be 1430 kickback for hearts.

Many pairs use “garbage” rules to justify opening a hand like the Rule of 15 with spades in the 4th seat which only counts H and Length in spades, when all have passed or the Rule of 20 in any seat which only counts H points and Length in two suits.

Consider the hand (D): ♠AQ105 ♥AJ52 ♦ 62 ♣542

The Rule of 20 says add HCP to the length of the longest two suits. If that sum is ≥ 20 open the hand.

Hand (D) has we have 11HCP+4+4=19 points so do not open the hand!

However, the real value pf the hand is: 9=2 aces+Q10=3+J=1-1 for no K or 12 total points with two 4-card majors.

The is simple, but the rule failed since I does not look at true value of Aces or the value of associated honors in the hand.

The hand should be opened 1♣!

Bergen's Adjust-3 method also fails with this hand giving it a value of only 11 points.

The Optimal Point Method of Hand Evaluation used in the examples is discussed in the link:

www.bridgewebs.com/ocala/Optimal%20Hand%20Evlauation%20Revisited.pdf

Peter Cheung provides an Analysis of Strong NT and the Rules of 15 of 20 with a computer simulation of bridge hands which I have made is available on the Ocala bridge site.