

Evaluating a Hand Playing 2/1?

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When you pick up a bridge hand, the first things you notice is its Honors (H), then suit Length (L), and finally suit Distribution (D). To open a hand at the 1-level in a suit bid or 1NT, most experts and teachers recommend values and rules to help assess the number of tricks that a hand can be expected to generate.

Most rules involve assigning Honors with fixed values (e.g. A=4, K=3, Q=2, J=1, 10=0) following the work of Goren/ M. Work and acknowledge that the honor values of singletons and doubletons should be adjusted downward.

It has been shown via computer analysis that the “true” values of these Honors are: A=4.5, K=3.0, Q=1.5, J=0.75, and 10=0.25. Or, A’s and 10’s are under-valued, and Q’s and J’s are over-valued. But no one wants to deal with fractions.

Bridge experts also acknowledge that suit lengths with 5+ cards effect hand value and that suits with honors or higher quality, are worth more than suits that contain limited or no honors (e.g. a hand without and A/K/Q).

Finally, they acknowledge that hands with voids, singletons or doubletons have unequal value and that very balanced 4333 hands have less value than more distributional hands.

However, there is not agreement on the methodology for assigning “value” or on which hand characteristics’ apply to suit versus NT contracts.

For example do all three attributes (H, L, and D) in total or in part apply to both Suit and NT contracts or do only some subset?

On a recent Bridge Base Forum (BBF) I have seen the following comments:

You don't count length points when opening NT
When responding to a NT you don't count length points
You only count distribution points when you have found a fit

I like the French set of rules. You count length points for good suits when you open, even when you open NT or respond to 1 NT.

You count both length points and honor values when opening NT

Terence Reese, a legendary bridge player and write, said, “Players who count points and don’t take into account distribution are a menace”.

What are the fundamental guidelines in Contract Bridge put forth by Goron and M. Work for opening a bridge hand in a suit or NT contract called the 4-3-2-1 Method?

“STANDARD” 4-3-2-1 HCP Method

NT Contracts

Honor Values A=4, K=3, Q=2, J=1

Deduct 1 point for a hand without an Ace

Deduct 1 point for a 4333 “flat” hand

Count either Length/ Shortness NEVER both. For suit length it is recommended that one add 1 point for a 5-card suits and 1 additional point for 6, 7, 8 cards provided the suit has value defined by K/QJ (3HCP).

Suit Contracts

Same as above, but now with an established 8-card fit (F) one now accounts for suit shortness, which varies depending the number (#) of trumps:

Doubleton = 1 point

Singleton =2 (excluding trump), 3 with 4-trump

Void = # of trumps in dummy, but ≤ 4 (some use 5 with 5+trumps)

While these rules are applied by many pairs playing for example 2/1, Standard American and Acol, as shown by Darricades (2019) “Optimal Hand Evaluation” using a computer analysis of Bridge Contracts they:

- (a) Fail to correctly represent the point count values of honors, it does not address honor singletons or doubletons.
- (b) Fail to take into account both hand shape (e.g. length and shortness) and singletons and doubletons.
- (c) Fail to address suit quality and hand quality (e.g. hands lacking Ks or Qs).

Taking into account these weaknesses, Darricades (2019) suggests the following rules.

HONOR POINTS (H)

Ace: 4½ pts K: 3pts Q w/A, K, J: 2 pts Qxx: 1½ pts Qx=1pt
J w/A, K, Q: 1pt Jxx: ½ pts Jx=0 pts

Value of 10s vary: 10K=½, 10A=0, 10Q=1, 10J=1, 10Jx=2, 10x=0

No Aces = -1 pt (Only Opener) No Q = -1 No K = -1 (all hands) with Max = -2

3Ks = +1 pt, 4Ks = +2pts, 4Qs = +1pt

Singleton honor = -1pt Honor doubletons = -1 pt for 2 honor doubletons
(AK/AQ/AJ/KQ/KJ/QJ)

3+ Honors in 6-card suit = +2 pts or in a 5-card suit = +1 pt

These above rules apply to all contracts, Suits and NT

LENGTH POINTS (L)

5-card suit with at least a QJ/K = 1pt

6-card suit with at least QJ/K = 2 pts w/o a QJ/K = 1pt

7-card suit = 2pts for each card for 7th on (even without an honor)

DISTRIBUTION POINTS (D)

VOID = 4pts Singleton = 2 points ONE doubleton = 0 pts TWO doubletons = 1pt

4333 = -1pt

Singleton in NT contract = -1pt

The (D) values defined for HLD apply only to Opener's hands NT suits hands.

Responder hands are counted for HL pts only & no more than 2Lpts. D points are applied only when a suit fit is found. Where a fit is defined as a known minimum of 8+ cards in ANY suit.

DISTRIBUTION-FIT POINTS (F)

Number of responder trumps	4	3	2
Void	4pts	3pts	2pts
Singleton	3pts	2pts	1pts
Doubleton	2pts	1pts	0pts

Let's look at an Example playing 2/1 with a 15-17 NT

Opener: ♠A65 ♥86 ♦K76 ♣AQ432

Responder: ♠98 ♥A72 ♦AQJ54 ♣K105

Opener counts 13HCP + 1 for 5th club or 14 points, Responder counts 14HCP + 1 for 5-diamonds or 15 points

The bidding goes:

1♣ - 2♦; 1NT - 2NT; 3NT - Pass

But the correct point count for the Opener is 15HLD points (9 for two aces or 14H points + 1 for L) or 15HLD points since D=0 (need two doubletons).

Responder has 15.5HCP (As=9 + Q=2 + J=1 +K=3 + K10=0.5) + 1suit Length and +1 for Quality 5-card suit = 17.5 HLD since D=0 or 33 starting points or a potential slam.

Two possible bidding sequences are:

Opener	Responder
1NT	2♣ (Stayman)
2♦(No 4-card major)	3♠ (Western Cue)
3NT (Yes)	4♣ (Gerber)
4♠ (2 Aces)	5♣ (specific King)
5♦ (♦K)	6NT

Opener	Responder
1NT	2♦ (Forcing Stayman)
3♣(No 4-card major)	3♠ (Western Cue)
3NT (Yes)	4♦ (1430 Roman Keycard for clubs)
5♣ (2 with Q)	5♦ (specific King ask)
6NT yes One	Pass

Employing the revised suggested rules, the slam is reached. Note partner cannot have two kings for 7NT since that would mean 18.5 HLD and too much for the opening bid of 1NT.

Note also that with the second bidding sequence Responder also knows that the opener (his partner) has a 5-card club suit and with 3 clubs may add +1 point to 17.5HLD to obtain 18.5 HLDF points since “fit” points apply to all suits between the two hands.

When you add points to a hand for fit from the knowledge gained during the bidding sequence, you must also adjust for partial support or semi-fit as follows.

SEMI-FIT (F)

Add +1 if you hold an honor doubleton Kx/Qx/J10/Jx doubleton (other than the Ace) in partners long suit (5+cards). Applies to both the opener and the responder make the +1 point adjustment with 2-card suit support.

And you must adjust for having misfit knowledge:

MISFIT POINTS (F)

Opposite a long 5-card suit in Partners hand you must subtract -3/-2/-1 for void /singleton/doubleton in the corresponding long suit.

Finally if you're bidding agreement allows for splinters or mini-splinters, this allows one to evaluate hand strength opposite length or shortness.

Recall that honors in long suits lose value opposite a singleton or void in partner's suit and conversely a suit without an honor opposite a singleton or void has NO wasted value! Knowing this as the bidding progresses, adjustments are made:

WASTED HONOR ADJUSTMENTS

Honors (excluding Aces)	Opposite a singleton	-2 points
	Opposite a void	-3 points
No Honors	Opposite a singleton	+2 points
	Opposite a void	+3 points
Axx	Opposite a singleton	+1 point

The above recommendations may improve upon the process you correctly use playing 2/1. It incorporates many of the suggestions provided by Patrick Darricades (2020), "Optimal Hand Evaluation in Competitive Bidding, Master Point Press.

The biggest change is that opener now calculates D and L points never before recommended by bridge experts based upon the analysis of many bridge hands.

One opens a hand at the 1-level in a suit with 12+ HLD points and 15-17 HLDF points for 1NT. For game or slam contracts the number of total points needed between the two hands are: 26 points for a NT game, 27 for a Major suit game, 30 points for a Minor suit game, 33 points for a small slam in a suit, 34 points for a small NT slam and 36/37 points for a grand slam.

Patrick Darricades (2019), "Optimal Hand Evaluation", Master Point Press