



Play & Learn

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Hand evaluation

Hand evaluation works like a thermometer. Sometimes your hand warms up, sometimes it cools off. It depends on what the bidding tells you about the other three hands at the table.

For example, suppose you hold ♠K J 7. How would you feel about this holding if:

- A Partner opens 1♠?
- B Right-hand opponent opens 1♠?
- C LHO opens 1♠?

High cards in suits bid by partner are good. The spade honors in (a) will fill in partner's suit nicely. Location matters too. Because play proceeds clockwise around the table, high cards other than aces located behind an opponent's high cards are more likely to win tricks than high cards located in front of an opponent's high cards. Although bidding a suit doesn't guarantee high cards in that suit, it is more likely that a player who bids a suit holds high cards in that suit, so we base our judgment on that during the auction. That means you have a greater expectation of your 4 points in spades producing at least one trick when RHO opens 1♠ than when LHO bids 1♠. In the latter case, those same 4 points could be totally useless (think about finesses). When the auction gives you information about how well located your high cards are, you can evaluate your hand better.

In each of the following examples, cover up the answer until you decide which hand you would rather hold:

1. Partner opens 1♥.

- (a) ♠Q 7 3 ♥A 8 2 ♦9 6 5 ♣Q 4 3 2
 (b) ♠A 7 3 ♥Q 8 2 ♦9 6 5 ♣Q 4 3 2

While there seems to be little difference between these two hands, both queens in the first hand are in unbid suits where partner might not have any high cards. With the trump queen and an outside ace sure to be working cards, (b) is better. The ♠Q in (a) could be worthless.

2. Partner opens 1♠. These three hands are worth 10 points in support of spades and have the four-card support needed to make an immediate limit raise. But which have the good 10 points needed to make a limit raise?

- (a) ♠K 7 6 5 ♥A 6 5 ♦Q 6 4 ♣J 3 2
 (b) ♠K 7 6 5 ♥6 5 ♦A Q 6 4 ♣8 3 2
 (c) ♠K 7 6 5 ♥6 5 3 ♦A Q 6 ♣J 3 2

Each hand has an ace and a queen outside of the trump suit. Those cards are better located in (b) and (c) because they are working together in the same suit, making it more likely that both could be winners. High cards together are worth more than scattered high cards. Hand (b) is the best because those high cards are in a longer suit. High cards together in long suits are worth more than high cards in shorter suits because they also offer the chance for developing tricks through length. Note that (b) has only 9 HCP, with the 10th point coming from the doubleton. You can also use Losing Trick Count (LTC – discussed last

month) on these three hands. Only (b) has the eight losers needed for a limit raise. The others have nine losers.

3. Partner opens 1♠, RHO overcalls 2♥.

- (a) ♠K 9 6 5 ♥K 6 ♦A 8 6 2 ♣9 5 4
 (b) ♠K 9 6 5 ♥Q 6 ♦A J 8 2 ♣9 5 4

Both hands have 10 HCP but (a) is better. The ♥K is well placed and there is also the possibility of a heart ruff. Adding a point for the doubleton brings this hand up to 11 points. The ♥Q in (b) could be useless, and you should not add for shortness with a doubleton honor if that honor would drop under higher missing cards. LTC confirms that (a) is an eight-loser hand worth a limit raise but (b) has nine losers and should raise only to 2♠.

4. LHO opens 1♥. Partner doubles and RHO passes.

- (a) ♠K Q 7 6 3 ♥K J 4 ♦6 2 ♣7 5 2
 (b) ♠K Q 7 6 3 ♥6 4 ♦7 5 2 ♣K J 2

All the high cards in (b) rate to be working in suits where partner's double showed some length. Invite game with a jump to 2♠. The hearts in (a) are likely to be useless, trapped by LHO's higher hearts and in partner's short suit. Bidding 1♠ is enough.

Rather than relying solely on point count, it pays to check as the auction progresses to see if your hand has gotten hotter or colder than your original count indicated. Do this to improve your hand evaluation judgment. ■