



Play & Learn

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Opening bids

Recently a reader asked me to discuss hand evaluation, and that begins with deciding which hands are worth being treated as openers in standard bidding. Because there are special considerations that influence our decision to open in third or fourth seat, we will confine our discussion to opening bids in first or second seat (as dealer or after dealer passes).

There is no perfect way to evaluate a hand for opening. The goal of any method is to come up with a reasonable estimate of the trick-taking potential of a hand, but there are many factors that can affect that first estimate.

Common methods use the 4-3-2-1 point count for the top four high cards, but the trick-taking power of a hand is also based on distribution, and that is where sources differ. Some count length, some count shortness, and others factor in only high-card points *until a fit is located*. I made Life Master counting high-card points only until a fit was found, but I became a better and more aggressive bidder once I started counting length.

Since the mid-1980s, when Audrey Grant created the original teaching materials used in the ACBL courses, counting length has become more popular. Coming up with a fairly accurate initial value of a hand was easy for a beginner: just add high-card points to length points (one point for every card beyond the fourth card in any long suit). No exceptions for a beginner – use the same method for all opening

bids whether suit or notrump. Exceptions came, as they should, only after players gained enough experience to understand what makes a hand more or less powerful. Hopefully, this series will get you started on that road.

With each hand shown below, what is the total point count and what call will you make as dealer?

① ♠ A J 10 ♥ K 8 ♦ Q J 3 ♣ K Q J 9 6

② ♠ A J 10 ♥ A Q ♦ K Q 8 ♣ J 6 5 4 3

③ ♠ 7 4 ♥ A K 10 8 6 3 ♦ K J 10 2 ♣ 5

④ ♠ K 9 7 4 ♥ A J 8 3 ♦ A 10 7 2 ♣ 5

No. 1 looks like a 1NT opening at first glance, but counting length, you have 18 points – too good if your partnership uses the common 15–17 point range for opening 1NT. Open 1♣, planning to rebid 2NT over any response from partner.

No. 2 seems like the same situation, and a beginner might well plan to bid the same way. As a duplicate player, you have a little experience. Can you see how No. 2 is different? Setting up club tricks might be difficult with such a weak, long suit. This is where judgment kicks in. It's fine to count an extra point for a decent five-card suit, but a weak five-card suit might not be worth counting. Open 1NT.

No. 3 has 11 HCP plus 2 length points to total 13 points. Open 1♥. If you count only high-card points, it's possible you would choose to pass or open a weak two, but this hand is too good for either action.

Did you open 1♦ with **No. 4**? Even though you were probably taught that you need 13 points to open, it's common for today's players to open with 12 or even 11 points. Once again, judgment is needed. Widening the 13- to 21- point range for opening bids even more makes it harder for partner to judge how high to bid, so it's best to do it only with hands that have merits that make them worth opening.

This hand lends itself to opening because finding a major-suit fit is likely and your singleton will add value to your hand if you play in a 4-4 or greater suit fit. If you end up in notrump, you're back to a 12-point hand, but it's a decent hand with more aces and kings than queens and jacks. The 4-3-2-1 point count system undervalues aces a bit just as it overvalues queens and jacks a bit. Aren't you happier to see one ace instead of two queens or four jacks?

The Rule of 20 can help you decide whether to open No. 4. It works like this: Add your high-card points (12) to the number of cards in your two longest suits (8). There are other requirements, which we'll discuss next time. Just remember, once you open, you can't let the fact that you didn't have 13 points make you pass a forcing bid by partner. Deciding to treat your hand as an opening bid means you have to live with that decision for the entire auction. ■