

The methods of evaluating a bridge hand have generated controversy for many years. Virtually all authorities agree on the 4-3-2-1 count for high card points (HCP) but the ways to evaluate distribution vary. I studied this area in depth when I started teaching and devised a method that is simple and accurate. Read on! I think you will be convinced to do it my way.

First let's look at four reasonable ways to count distributional points. Assume you are deciding whether to open in first or second seat.

Long-suit method

A widely used method is to count long cards in each suit. The rule is to add one point for each card over four in any suit. Hence a five-card suit is worth one point, a six-card suit two points, etc. An opening bid requires 13 or more points.

Short-suit method

Popularized over 40 years ago by Charles Goren, this method counts points for short suits. The rule is to add one point for a doubleton, two for a singleton, and three for a void. (One point is deducted if an honor is unprotected.) Again, an opening bid requires 13 or more points.

Rule of 20

Of recent popularity is the method suggested by Marty Bergen in his book "Points Schmoints." The rule is to add your HCP to the length of your two longest suits. If the total is 20 or more, you should open the bidding at the one level.

Pavlicek method

My method is based on the short-suit method, but includes a better adjustment for wasted honors: If a short suit has a wasted honor, you may count its HCP or its shortness, whichever is greater, but not both.

Examples

Let's see how these four methods work on a few hands. Assume you are the dealer in each case.

1. ♠ K J 8 6 5	Long suit:	12
♥ A K 7	Short suit:	12
♦ 4 3	Rule of 20:	19
♣ 10 7 2	Pavlicek:	12

All four methods agree. This hand falls short of all the requirements, so it is not an opening bid.

2. ♠ K J 8 6 5	Long suit:	12
♥ A K 7 4	Short suit:	13
♦ 3	Rule of 20:	20
♣ 10 7 2	Pavlicek:	13

In the long-suit method this hand stays the same, so it should be passed. Note how it gains a point in all the other methods and should be opened 1 ♠.

3. ♠ J 8 6 5 3	Long suit:	12
♥ A K 7 4	Short suit:	12
♦ K	Rule of 20:	20
♣ 10 7 2	Pavlicek:	11

In the long-suit method or the rule of 20 this hand has the same value as Hand 2. In the short-suit method it drops a point, and in the Pavlicek method it drops two points. Only by the rule of 20 is it a 1 ♠ bid.

Aces and Tens

Experts agree that aces are undervalued slightly at four points, and anyone would agree that tens must be worth something. In order to increase accuracy *without counting fractions*, my method incorporates another rule: If your hand contains four aces and tens (in any combination) add one point.

4. ♠ K J 10 6 5	Long suit:	12
♥ A K 10	Short suit:	12
♦ 4 3	Rule of 20:	19
♣ 10 7 2	Pavlicek:	13

Holding one ace and three tens, you get one extra point in my method (compare Hand 1) so it becomes a 1 ♠ bid. By all the other methods it should be passed.

Summary

Consider the relative merits of the examples, and ask yourself which method offers the best yardstick for comparison. Don't you agree? Try it; you'll like it.

Below is a complete summary of my method, including the rules that apply after partner has bid.

For all bidding:

Ace = 4, King = 3, Queen = 2, Jack = 1
Any four aces and tens = 1

For all suit bidding:

Void = 3, Singleton = 2, Doubleton = 1

Exceptions: With a singleton K, Q or J, or a doubleton K-Q, K-J, Q-J, Q-x or J-x, count the HCP or shortness, but not both. Do not count shortness in partner's bid suit unless another trump fit is known to exist.

When dummy in notrump:

Each card over four in a suit Q-x-x-x or better = 1

Note: The above assumes *partner* has bid notrump, so there is good chance of establishing the suit.

When raising partner's suit with 4+ cards:

Void = 2, Singleton = 1

Note: All points are cumulative. For example, a void counts as 3 points originally; if partner bids a suit that you will raise with 4+ cards, you now get 2 more for the void, or 5 points in all.

When partner raises your 5+ card suit:

If you did not already show five cards = 1
Each trump over five if not shown = 2
Each side-suit card over three = 1

Partnership Goals:

25 or less = stop as low as practical
26-32 points = game in 3 NT, 4 ♥ or 4 ♠
29-32 points = game in 5 ♣ or 5 ♦
33-36 points = slam (any 6-bid)
37 or more = grand slam (any 7-bid)