

When is a Hand Good Enough to Open ?

Evaluating a Hand's Actual Strength

1st (Dealer) or 2nd Position

THE RULE OF 20: This states that a hand qualifies for an opening bid of one of a suit if the summation of HCP's plus the total number of cards in the two longest suits equals, or exceeds, the number 20. The "Rule of 20" is only applicable for use in the first seat, the Dealer, or in the second seat, the player to the immediate left of the Dealer, should the Dealer have passed. It should never be used in the third or fourth seat, under any circumstance.

Examples: KXXXX JXX AKXX X (11+9=20) – (Open 1S)
XX AJXXX AKX XXX (12+8=20) – (Open 1H)
KXXX AXX QXXX QX (11+8=19) – (Do not open)

Note: All Hands having 13 HCP's or more will automatically satisfy the "Rule of 20" since they can have no fewer than 7 additional points resulting from seven (7) cards in two of the suits held if the hand (worse case scenario) were evenly divided 4-3-3-3. Additionally, almost all hands holding 12 HCP's (exclusive of a 4-3-3-3 distribution) will also qualify under the "Rule of 20" since, exclusive of this holding, there will be at least two 4-card or longer suits present.

All 11 HCP hands (see the examples below) which have a 6-card suit will satisfy both the ability to open under the "Rule of 20" calculation, but, they will also qualify as to the requirements necessary to open a weak 2-bid. In this instance it is recommended that if the 6-card suit be Spades (Example a), one would fare best, since Spades is the controlling suit, to open 1 Spade.

4th Position - Opening Criteria

THE RULE OF 15: When in the 4th position relative to the Dealer, the so-called "Pass-out" seat; i.e., there has already been three successive passes by the Dealer and the next two players, this player is in a unique scenario. He/She holds within his/her power as to whether or not the hand gets passed out, and, thus, whether or not any score, plus or minus, by either side, be scored. **"The Rule of 15" states that a hand qualifies for an opening bid of one of a suit, in the fourth ("Pass-Out" seat) position, if the summation of HCP's plus the total number of cards in the Spade suit equals, or exceeds, the number "15".** Since Spades is the controlling suit, the more actual Spades one possesses, the less likely the opponents can enter the same auction competitively at the same level Opener's team would be willing to bid. The "Rule of 15" is applicable only for use in the last seat. It should never be used in the first, second, or third seat for decision-making as to whether or not to open.

Examples: (S)XX (H)Qxx (D)AQxx (C)Axxx ("14" Points) (**Do not** open!)
(S)QXX (H)xxx (D)AQxx (C)Axx ("15" Points) (**Do** open!) (1D)

THE OPENER: - Each Player has a role to play. The Partner who opens the bidding and who gets the first opportunity to provide information to the Partnership is called the **Opener**. The Opening Bidder starts to paint a picture of his/her hand to Partner. The Responder then responds to Opener's opening bid.

GUIDELINES WITH RESPECT TO SHAPE

Which suit to bid varies according to whether a team is using the Standard American System or the British ACOL System of bidding, but whether or not to bid in either system, at all, as opposed to just passing, is dependent upon a combination of both distribution and high-card strength.

- a. With fewer than 12 HCP's (high-card points) + Distribution = "Pass" (Usually)
- b. With 12-21 HCP's + Distribution = Make one of the bids described below:
 - (1) With a 5-card or longer suit, or two 5-card, or longer suits:
 - (a) Bid the longer suit ("Length before Strength")
 - (b) Bid the higher ranking of two equally-long 5-card or 6-card suits
 - (2) With a 4-card or longer suit, or two 4-card suits:

Standard American (5-Card Majors - only)

Acot System (4-Card Majors)

- (a) Bid the longer Minor suit, "1C" or "1D" if one be discernibly longer than the other
- (b) Bid "1D" if holding two 4-card, 5-card, or 6-card Minor suits
- (c) Bid "1C" if holding two 3-card Minor suits (Note: The "Short Club" system differs)

(a) Bid the Major suit or "1S" if holding both Majors

3rd Position - Opening Criteria

The third (3rd) seat opening criteria, like the other three seats, is unique. It is generally considered appropriate and acceptable to lower the point count requirements for a 3rd seat opening bid of one of a suit. Since this be occasionally done, it is important for the Partner of the 3rd seat Opener (the previously passing 1st seat player), to be able to ascertain whether or not the 3rd seat opener has a full opening count, else a lighter than full count, especially if the 1st seat player, who previously had passed, has a near opening count himself/herself. It is, recommended, therefore, that if one does indeed choose to open light in the 3rd seat, one must only open with a hand that can afford to pass any bid made by Responder, and that if the 3rd seat Opener makes any re-bid, he/she guarantees a full opening count. Absent this ability to Pass any bid made by Responder, 3rd seat player should pass with a less than a full opening HCP count (a hand with 12 HCP's or fewer).

Examples: X JXXX AQXXX AXX (Do not open – Cannot afford to Pass a 1S Response)
 XXX JXX AQXX AXX (Open 1C - Can Pass any Response)

Marty Bergen's Adjust-3 Method of Hand Evaluation

1. Add up your HCP's in the traditional manner.
2. Count the number of underrated honors:
(The # of Aces and Tens)
3. Count the number of overrated honors: "Quacks"
(The # of Queens and Jacks)

Note: No adjustment is needed for Kings!

4. Subtract the smaller number from the larger.
5. Consider the difference:
 - If 0-2, no adjustment
 - If 3-5, adjust by 1 point
 - If 6(+), rare, adjust by 2 points
6. If you hold more underrated honors, (+) add;
 If you hold more overrated honors, (-) subtract.

Summary

1. The traditional 4-3-2-1 point count is not totally accurate.
2. Although traditional HCP count evaluates Kings correctly, it underrates Aces & Tens and overrates Queens & Jacks - Use the Adjust-3 System of HCP count.
3. Many hands require upgrading or downgrading as per the Adjust-3 Method listed above..
4. A hand with a 4-3-3-3 distribution is the worst distribution in Bridge.
5. The concept of upgrading or downgrading hands is critical in proper hand evaluation.
6. Honors in short suits are not worth their assigned value and should be devalued.
7. When all of your strength is concentrated in two long, strong suits, your hand is upgradeable.
8. Evaluation of the strength needed to become an opener varies with one's position at the table.

Evaluating a Bridge Hand

There is no perfect system of evaluation. Counting the expected number of winning tricks is the most accurate, but it is difficult to do with typical hands.

The most common method is counting points (**A=4, K=3, Q=2, and J=1**). It is easy to learn and use, but it only provides a rough guideline to the overall strength of any hand.

There are three notable flaws in the point-count method. Aces and Tens tend to be undervalued, Queens and Jacks (“**Quacks**”) tend to be over-rated, and points do not necessarily translate directly into tricks.

The point-count total can be adjusted for distributional features, such as length or shortness. Using the former, you would add one point for each card beyond four in a suit. Using the latter, you would add three points for a void, two for a singleton, and one for a doubleton. When a “**Golden Fit**” is determined (8 or more pieces in any suit held by both Partners), the value of shortness becomes elevated such that - add three points for a singleton, and five points for a void.

Adjusting for distribution, however, has its own inherent flaws:

- a) Short suits have ruffing value, but only if there is an agreed-upon trump suit.
- b) A short suit is a handicap opposite Partner's long suit or in a No-Trump contract.
- c) Long suits have little value if their quality is poor and/or Partner has inadequate support.
- d) Long suits and short suits are flip sides of the same coin. If you have a long suit, you must also have a short suit. Therefore, you should never take an adjustment for both of these features on the same hand.
- e) Distributional points should **not** be counted when considering a No-Trump contract. They are only of value when in a suit contract, and even then, only if a “**Golden-Fit**” with Partner is found.

Since distributional values depend on the degree of fit with Partner's cards, it is inadvisable to count them in advance. Start with high-card points alone, and listen to the bidding. If, and when, you find an agreed-upon trump suit (or a long-suit match for no-trump purposes), that is the proper time to add them in.