

Rubens' Pearls on Hand Evaluation (3)

.....on VALUATION TECHNIQUES: HIGH CARD POINTS

- High Card Point Counting works best for balanced hands.
- The High Card Point Count could be adjusted upwards where you have Aces and Kings or good quality intermediate cards or a fit with partner. High Card Points should be adjusted downwards for unguarded honours.

In my experience, counting high card points is the standard method by which players assess the value of their hand and most of the time, when both your hand and your partner's hand are balanced, will lead to the proper contract. Balanced hands are defined as those that do not have a singleton or more than one doubleton. This still allows for a 5-3-3-2 distribution to be included in the balanced category. In this case, some players will count an extra point for the five-card suit which is using the Total Point Counting system, normally used for the evaluation of distributional or unbalanced hands.

Given that additional evaluation measures are definitely needed for distributional hands, let us consider here the pitfalls that may be encountered when using the High Card Point Count system alone even with balanced hands.

Extra Length Counts:

BD: 28	♠ J92	Dir: W	
	♥ T5	Vul: NS	
	♦ T974		
	♣ 8742		
♠ KQ		♠ T863	
♥ KQJ76		♥ A2	
♦ AQJ		♦ K8653	
♣ AQ6		♣ T3	
	♠ A754		
	♥ 9843		
	♦ 2		
	♣ KJ95		
	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ NT		
N			1
S			24 7
E	2	6	6 3 6
W	2	6	6 3 6

The guideline to make 6NT is 33-34 HCPs. E-W can make 6NT easily on this hand despite the HCP count being only 31. An extra distributional point in each hand can be added for the five card suits, both of which are fundamental to making the contract.

Weak Fit and Unguarded Honours Detract:

BD: 1	♠ KJ74	Dir: N		
	♥ K63	Vul: Nil		
	♦ K			
	♣ AKT74			
♠ 52		♠ AQT9		
♥ A97		♥ J854		
♦ 543		♦ QT72		
♣ 98532		♣ J		
	♠ 863			
	♥ QT2			
	♦ AJ986			
	♣ Q6			
	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ NT			
N	3	1	1 2 2	17
S	2	1	1 2 2	4 10
E				9
W				

Despite N-S holding a combined 26HCPs and 28 Total Points for a 3NT contract, the contract should not make. The opponents' distribution is certainly unhelpful but the unguarded KD together with lack of a comfortable suit fit also depreciate the HCP count of the hand.

The Impact of Good Quality Intermediates:

BD: 6	♠ Q6		Dlr: E	
	♥ QT3		Vul: EW	
	♦ QJT3			
	♣ AKJ5			
♠ 73		♠ AK952		
♥ A652	3/12/21	♥ 74		
♦ K8742		♦ A6		
♣ 63		♣ 8742		
	♠ JT84			
	♥ KJ98			
	♦ 95			
	♣ QT9			
	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ NT			
N	1	1	2	15
S	1	1	2	7 11
E				7
W				

This N-S hand punches above its weight in a NT contract because of the impact of its large number of tens and nines leading to solid suit combinations. Despite holding only sufficient HCPs for 1NT, the opposition with the lead and the majority of controls cannot effectively penetrate its defences.

The Impact of Poor Quality Intermediates:

BD: 9	♠ T98		Dlr: N		
	♥ JT983		Vul: EW		
	♦ KT43				
	♣ 3				
♠ K763		♠ AQ			
♥ 764	2/12/21am	♥ KQ5			
♦ Q92		♦ A765			
♣ A62		♣ K974			
	♠ J542				
	♥ A2				
	♦ J8				
	♣ QJT85				
	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ NT				
N				4	
S				9 18	
E	2	2	2	1 3	9
W	2	2	2	1 3	

This E-W holding has 27 HCPs. A 3NT contract normally requires 25-26 HCPs to make and yet this contract went down in many cases. While 3NT will always be bid the main problem with the hand is that it lacks good quality middle cards unlike the oppositions' hands.

No trump play is all about knocking out the opponents' controls in order to establish your longer suits and having good intermediate cards facilitates this.

Answer to Exercise (2):

♠ Q6
♥ QT3
♦ QJT3
♣ AKJ5
♠ JT84
♥ KJ98
♦ 95
♣ QT9

The guidelines state that hands of 21-22 HCPs should make 1NT but this hand can actually make 2NT. It is lacking controls, but despite the opposition holding 3 of the Aces and 2 Kings, both clear winners, the impact of the amazing quality of the middle cards, the 10s, 9s and even 8s allow the hand to make all the remaining 8 tricks. (See B6 above for the full hand)

Exercise (3):

Think of another example where the High Card Point Counting system can lead to overbidding. Clue: It relates to the layout of the cards between your hand and your partner's hand.