

Hand Evaluation

Good bidding is the result of good judgement and the basis of good judgement in bidding is intelligent hand evaluation. Hand evaluation isn't just a matter of counting HCPs and adjusting for distribution. There's far more to it than that.

Factors you should take into consideration when deciding whether to open a hand, or whether to look for game or slam after your partner has opened include

1. Shape

Even when playing in NT, holding a long suit can be a plus. For example, 4-4-3-2 distribution should be considered stronger than 4-3-3-3 because the first hand offers two possible sources of an extra-length trick rather than only one. A five-card suit offers the possibility of two extra-length tricks, so a 5-3-3-2 shape is better still.

2. Honor Combinations

Two honors in combination in the same suit are more powerful than the same two honors split between two different suits. A holding such as Qxxx needs a lot of help from partner's hand to supply many tricks, while KQxx is a holding with some potential even opposite three low.

3. Honors with Length

Honors in your long suits are better than honors in short suits because it's easier to establish extra-length tricks if you have high cards in the long suit. For example, KQxx in your long suit and xx in a side suit will be more useful than xxxx as a long suit and KQ as a side suit.

4. Intermediates

Intermediate cards such as nines and tens can make a big difference to a hand, especially if they're backing up one or more higher honors. For example, AJ109 opposite xxx will produce more tricks than AJxx opposite xxx.

5. Side-Suit Shape

Even when holding a long suit, your side-suit shape is worth taking into consideration. When preempting, 7-2-2-2 is the worst possible shape. 7-3-2-1 is better and 7-3-3-0 or 7-4-2-0 are better still. That's because 7-2-2-2 will likely have losers in every suit, needing partner to have a lot of strength if he is to cover them. In addition, you have no side suit to establish tricks in and are unlikely to be able to ruff anything in dummy.

The more unbalanced your side-suit shape, the better the chance of getting lucky with the position of partner's high cards, and the greater the possibility that you will have an unpleasant surprise for the opposition should they come into the auction.