



Play & Learn

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Rule of 20 or 22?

Last month we introduced the Rule of 20, which suggests bidding more aggressively with borderline distributional hands as dealer or directly after dealer passes. This bidding guideline lets us open more frequently, which can be an advantage.

The Rule of 20 became popular in the '90s after Marty Bergen popularized it in his book "Points Schmoints." Some players lived by it even when it meant opening 1♣ with this hand:

♠QJ ♥Q742 ♦Q ♣K76542.

Adding high-card points plus length (one point for each card beyond four cards in long suits), gives us 12 total points, a total that requires judgment on whether or not to open. The Rule of 20 has us add 10 HCP to the 10 total cards in our two longest suits (clubs and hearts). With a sum of 20 or more, opening is suggested. How about you? Would you open?

One-level opening bids in first- or second-seat tend to show both offense – the ability to win tricks as declarer – and defense – the ability to win tricks if the opponents win the bid.

If you find a good fit and your side wins the bidding, opening might work out well, but your high cards are too scattered to guarantee many tricks on offense. Happiness is having our high cards together in our long suits. Only 5 of this hand's 10 HCP are in suits having length, and those 10 HCP are not the best.

The 4-3-2-1 point-count system undervalues aces and overvalues

queens and jacks. Being aware of these facts makes you upgrade or downgrade a hand as you gain judgment. What if your opponents win the auction? On defense, the ♣K could be a trick, but the club length might be offset by shortness in an opponent's hand. Singleton and doubleton honors could fall. On a bad day, this hand could provide zero tricks on defense. Regardless of the fact that the Rule of 20 is met, I would pass.

Several Bulletin writers have suggested using the Rule of 22, an easy and reasonable modification that takes defensive tricks into consideration. The extra 2 comes from the required number of quick tricks – tricks that can be won if you end up defending. A definite first- or second-round winner (an ace or a king-queen combined) is one quick trick. A possible first- or second-round winner counts as half a quick trick. Aces and kings usually count as quick tricks. Queens count only when paired with a higher card in the same suit.

Ace = 1 quick trick

Ace-king in same suit = 2 quick tricks
(Don't add more with the queen)

Ace-queen in same suit = 1.5 quick tricks

King-queen in same suit = 1 quick trick

Protected king = .5 quick trick
(More than a singleton but without the ace or queen)

We might think of the Rule of 22 as The Rule of 20+2 with the "+2" an

additional requirement to the Rule of 20. The hand we've been discussing has only a half quick trick (the ♣K) for 20.5, not the suggested 22, and passing is suggested.

Let's apply the Rule of 22 to three hands you might hold as dealer. None comes to 13 points including HCP plus length, so your decision is whether or not to open a little light.

1. ♠A Q 9 7 4 ♥8 3 ♦K J 8 7 2 ♣5

2. ♠K Q ♥J 8 7 5 3 ♦K J 9 5 2 ♣5

3. ♠K Q 7 4 ♥K 8 7 5 ♦K J 5 4 ♣5

Hand No. 1 values to 12 total points, counting one length point in each five-card suit. If you're in doubt as to whether to open, apply the Rule of 20, which is met with 10 HCP + 10 cards in the two longest suits. The hand also has 2 quick tricks to meet the Rule of 20+2. Open 1♠.

With 10 HCP and two long suits, you might value hand No. 2 at 12 points; but because the hearts are a bit weak, you might judge this hand to be worse than hand No. 1. While we do meet the Rule of 20, we're lacking in the quick-tricks department, with only 1.5 (one in spades and a half in diamonds). Pass, because the hand does not meet the Rule of 20+2.

With 12 HCP, hand No. 3 meets the Rule of 20 (adding 8 cards in the two longest suits). There are also two quick tricks (one for the ♠K Q and .5 each for the ♥K and ♦K). Open 1♦.

With a full 13-point opening hand, the Rule of 22 is not needed. Use it only when deciding whether or not to open with fewer than 13 points. Once you apply the Rule of 22 to open, gauge your future bids on the actual strength of your hand along with judgment based on what you learn as the auction progresses. But don't chicken out mid-auction and pass partner's forcing bid. Opening the bidding obligates you to see that the bidding remains open after partner makes a forcing bid.

THE essential bridge skill: Counting the hand **by Karen Walker, Champaign IL**

Ever wonder why expert players seem to be able to see through the backs of your cards? Why they're so successful in finding the right lead, locating missing honors, guessing the distribution of their opponents' cards?

The answer is that they're usually not guessing. Whether they're defending or declaring, successful players are constantly gathering clues from the bidding and play and using them to make logical assumptions about the location of the unseen cards. This exercise - some call it a talent -- is often called card reading, and it's a skill that even beginners can develop.

The most basic form of counting is keeping track of the cards your opponent's play as you're leading one suit. At the expert level, "getting a count" involves visualizing the length and strength (honor holdings) of all four suits in all four hands.

To do this successfully, you need memory and reasoning skills, which will improve with practice, and knowledge of how to collect and analyze the clues. Most important, though, is effort and concentration.

Counting isn't easy, and it can be tiresome. You have to force yourself to study every trick and constantly modify your picture of the unseen hands. Your bridge results may even suffer at first because your attention is focused on the counting instead of the play.

The benefits, however, are worth the effort. Playwright George S. Kaufman, who was a skilled rubber-bridge player, wrote:

"Counting to a bridge player is similar to an actor learning his lines - it does not guarantee success, but he cannot succeed without it."

Getting motivated

For some, the biggest hurdle in developing their counting skills is a lack of self-discipline. It's easy to let your concentration lapse, especially on deals where it may appear that you'll have no decisions to make. Anyone who's ever been caught in a "pseudo-squeeze" - where declarer is running tricks and you have no idea which winner you should keep - knows how important it is to stay alert and keep counting.

I learned this early in my bridge education, from a more experienced partner who employed the Socratic method. At unexpected times during the bidding or play, he would stop the proceedings and quiz me: "How many diamonds does declarer hold?" "Who has the club ace?" The fear of not being able to offer an intelligent answer became a strong incentive for me to pay attention to every trick and signal.

Of course, you can't do this in a club game or tournament, but you may find it an effective motivator to imagine the same scenario at your table. Just assume that your partner - or anyone who is judging your bridge skill -- might interrupt the play at any time to ask you similar questions, and that you have to be ready with answers.

If you need more inspiration, consider this observation from bridge great Victor Mollo:

"Learning to count out a hand is like plunging into a cold bath - difficult and a little frightening until you get into the habit. Then it comes quite easily, and leaves you with a pleasant, tingling sensation when it is all over."

Getting started

If you haven't been a devoted counter in the past, you can speed your progress by using memory aids and other techniques that will help "train" your brain to handle counting tasks. Here are some to try:

Memorize the common distribution patterns of a bridge hand -- 4432, 4333, 4441, 5332, 5431, 6322, etc. (Note that all the patterns fall into one of two even-odd combinations: three even numbers and one odd, or three odds and one even.) Drill yourself on the patterns until they're so familiar that you won't have to do arithmetic once you get a partial count. If you learn that each opponent holds four cards in a suit and you hold two, you'll instantly know partner has three because the 4432 pattern will pop into your head.

Concentrate on how the unseen cards divide. Once you become proficient in recognizing the patterns, start thinking about not just the number of outstanding cards in a suit, but how they might break. If your hand and dummy have eight total cards in a suit, focus on the possible divisions of the missing cards. With practice, it will become second nature to go beyond thinking "5" and start thinking "3-2, 4-1, 5-0".

Use a mnemonic to commit the original layout to memory. Study the dummy at trick one and create a mental picture of its distribution (left to right, as the suits are arranged on the table). Repeat the pattern in your head, using two numbers instead of four (a 3-5-3-2 hand is memorized as 35-32), then do the same with your own hand. Later in the play, if you can't remember how many cards of

a suit are still out, you can often figure out how many times the suit was led by recalling the number of cards you and dummy originally held.

Count missing cards instead of the whole suit. When counting just one suit, start with the number of cards you're missing and count down to zero. If you have a 7-card fit and both opponents follow to the first lead, you would mentally count "6-5". Many players find this easier than the alternative of counting "up" from 8 to 13.

Focus your count on just one unseen hand. If you're trying to determine the distribution of all four suits in the opponents' hands, deal with just one hand at a time. The easier hand to count will usually be the one that made the most bids during the auction, especially if it showed a long suit, or made the opening lead. Once you know the shape of that hand, it will be easy to work out the distribution of the other.

Practice, practice, practice. It will take time and lots of experience before you can process all the information available and make the right conclusions. That will happen faster if you make a concentrated effort to count at least one or two suits on every deal. The more hands you play and the more suits you count, the more adept your brain will become at remembering the cards.

Your stint as dummy is a perfect practice opportunity. Try analyzing the bidding and opening lead, then watch the played tricks and defenders' signals and see if you can develop an accurate picture of the other three hands. This is a more challenging exercise than "regular" counting because you can see only one hand, but it's also less taxing because there's no pressure to get it right.

But ... don't overload your neurons. On many deals, you won't need to keep track of all four suits. Early in the play, decide which suits are critical and which can be ignored. If you're declaring, focus on counting the opponents' cards in your longer fits -- the one or two suits where you and dummy have the most cards.

If you're a defender, start your count with the suit your side has bid or led, then try figuring the distribution of one of declarer's suits. A good choice will be a suit that may present you with a problem later in the play - you hold the ace and dummy, on your left, has KJxxx, for example.

Collecting and analyzing the clues

Start counting during the auction. Begin visualizing each player's suit length and overall strength during the first round of bidding. Consider not just what the hidden hands actually bid, but what they did not bid. Refine your picture with every subsequent call and review it before you play to the first trick. Some simple examples:

- If an opponent opens 1D and then does not support his partner's major-suit response, it's guaranteed that opener has 4+ diamonds (because the only time he would open 1D with a 3-card diamond suit is when his distribution is exactly 4-4-3-2...i.e. 4 Spades, 4 Hearts, 3 Diamonds and 2 Clubs).
- If the opponents' auction goes 1H-1S-1NT, you'll be able to narrow down your picture of opener's hand to one of three patterns: 2-5-3-3 or 3-5-3-2 or 3-5-2-3. This conclusion is based on three logical assumptions

(1) Opener showed a balanced hand with his 1NT rebid, but he did not raise his partner's 1S response (so he has exactly 2 or 3 spades);

(2) He did not rebid his heart suit (so he holds exactly 5 hearts); and

(3) He did not show a second 4+-card suit (so he has at most 3 cards in each minor).

Process information as soon as it becomes available. Don't wait until you have to make a decision to add up what you know. Once play begins, look for clues in every trick and incorporate them into your count before you play to the next trick. When it's time for you to make a critical play or discard, you'll be able to do it smoothly, without giving away information about your problem.

Look beyond the obvious. Keeping track of the cards as they're played is the simplest, most objective form of counting. Another purpose of counting is to figure out the most likely location of cards that haven't yet been played. Called card reading, this requires using all the available clues to come up with an inferential count - a picture of the layout based on logical assumptions about the opponents' hands.

Positive inferences are the easiest to identify, and many are fairly routine. You play the opening bidder for a missing ace, for example, or you use information from the opening lead to figure how a suit is divided in the opponent's hands.

Dig deeper to find negative inferences. Valuable information can also be gathered by analyzing bids and plays that were not made. Expert counters uncover these negative inferences by asking themselves "why" questions: Why didn't West lead his heart suit? Why is East pitching clubs instead of spades? Why didn't the opponents ever bid with their 10-card spade fit?

Against good opponents, questions like these will usually have logical answers. If you know what to look for and if you can draw the right inferences, you may be surprised to find that you, too, have developed x-ray counting vision.

DON'T MULTI-TASK!!

by Barbara Seagram

It is a known fact that some are able to multi-task and some just cannot. We are not going to suggest which gender can and which cannot but we all know!!

BUT at the bridge table, no-one should multi-task! Bridge demands your full attention and focus. Discussing the outfit of the player sitting south at table 7 will distract you and likely will lead to poor results.

Once you settle down to play a game, now it's time to tune out all the surround-sound. Zoom in and focus on the task at hand. Don't let the distractions get in your way or your life will become a series of missed opportunities.

S 10952
H Q42
D QJ
C Q974

S 7
H J1098
D AK1092
C A102

S QJ
H 7653
D 83
C KJ653

S AK8643
H AK
D 7654
C 8

S	W	N	E
1S	Dbl	2S	P
4S			

You are sitting West on this hand and lead the Diamond Ace. Partner follows with the Diamond 8. You continue with the Diamond King and partner now plays the Diamond 3. Since partner has given you a high-low signal, you correctly interpret that she must have a doubleton. Furthermore, she must be able to overruff the dummy.

It is now that you have to be paying even closer attention. When you are giving partner a ruff, you are able to tell her which suit to lead back after she has ruffed. If you lead a LOW card for partner to ruff, it requests the return of the LOWER ranking suit. If you lead a HIGH card for partner to ruff, it begs for the HIGHER ranking of the two remaining suits. (There are only ever two remaining suits as the player who is ruffing is out of one suit and trumps don't count.)

West now returns the Diamond 2. East's ears perk up as she notices the Diamond 2. Declarer ruffs the Diamond in dummy but East overruffs with the Spade Jack. She returns a low Club (West asked for the return of the lower ranking suit). West wins the Club A and returns another Diamond. East is happily able to overruff dummy yet again. Down two!

Note that if West had led back any old Diamond (e.g. the Diamond 10) then East would have returned a Heart . Declarer can now win that with the Heart Ace, draw trumps and pitch her losing Club on the Heart Queen in dummy. Making 4S.

Ahh, the magic of good defense! It should hold great allure for all of you. It's a great feeling when you've beaten a contract. You'll stand taller when you leave that table!

BID THIS HAND WITH ME

S ---
H J96532
D KJ53
C AK8

S KJ9643
H Q10
D 1076
C 65

S Q108
H A874
D Q9842
C 7

N	E	S	W
1H	P	2C	P
2H	P	3C*	P
4C	P	?	

S A752
H K
D A
C QJ109432

* This pair was playing 2 over 1 so that 3C was forcing. If you were not playing 2 over 1, you would have to substitute another bid here e.g. 2S but this is one of the advantages of playing 2/1.

Your bid as South here.

If you are one of those players who just counts High Card Points only, then you, as South, might now bid 5C. North, with a minimum hand will now pass and you will both have missed the boat.

Remember to always count your distribution (unless bidding No Trump) and always revalue your hand.

You, sitting South, were not thrilled when partner opened with 1H and the rebid her Hearts. If you are a long suit counter, as many now are, then you should have counted 17 points to start with on this hand (one for 5th Club and one for each of 6th and 7th Club also).

It is when your partner supports your Club suit that you, South, should be aroused. You now get an ADDITIONAL one point for the 5th card in the suit which has been supported and an ADDITIONAL 2 extra points for each additional card (YES, over and above the length points you already have given). You now have 22 points and partner opened the bidding so he/she has at least 13 points. This is the SOUND OF SLAM.

The auction will continue:

N	E	S	W
		4NT	P
5N**		6C	

** 5NT shows a useful void (i.e. not in a suit that partner has bid, that would not be useful) South knows that it cannot be a Diamond void since South only has one Diamond and that would mean that EW have 12 Diamonds between them and have not entered the auction...South deduces that North has a Spade void. Ergo, S knows she can trump her S losers in the dummy.

The play is fairly straightforward, even on a Club lead. S can ruff two Spades in dummy and discard a Spade on the Diamond K.

Revalue when partner supports your suit. It is something that many teachers do not get around to teaching. See article called Hand Evaluation on right hand side of website under articles at www.barbaraseagram.com
Did you bid 6C?

You hold this hand:

S A842
H K765
D 6
C K1062

1. The player on your right opens 1D. Do you

- a) Pass
- b) Double
- c) Take a long time and then pass
- d) Bid 1S or 1H

Answer:

You have been taught that you need 13 points to make a takeout double. That is 13 TOTAL points i.e. HCP AND distribution points. Who or what will you become if you were to say double?

You will become the dummy. And as such, you must count dummy points.

With 3 card support for partner's suit, use the 3-2-1 dummy points method.

3 for a void, 2 for a singleton and 1 for a doubleton.

With 4 card support for partner's suit, use the 5-3-1- dummy points method.

Since partner is forced to respond if you make a takeout double, on this hand you have 4 card support for any suit she might bid. This you have 13 total points. You must double, requesting (demanding!) that partner now name her best suit.

2. After your takeout double, the player to your left passes and partner responds 1S. Pass on your right. What is your bid?

- a) Pass
- b) Bid 2S
- c) Bid 3S
- d) Bid 2D

Answer:

When your partner responds 1S to your takeout double, she could have as little as

S 5432
H 543
D 543
C 543

When you made a takeout double and the next player passed, your partner was forced to bid, in spite of having no points. The question you have to ask yourself is: "Have I already told my story?" The answer is YES, you have. You must now pass.

Remember that if partner had held

S KJ76
H QJ6
D 876
C K97

She would have responded 2S to your takeout double showing 9-11 versus bidding 1S showing 0-8 total points.