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## **BBW Lesson #1: Bidding when Bidding Suit Contracts**

**Bruce Thompson**

In duplicate bridge, players count the High Card Points (HCPs) that they hold in their hands. In a system in which Aces are worth 4 HCPs<sup>1</sup>, Kings are worth 3 HCPs, Queens are worth 2 HCPs, and Jacks are worth 1 HCP, there are **40** HCPs in a deck of cards. Thus, the "average" randomly-dealt hand will hold **10** HCPs. In general, if you and your Partner hold a majority of the HCPs (**20+** HCPs) on a given duplicate bridge Board, you and your Partner usually want to obtain the contract on that Board, assuming that you can find a reasonable "fit", and also assuming that your Opponents are not bidding wildly such that they give you the opportunity to score *more points on Defense* than you would on Offense.<sup>2</sup>

When you bid, you want to give your Partner as much information as possible about both (1) your HCPs, and (2) your card distribution. Both pieces of information are equally important.

In general, contracts will usually require *roughly* the following number of HCPs in order to be "made":

1. **3NT** requires 25+ HCPs;
2. **4H** or **4S** requires 25-26+ points, if your partnership holds at least 8 trump cards;

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<sup>1</sup> More advanced players may count *Aces as being worth 5, or even 6, HCPs*. Even if you elect to count Aces as worth only 4 HCPs, you should at least wholistically value Aces as being worth more than 4 HCPs. Afterall, Aces are valuable for doing their **main and unique job, which is "killing Opponents' Kings!"**, and usually also represent "control" of a given suit. Incidentally, you almost *never* want to lead an Ace, unless you also hold the King in the same suit, and you generally do not want to play your Ace, unless you are defending against a Slam bid in a suit contract, in which case you may want to cash your Ace early, but *otherwise reserve your Ace when defending against suit contracts until you can "kill a King!"*

<sup>2</sup> Novice players too often forget that it is entirely possible for your to obtain a higher score on Defense than you can obtain on Offense. For example, if you are not Vulnerable, and you bid and make a 4-level contract in a Major, you will obtain a Bridge Score of **420**. On the same Board, if your Opponents are Vulnerable, and you set them 3 tricks, you will score **500**, which is higher than **420**! If your Opponents are Vulnerable, and you Double them for Penalty, and you set them 3 tricks, you will obtain a Bridge Score of **800**, which is also higher than **420**!!!

3. **5C** or **5D** requires at least 29+ points, if your partnership holds at least 8 trump cards; and
4. A 6-level small Slam requires 32+ points.

However, especially when bidding suit contracts, card distributions and "fit" can **substantially** lower the point requirements for making game or slam bids.

### **Opening Bid Checklist**

In order of priority....

1. If you hold 22-24 HCPs, open with an "artificial" **2C** bid (not really showing Clubs), thus showing your points, but not yet showing to Partner your card holdings or your card distributions, and "demanding" that Partner say more to describe Partner's hand.
2. If you hold a "balanced" **NT** hand (no void(s), no singleton(s), and not more than 1 doubleton), and 20-21 HCPs, open **2NT**.
3. Open **1NT** any time you hold 15-18 HCPs (even if you hold a 5-card Major), if you hold a "balanced", "square", "flat" distribution involving no void(s), no singleton(s), and not more than 1 doubleton.

As discussed further in the present Lesson....

4. If you hold opening points, open a 5-card or longer Major, open the Major.
5. If you hold opening points, and one or both 4-card Majors, open by bidding a "convenient Minor" (**1C** or **1D**) to "demand" that Partner show a 4+ card Major, if Partner has one, so that you can find a 4-4 "golden" 8+ card Major.
6. If you hold opening points, and none of the above, but a 5+ card Minor, open the Minor.

### **Requirements to Open the Bidding with a Suit Bid**

In general, you and Partner want to look for makeable contracts in either **NT**, or a Major, either at a part score or a game level, because these contracts for a given number of tricks yield higher Bridge Scores than part or game contracts in a Minor. Also, because **3NT** game contracts that make exactly 3 yield lower scores than game contracts in a Major that make exactly 4, *in general 4-level contracts in a Major are preferred over 3NT contracts, unless a **4H** or **4S** contract is not makeable.*

### **You Hold 12-13 HCPs....**

First, sitting in any seat (Dealer, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, or 4<sup>th</sup>), you can open the bidding with a 1-level suit bid of a Major if you hold both (1) **12-13** HCPs, and (2) a **5+**-card Major. Second, sitting in any seat (Dealer,

2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, or 4<sup>th</sup>), you can open the bidding with a 1-level suit bid of 1C or 1D (called a "convenient Minor" seeking a 4-4 fit in a Major) if you hold both one 4-card Major or 2 4-card Majors with either 3+ Clubs or 4+ Diamonds. Third, even lacking any 4-card Major, sitting in any seat (Dealer, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, or 4<sup>th</sup>), you can open the bidding with a 1-level suit bid of 1C if you hold 5+ Clubs, or 1D if you hold 5+ Diamonds.

1. If you hold 12-13 HCPs, and both 5 Spades and 5 Hearts, open by bidding 1S (i.e., the higher ranking of two equally long Majors).
2. If you hold 12-13 HCPs, and 5+ Hearts, but not 5 Spades, open by bidding 1H.
3. If you hold 5+ Spades, but not 6+ Hearts, open by bidding 1S.
4. If you hold 4+ Diamonds with good "suit quality" (i.e., honors), and 1 or 2 4-card Majors, open by bidding 1D. A 1D opening bid, assuming the Opponent Passes, "demands" that Partner/Responder show a 4-card Major by bidding that Major. Partner/Responder holding both exactly 4 Hearts and 4 Spades will bid Hearts "up the line" by bidding 1H, and bid the Spades later in the auction, if necessary, to show the Spades. Partner/Responder holding a 5-card Major will bid that Major, 1S, and holding both 5 Hearts and 5 Spades will bid 1S, and, again, may show the Hearts later in the auction.
5. If you hold 3+ Clubs, and 4 cards in either Major of both Majors, open by bidding 1C. A 1C opening bid, assuming the Opponent Passes, "demands" that Partner show a 4-card Major by bidding that Major. Partner/Responder holding both exactly 4 Hearts and 4 Spades will bid Hearts "up the line" by bidding 1H. Partner/Responder holding a 5-card Major will bid that Major, and holding both 5 Hearts and 5 Spades will bid 1S.
6. If you hold 5+ Diamonds, open by bidding 1D. You will show a true 1D holding by re-bidding Diamonds later in the auction.
7. If you hold 5+ Clubs, open by bidding 1C. You will show a true 1C holding by re-bidding Clubs later in the auction.

**....and You ALSO Hold (1) Voids/Singletons and/or (2) Extra Trump Cards**

Players also evaluate their hands to take somewhat into account *unusual distributions* (e.g., short side suits, extra trump cards). These extra distribution points are added to HCPs to yield a Total Point Count.

**Short Side Suits.** Short suits can be deadly in **NT** contracts, but in suit contracts instead are valuable in providing trumping opportunities. You can add to your Total Point Count *when bidding suit contracts* (1) 1 point for holding a doubleton in a side suit, (2) 2 points for holding a singleton, and (3) 3 points for holding a void.

Voids and singletons are especially valuable *when they occur in a suit that both Opponents are bidding!* During the auction, if both Opponents are bidding Hearts, and you and your Partner are both showing Spades,

you must wholistically promote the value of your hand big time! In such an auction Opponents are virtually certain to lead their mutually-bid suit, which you can then promptly trump.

**Extra Trump Cards.** Some players add to their Total Point Count points for holding extra trump cards. However, *be cautious about adding these points to your Total Point Count until during the auction you and Partner have found a "fit" in your long suit holding.* You can add (1) 1 point to your count for holding a 5<sup>th</sup> trump card, (2) 2 points to your count for holding a 6<sup>th</sup> trump card, and (3) 3 points to your count for holding a 7<sup>th</sup> trump card, and so forth. In later lessons we will learn that **profoundly emphasizing in suit contracts the number of trump cards held by the combined Partnership is really what is essential in successful duplicate bridge.**

**The Sum of (1) Your HCPs, plus (2) the Number of Cards in Your 2 Longest Suits Equals 20 or More**

In general, HCPs are vital when playing NT contracts. On the other hand, when playing suit contracts, card distributions are more important than HCPs. This view is reflected in the teaching of SDBC player Yoda that, "**Points are for No Trump!**" This view is also reflected in the titles of two of Marty Bergen's (10-time American National Champion) two best-selling books, Points Schmoints! And More Points Schmoints!

In suit contracts, *2-suited hands play better* than flat or "square" hands, which instead play better in NT. This is because when you are playing a suit contract with a 2-suited hand, you can dump Dummy's losers on your long suit, or alternatively once you draw trump, you can then run your long side suit in your hand and in Dummy. Furthermore, **holding 2 long suits implies holding 2 short suits, and thus the capacity to trump Opponents' holdings in the 2 short suits!!!**

Sitting in any seat, you can open the bidding with a suit bid any time the sum of (1) your HCPs and (2) the number of cards in your longest 2 suits is **20** or more. This so-called "Rule of 20" developed by Marty Bergen honors the dynamic that 2-suited hands play well in suit contracts.

**You are Sitting Third and Hold 11+ HCPs**

Sitting third, you can bid even if you hold only 11 HCPs! In this case, bid a Major if you hold 5+ cards with some top honors. Or bid Clubs with 5+ cards and honors. Or bid Diamonds with 5+ cards and honors. Or bid Clubs with 3+ Clubs and at least 1 Major with 4 cards including honors. Or bid Diamonds with 4+ Diamonds and at least 1 4-card Major including honors.

**Note.** As Responder, when Partner opens in 3<sup>rd</sup> seat, you must **remember that Partner may have opened with only 11 HCPs**, and adjust your bidding accordingly.

### **You are Sitting Third or Fourth After Multiple Passes and Meet the Requirements of the "Rule of 15"**

Bridge "Rules," of which there are dozens, are not "rules" in the sense that they dictate correct behavior, and specify the penalties for "rules" violations. Instead, in duplicate bridge, the ACBL "**Laws of Bridge**" specify correct behavior, and the penalties for violations. For example, the ACBL "Laws of Bridge" specify the expectation that overcall and response bids must be "sufficient," and dictate the penalties for a violation.<sup>3</sup>

Bridge "Rules," on the other hand, are guidelines for bridge bidding and/or play. There are several dozen such "Rules," which vary considerably in their value and import.

The "Rule of 15" says, "You can bid 1**S**, when you are sitting 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup>, and the sum of (1) your HCPs and (2) the number of Spades you hold together is **15 or more.**" In duplicate bridge, Aces hold *special value*, because they can both do their job of "killing Kings," and are "control" cards. In a similar vein, Spades as a suit hold *extra value*, because Partners holding Spades often have the power to set the final contract.

### **You are Sitting in the "Balancing" Position After 3 Passes**

Whenever you are bidding in a situation in which, if you Pass, the contract will be set, you are in what is called the "balancing" position. There are special considerations when you sit in the "balancing" position. For example, some partnerships have a "partnership" agreement that the "Balancer" ought to bid even with

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<sup>3</sup> In "social" or "party" bridge, when someone makes an "insufficient" bid, the expected /demanded behavior is that EVERYONE at the Table must yell, guffaw, wave their arms, and guffaw more, yelling, "INSUFFICIENT! INSUFFICIENT! INSUFFICIENT!!!! Ha Ha Ha!!!" In duplicate bridge the ACBL **REQUIRED** behavior *instead* is for the other 3 Players to do and say absolutely nothing!!! This expectation includes the Partner of the Player making the "insufficient" bid. In duplicate bridge, once an "insufficient" bid is made, the situation is ENTIRELY controlled by the LHO of the Player making the "insufficient" bid. **First**, the LHO without any further comment or explanation can then make ANY bid that is "sufficient" over the "insufficient" bid, such as Pass, or for example bid 1**H** in the bidding sequence: 1**S**, 1**D**, 1**H**. Second, the LHO of the Player making the "insufficient" bid can instead request that the bid be made "sufficient." If the Player making the "insufficient" declines to make the bid "sufficient," call the Director to sort out the situation.

As another example of a Law violation, if the RHO of the Declarer leads "out of turn," the Declarer's Partner is now in sole, total, absolute control of resolution of the ACBL Law violation. Declarer's Partner should immediately call the Director by holding a hand in the air, while yelling, "Director, please!" The Director will then give the Declarer's Partner 5 choices, 1 of which will be to become the new Declarer! These penalties can be painful, which is why, when you believe it is your lead, before you turn your lead card over on the table, you should **ALWAYS** ask your Partner, "My lead, Partner???"

insufficient (but not 0) HCPs if the Opponents' contract will be set at the 1-level. Some Partners agree that they will not ever allow Opponents to play a 1-level contract, since such contracts are too easy to make!

Sitting in the "Balancing" position after 3 Passes, you can open with 13 HCPs "minus a King", or **10** HCPs. You don't have to, but you can. And, again, Responder must remember that Opener may have opened "light," especially when Opener bids in the "balancing" position following 3 Passes.

**A VERY Special Consideration When You Are Bidding Suit Contracts is the "Law of Total Tricks" or "LOTT"**

In 1992 Larry Cohen published his massively influential bridge book, To Bid or Not to Bid: The LAW of Total Tricks. This book won a best bridge book of the year award from the American Bridge Teachers' Association (ABTA). In this book Cohen emphasized to **focal importance** of Trump card count and Suit distributions as against HCPs. Cohen noted that a Declarer will almost always make a Suit contract bid set at a level no higher than the number of Trump cards held within the Partnership - 6.

Alan Truscott wrote the daily bridge column for the New York Times for 41 years (1964-2005) and served as Executive Editor for the first 6 editions of The Official Encyclopedia of Bridge. In his June 27, 2002 [Section E, p. 6] article in the New York Times, "Obey the Law of Total Tricks (And Always Add Carefully)" Alan Truscott argued:

**The law does not always work. If there is a double fit [in which Partners hold 2 8+ card fits], the total tricks are usually one more than the number of trumps. But there is *very seldom* more than a *one-trick* variation. A practical guideline can be derived from this... [O]ne should normally bid for a number of tricks equal to the number of trumps you and your partner are known to have. With an eight-card fit, bid to the two level, with a nine-card fit, to the three-level; and so on. [emphases added]**

For a more thorough treatment of the "**Law of Total Tricks**", see Esther's Lesson, "(1) Does the '**Law of Total Tricks**' Really Work, and (2) Is the '**LOTT**' Magic?" at:

[https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/LOTT\\_bad.pdf](https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/LOTT_bad.pdf)

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