

Esther Discusses Hand Evaluation Methods to Guide Opening Bid Decisions

Bruce Thompson

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Bruce: Today, we are honored to have with us Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, Quintuple Gold Emerald Life Master (20 Million+ ACBL MasterPoints), who will talk us through **hand evaluation methods** to guide opening bid decisions. Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, thanks for taking time to be with us today!

Esther: D**n it, Bruce! How many times do I have to tell you to **NEVER, ever** call me Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen! Instead, always, **ALWAYS, ALWAYS** instead call me, Esther, because I am a *warm, caring, pleasant person!*

Bruce: Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast... Errr, I mean, Esther. Thanks so much for being here today to discuss the important topic of **hand evaluation methods!** Are there any important principles that you wish to elucidate prior to discussing (1) some of the basics of hand evaluation, and (2) some more elaborate aspects of hand evaluation?

Esther: Well, yes, my malodorous misanthrope, before I discuss hand evaluation methods, there is indeed a **preeminent** principle that simply must be emphasized: Partners can play any, any, any system(s) that they wish, and agree to play, as long as the systems are properly alerted to Opponents. But what is absolutely, totally, critically essential is that **both Partners are playing exactly the same system(s)!**

Bruce: Well, OK, Esther. What hand evaluation methods¹ do you and your Partner(s) typically agree to play?

Esther: Well, here are the basic opening bid requirements that my Partner(s) and I typically play. My Partners typically agree to play by these requirements, so that we can clearly communicate with each other, and they do so because, after all, I like these requirements, and I do indeed have 20M+ ACBL MasterPoints, so they need to do whatever I prefer!!!!

1. If I open a suit bid in first or second position, I have 12-13 HCPs, or I can also open in *any* position if the **sum** of (1) my HCPs and (2) the length of my longest 2 suits is 20 or more (Marty Bergen's "Rule of 20").
2. If I open the bidding with the first non-Pass bid either 1**H** or 1**S**, I have 5+ cards in the bid suit.
3. If I open 1**D** with the first non-Pass bid, I have 4+ Diamonds.
4. If I am sitting **3rd**, and the first 2 bids are Pass, I can (not have to, but can) open with 11+ HCPs.
5. If I am sitting 4th, and the first 3 bids are Pass, I can (not have to, but can) open with 10+ HCPs. But the closer I am to 10 HCPs, then the more likely it is that I hold a Major, and often Spades, when I open lighter.
6. I do not count distribution points, except for extra length in a suit I am bidding, until my Partner and I establish a fit. (Responder counts distribution points for void, Singleton, or Doubleton *once Responder knows* there is a trump suit fit.)

¹ Marty Bergen, a 10-time National Bridge Champion, and creator of numerous bridge conventions, including "**Bergen Limit Raises**", "**DONT**", and the "**Rule of 20**", and who has had a regular column in the ACBL Bridge Bulletin since 1976, wrote a wonderful little bridge 2011 "pocket book": pocket posh tips for bridge players. The "Hand Evaluation" chapter from this WONDERFUL, INCREDIBLE little book is particularly extraordinary! This book is available online from various vendors, including Walmart:

<https://www.walmart.com/ip/Pocket-Posh-Pocket-Posh-Tips-for-Bridge-Players-Paperback>

7. If I open **1NT**, I have (1) 15-17 HCPs, (2) no void or singleton, and (3) no more than 1 Doubleton, but I **may** have a 5-card Major.
8. If I open **2NT**, I have (1) 20-22 HCPs, (2) no void or singleton, and (3) no more than 1 Doubleton, but I **may** have a 5-card Major.
9. If I open **2C**, I have 23-24 HCPs, and I may have a "flat" hand without a 5-card suit.

Bruce: Ok. So, are these the *only* guidelines or things you consider when deciding whether or not to make an opening bid?

Esther: Well, not no, but **h**1 no!!!** I *always* evaluate my hand from multiple, and different, but compatible **wholistic perspectives considered simultaneously!!!**

Bruce: OK. So what additional hand features do you consider?

Esther: Well, my dim-witted dufus, *first*, I always think about **Controls**. Controls are (1) Aces and (2) protected Kings (e.g., K,x or K,x,x). Of course, Controls are *especially important* when playing (1) **NT** contracts or (2) slam contracts!

Bruce: OK. Anything else?

Esther: Yes, my simpering simpleton, *second*, I also think about **"Quick Tricks"**. "Quick tricks" are a measure of both playing strength on defense, but also of playing strength on offense, because these are likely winning tricks on either offense or defense. "Quick tricks" are counted by summing up for the hand:

- AK = 2 "quick tricks"
- AQx = 1.5 "quick tricks"
- A = 1 "quick trick"
- KQ = 1 "quick trick"
- Kx = 0.5 "quick tricks"

For example, if I hold **S:** AKx, **H:** Axxx, **D:** Kxx, and **C:** xxx, I hold 2.0 + 1.0 + 0.5 + 0.0 = 3.5 "quick tricks". You usually should open if your hand has **2.5+** "quick tricks". And you usually should open **2C** if you hold **4.0+** "quicks tricks".

Bruce: But "quick tricks" do not count Queen and Jack winners, what Yoda calls "Quacks". Is that wise?

Esther: Well, some players do instead count "honour tricks". For example, AK = 2.0 "honour tricks", while KQ / KJx / Kx / Qxx = 1.0 "honour trick". But I would rather take into account lower honor tricks simply as part of the *holistic evaluation* of my hand. For example, I simply elevate the impressionistic evaluation of my hand when I have Quacks, or touching card sequences even in the intermediate card range (e.g., J,T,9,x,x).

Bruce: Well, Esther, is there yet another measure useful in hand evaluation?

Esther: Well, of course, my obnoxious oligarch! It may also be important, *third*, to count "playing tricks". "Playing tricks" are a count of how many tricks you are likely to take as Declarer in a suit contract involving your longest suit. For example, if you hold **S:** AKQ8765, **H:** --, **D:** AQ, and **C:** 7532, you hold 7.0 Spade "playing tricks", and 1.5 Diamond "playing tricks", for a total of 8.5 "playing tricks". "Playing tricks" can be useful, for example, in deciding whether to open a 4-level game contract bid. If you hold 8.0+ "playing tricks", you can open 4**H** or 4**S**.

Bruce: Well, Esther, this is all quite amazing, indeed! What about hand evaluation with respect to making *Overcall bids*?

Esther: Well, my malodorous misanthrope, that is, of course, for a discussion at another time!