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Hand Evaluation, Lesson 2
with the Granovetters

The Opening Bid

Upgrading and Downgrading

Bidding at bridge is about plus scores, the bigger the better. Games are better than partscores, slams are better than games, vulnerable games/slams are better than non-vulnerable contracts, etc. Plus scores for defeating the opponents' contracts are also quite valuable, particularly if the plus score is a large penalty (i.e., "a number").

We can't always bid to a game or slam, but competing in the auction, if not to make a partscore or game then at least to push the opponents up to a contract that they can't make, is a fundamental part of the game. Bidding should be constructive or it should put pressure on the opponents. All too often, however, players *think* they are doing this, when in fact they are actually sabotaging themselves by providing a play-of-the-hand road map for the opponents, or they offer the opponents an easy way to go plus (i.e., all the opponents have to do is pass and take their tricks against your hopeless contract).

How do you know which you are doing? The point-count system is very valuable as a guideline as long as you "evaluate" your points well. When you have 13 points, you open the bidding, hoping to buy the contract or push them too high. But woodenly counting points is just not enough; there are 13-point hands that are weak hands, middling hands, good hands, great hands and even super hands. For example:

A K 3 2
 K J 5 4
 2
 Q 6 5 3

This is a nice hand. You have good support for either major, 2-3/4 quick tricks, and a singleton.

A K T 9
 K Q J 8
 2
 T 9 8 4

This is a better hand. You have three quick tricks, your spot cards are maximum and your honors are touching.

A K T 9 5
 K Q J 8
 2
 T 8 4

Better still; now you have a strong five-card suit and a powerful second suit.

A K T 9 5
 K Q J 8 2
 2
 8 4

Even better; now you have two good-looking five-card suits.

A K T 9 8 5 4
 K Q J 8 2
 2
 -

Wow - this time you have a slam opposite as little as a red-suit ace and a fit in either major!

The following example hand has the same point count but little resemblance to the previous hands....

Q 7 4 2
 K 4 3 2
 K
 A J 4 3

This time you still have support for both majors, but your king of diamonds could be a big waste, you have only 1-1/2 quick tricks and no spot cards, and your suits are weak. Suppose you hold this hand in the West seat, and the whole layout is:

West dealer
 All vul

North	
A K J 9	
Q J 6 5	
J 8 3	
7 5	
West	East
Q 7 4 2	T 8 3
K 4 3 2	T 8 7
K	7 6 5
A J 4 3	K 9 8 2

South
 6 5
 A 9
 A Q T 9 4 2
 Q T 6

West	North	East	South
1C	double	pass	3NT
(all pass)			

Opening lead: C3

After you side takes the first four club tricks, declarer, who can count up to 13, drops your king of diamonds off side and claims his vulnerable game. Now it's true that this is a very lucky result for North-South, but West has only himself to blame for flagging the location of the king of diamonds.

Let's switch the North and East hands:

West	East
Q 7 4 2	A K J 9
K 4 3 2	Q J 6 5
K	J 8 3
A J 4 3	7 5

After West opens the bidding, East responds 1H and West raises to 2H. East will no doubt push on to a 4H game, which will probably fail by a trick should the defense play trumps or find a spade ruff. Now let's replace the East hand with the South hand from the above example:

West	East
Q 7 4 2	6 5
K 4 3 2	A 9
K	A Q T 9 4 2
A J 4 3	Q T 6

This time East-West have a good chance for success in a 3NT game (the game fails only when the defense can take four spade tricks, the diamond jack doesn't fall, and the club suit doesn't come in). After West opens the bidding with 1C, East-West will reach the good game. But notice that East-West will also reach game after West passes in first seat:

West	East
pass	1D
1H	2D
3NT*	

* After all, East took a second bid, West has 13 points, and the king of diamonds is now worth its weight in gold!

In short, giving East all three possible hands around the table, we find that on two hands when West opens the bidding he goes minus, and on the third he misses nothing by passing!

Let's count the points again using Paul Soloway's guidelines. We'll assume for now that, after re-evaluating your hand, you'll need "13" points to open the bidding. If you and partner are excellent declarers, you'll adjust "13" to "12" or "12 and 1/2." As a memory aid, we can call these guidelines the "ABCD'S: of hand evaluation: