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This Week in Bridge

(20) Hand Evaluation and *The Law of Total Tricks*

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Level: 1

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General

There are many parts to developing good hand evaluation skills. It is a craft that takes time, experience, and effort to learn. One of the most important parts of developing good hand evaluation skills is to understand the power of fits (8 or more cards in a suit.) It is much easier to produce tricks if we have a fit. It is even easier to take tricks if we have large fits or double fits. We often attempt to measure these fits and estimate their value by adding length points or ruffing values to our hands. This can sometimes be an effective estimate, but large fits are generally difficult to evaluate - we end up guessing as to how many tricks we can take or how many tricks the opponents can take. We look at our tools for evaluating and re-evaluating these kinds of hands and try to help develop some judgment in these large-fit auctions.

Law of Total Tricks

When it comes to evaluating our hands and deciding how high to compete in the auction the most important thing we can consider is not our number of points but the size of our fit. The primary guiding principle for making decisions in competitive auctions is the *Law of Total Tricks*.

(Simple Version) In a competitive auction we should compete to the size of our fit: 8-card fit to the 2-level, 9-card fit to the 3-level, 10-card fit to the 4-level, etc.

This general rule (poorly named a law) is most useful at lower levels. As we get to higher levels (5-level or higher) it becomes less accurate. At these higher levels, we will want to consider information that we may not be able to figure out. We will be left to make educated (and sometimes uneducated) guesses at these high levels. This is a hard part of bridge and why preempts are so effective!

8 vs. 9-Card Fit

Fits are just as important in constructive auctions as they are in competitive auctions. The larger our fit, the more trump we will have if we end up declaring the hand. The more trump we possess, the more control we will have of the hand – we will be able to ruff more losers and we will more easily be able to set up our long side suits by ruffing them out.

To most bridge players it seems like a very small difference, but the power of the 9-card fit over the 8-card fit is enormous. Interestingly, most bridge players already have ways of showing an 8-card fit (3-card limit raise) vs. a 9-card fit (4-card limit raise) yet they do not know what to do with the information once they receive it. The key is to be much more aggressive in bidding game or slam with a 9-card fit and far more conservative when we have only an 8-card fit.

Here are some ways in which a 9-card fit is far more powerful than an 8-card fit:

Bad Breaks

When we have a 9-card fit we are far less likely to suffer bad trump breaks than when we have only an 8-card fit. In an 8-card fit, a 4-1 trump break can be devastating and often is enough to sink our entire contract. But in a 9-card fit, a 3-1 trump break is much easier to handle (even a 4-0 trump split is survivable because both of our hands have as many trump as the pesky opponent.)

After Drawing Trump

When we have a 9-card fit (say a 5-4 fit) we can draw all of the opponents' trump and still be left with trump in the short side, usually the dummy, to ruff our losers. In contrast, when we have an 8-card fit we will often not be left with many trump after we draw trump.

Examples

- When we have a 5-4 fit:
 - If the trump suit breaks 2-2 then after drawing trump, dummy (the short hand) will be left with 2 trump that we can use to our great advantage.
 - If the trump suit breaks 3-1 then after drawing trump, dummy (the short hand) will be left with 1 trump which will be helpful for maintaining control of the hand, especially if we must give up the lead.
- When we have a 5-3 fit:
 - If the trump suit breaks 3-2 then after drawing trump, dummy (the short hand) will have no trump left for ruffing.

- If the trump suit breaks 4-1 then after drawing trump, dummy (the short hand) will have no trump left for ruffing and the long hand will almost be out of trump.
- When we have a 4-4 fit:
 - If the trump suit breaks 3-2 then after drawing trump both hands will have a trump left for ruffing – this is why a 4-4 fit often plays better than a 5-3 fit.
 - If the trump suit breaks 4-1 then after drawing trump our trump are exhausted. This often means we must do our ruffing before drawing all of the trump – providing additional danger and difficulty in declarer play.

Preempting the Auction

There is another classic implementation of the Law of Total Tricks. When we open the bidding with 1-Major and partner has a bad hand (0-8 pts) and 5-card support, he jumps to 4-Major. This is an example of getting to the 10-trick level with a 10-card fit. One of the reasons partner can make this bid is that we will not confuse it for a good hand. With a good hand and support, partner would start with a 2/1 auction (with 3-card support) or a *Jacoby 2NT* or *Splinter* auction (with 4+ card support.)

In competition, we can also preempt the auction by jumping to the 3-level in partner's suit with a weak hand (0-5 pts) and a 9-card fit. The reason that we can do this only in competition is that we have other ways to show a good hand with support (*Jordan* when the opponent makes a takeout double or *cuebid* when the opponent makes an overcall.)

Conclusion

Considering the size of our fit is an effective tool for competing to the appropriate level. These concepts will not give us the correct solution on every hand, but if we use them as our guiding principle we will effectively compete in the bidding more of the time.