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Hand evaluation tips

You open 2♣: Should you then bid 2NT or a major?

❖ If you intend to rebid 2NT, you need a hand worth at least 22 high-card points in notrump.

❖ If you intend to rebid 2♥ or 2♠, you need a five-card or longer major suit, but HCPs are *not* the key. To open 2♣ and then bid a major, the key number is four:

1. Count your losers — tricks you expect to lose if partner has no help. The maximum is four.
2. Count your quick tricks. The minimum is four.
3. Open 2♣ only if you satisfy both “fours.”

♠A J ♥K Q J 10 7 6 2 ♦A K 4 ♣8.

Open 2♣. You have four losers (one in each suit) and four quick tricks.

♠A K Q J 9 8 7 4 ♥7 2 ♦6 5 ♣A.

Open 1♠. You only have three quick tricks — case closed.

♠A K Q 10 3 ♥A K Q J 2 ♦4 2 ♣8.

Open 2♣. You have three losers (in the minors) and four quick tricks.

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♠A ♥A Q 6 4 3 ♦K 7 6 3 ♣A K J.

Open 1♥. The ♠A is a downgrade, and your two longest suits are not very strong. I'd guess five-plus losers, and wouldn't open 2♣ despite the five quick tricks.

Happy together

All honor cards increase in value when combined with other honors in the same suit.

Therefore, ♦K Q 4 ♣8 7 3 in the minors is worth more than ♦Q 4 3 ♣K 8 6.

All three hands below have 13 HCP. Rank them from weakest to strongest *after* counting the quick tricks:

1. ♠A K 7 6 ♥8 4 ♦K Q J 2 ♣8 7 5,
2. ♠K J 7 5 ♥K 3 ♦Q 8 7 6 ♣A 7 3,
3. ♠K J 6 3 ♥8 3 ♦K Q 7 4 ♣A 8 7.

Hand 2 is the weakest. It has two quick tricks: ♠K = ½, ♥K = ½, ♣A = 1.

Three of the suits contain only one honor card. All honors become less valuable when “isolated.”

Hand 3 is better. It has 2½ quick tricks: ♠K = ½, ♦K Q = 1, ♣A = 1. Both of the red-suit honors are now in the same suit. Therefore, the value of each of those cards is greater than in hand 2. Whether the ♦K and ♦Q are married or just living together, they are happier, and so are you.

Hand 1 is the strongest. It has three quick tricks: ♠A K = 2, ♦K Q = 1. Note the same 13 HCP as the other two hands, but each of the five honors is supported by other honor cards.

A hand with two strong four-card suits is upgradable.

A popular misconception

I frequently hear this question: How many HCP do you need to make a limit raise in opener's major? What do you say? Did you say 7–9? Some answer 8–10 while others prefer 9–11. I also hear 10–12. So, which is correct?

I hear 9–11 HCP the most, so I'll start there. My examples will include four-card spade support and 9–11 HCP.

1. ♠A J 6 4 ♥A J 3 ♦6 4 ♣7 6 4 3.

After partner opens 1♠, this looks like a limit raise.

2. ♠Q 9 5 4 ♥K 8 6 2 ♦— ♣A J 8 7 2.

This hand is much too strong to merely invite game.

3. ♠A 7 5 3 ♥J 7 2 ♦J 6 4 ♣K 4 3.

Yuck. This garbage is not even close to a limit raise.

What's my answer? When you have a fit in a major suit, the number of HCP alone is not the answer. The correct answer is the sum of HCP plus distribution points. Teachers refer to this total as “dummy points.” Here's my answer: A limit raise shows 10–12 dummy points. □

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