

Points Schmoints – Shape Rules

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When we pick up a bridge hand, the first step invariably involves counting our points. Four for an ace, three for a king, two for a queen and one for a jack sets us on course to bid our hand. While this initial count should only be the start of a journey of evaluating our hand, too many times we are guilty of not moving any further.

Some common phrases I often hear are “How could I have bid ? I only had four points !” or “How could we bid that game/slam? We only had 22 points between our hands”

The cause frequently is lack of adequate adjustment for shape

Major Adjustment points are

1. We discover a fit
 - We support partner
 - Partner supports us

2. Five card suits at no-trumps

A message from the sage of High Card Points

Charles Goren , the man widely recognized as being responsible for popularizing the point count system, had this to say in an Australian Bridge article :

*“ Among the happy strokes of fortune to which I owe my success, point count stands high. Using it, the run of the mill player suddenly found himself with a chart to measure both high cards and distribution and to steer a safe course.....the wax with which point count undoubtedly helped to mould novices into better players has sometimes flowed onto their ears.....they are safely deaf to the siren’s song , but neither can they hear the cries of the partner they allow to be lashed to the mast. There is no better advice to the bridge player than the sign at the railroad crossing: “Stop, look and listen”. By all means **look** at the points – but **listen** to the bidding”*

1. We discover a fit

1a. We Support Partner

Supporting partner is a pleasant moment. It usually signals the end of our involvement in the bidding. It empowers partner to take control and set the direction for whether we are bidding a partscore, game or slam.

Shape related adjustments, when supporting partner, depend on the number of trumps we hold.

With four trumps, add 1 for a doubleton, 3 for a singleton and 5 for a void.

With three trumps, add 1 for a doubleton, 2 for a singleton and 3 for a void.

The reason for the upgrade is that such shapely hands play better than their HCP count suggests. Partner can take ruffs in our hand or establish tricks in a side-suit we hold. The shape can also be useful to maintain control of a hand.

Some example hands after partner opens 1♠

(a)	(b)	(c)
♠ K87	♠ Q752	♠ K75
♥ 6	♥ AJ8	♥ K
♦ AQ54	♦ K9752	♦ Q1087
♣ 87653	♣ 6	♣ J1092

Hand (a) is worth at least an invitational raise, if not more. Nine plus two = 11

Hand (b) is worth a game force. Ten hcp plus three for the singleton = 13

Hand (c) is not worth an upgrade. Singleton honours rarely carry their full weight

Hand (c) illustrates a key point. Avoid upgrades with negative features

Avoid shape adjustments for singleton honours (♥K), short honours (♠Qx), two honours doubleton (♦KQ) and Aceless hands.

1b. Partner Supports Us

The parallel case is when partner announces a fit for us

Add one point for the fifth trump and two points for each extra trump then on

Add one for a doubleton, two for a singleton and three for a void.

Evaluate these three hands after 1♠ – 2♠ start to the auction :

(a)	(b)	(c)
♠ AQ8654	♠ KQ965	♠ AQ1054
♥ AJ104	♥ AKJ65	♥ Q5
♦ 3	♦ -	♦ KJ76
♣ 42	♣ 965	♣ Q9

Hand (a) started out as 11 points. After the fit, we can add three for trump length (1 +2) and two for the singleton. A total of 16 points. I would let that ten of hearts sway me into an aggressive game bid of 4♠ at teams scoring. At pairs scoring, a 3♥ game try bid is enough.

Hand (b) started out as 13 points. After the fit, the upgrades include one for trump length, three for the void and one for the five card heart suit. It has grown into an eighteen point monster. An easy 4♠ bid

Hand (c) started out as 14 points. Despite the fit, its hard to justify an upgrade. One for the extra trump can get us to 15 on an optimistic view. The doubleton queens are not pulling any additional weight.

Review of Adjustment Points after a fit

	Doubleton	Singleton	Void	Extra trumps
3 trumps for partner	1	2	3	
4 trumps for partner	1	3	5	
Partner supports us	1	2	3	1,2,2....

A good memory aid is that 3 trumps for partner is the same as partner supporting us. Supporting partner with 4 trumps is better than either option so rates higher.

2. Five card suits at no-trumps

A five-card suit at no-trumps resembles a trump suit with a fit at suit play. When both hands are balanced, we are likely to aim for setting up tricks in this suit. The more cards we have in it, the more tricks we rate to make.

When opening no-trumps or responding to a no-trump opening, add one point for a five card suit and two points for every extra card.

(a)	(b)	(c)
♠ Q76	♠ QJ8	♠ Q32
♥ AQ7	♥ A7	♥ J8652
♦ K10975	♦ 942	♦ Q75
♣ K9	♣ J10542	♣ QJ

Hand (a) is an easy upgrade to a 15-17 (or 15-18) no-trump. There are no defects in the hand and the five card suit is very attractive.

Hand (b) opposite a 15-17 no-trump starts off as eight points. The five card suit, once partner bids no-trumps, takes us up to nine. Depending on your style, it is now worth either 3NT or an invitational sequence. I like 3NT.

Hand (c) opposite a 15-17 no-trump starts off as eight points. The five card suit argues for an upgrade but the lack of aces and kings will be telling in the play. Aces and Kings take tricks, queens and jacks hope to take tricks on lucky days. This hand is worth only a transfer to hearts and giving up

Examples from Practical Play

Hand 1. NOT 2011 Semi Finals, Set 2

West	East
♠ J643	♠ AK10982
♥ Q10	♥ J
♦ K9864	♦ 753
♣ A10	♣ K42

Hans	Nunn
P	1♠
3♠ (*)	4♠

(*) Actual table auction was artificial but the message was the same as a limit raise.

The East hand, after the fit, reassesses to 10 HCP (ignore the jack), three for trump length (2+1) and two for the singleton = 15 total points

Hand 2. NSW State Open Teams 2011, Swiss Match 6

West	East
♠ 86	♠ Q10943
♥ AK106	♥ Q9532
♦ A1086	♦ Q42
♣ 854	♣ -

Gill	Bloom
1♦ (2♣)	X (3♣)
3♥	4♥ (!)

After the ♥ fit, the East hand turns from six bad points into a monster. Five for the void makes it eleven and we have not yet accounted for the fifth trump in support of partner.



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