



Ask Jerry

Well-known teacher and player **Jerry Helms** answers your bridge questions.
Send your questions to askjerry@jerryhelms.com.

Dear Jerry: My partner and I come from two different bidding schools. My partner learned “college” bridge 40 years ago, Goren style, while I’ve been learning the “modern” methods of hand valuation.

My partner’s books say that both opener and responder should add points for short suits. This is not the way I was taught, but when I asked several other players, they all agreed with my partner. I believe you once addressed this issue at a mini-lesson I attended. Can you elaborate?

—D. D., Newark, NJ

Dear D. D.: Can I elaborate? A good friend, Jerry Cartright, once compared me to CNN...once you get me started, I just go on and on.

First, a little background. Charlie Goren and I have been at odds over hand evaluation for years. Most, if not all, of his literature suggests that opener should add 3 points for any void, 2 points for a singleton, and 1 point for a doubleton. I respectfully but vehemently disagree.

Consider this hand.
Per Mr. Goren: 14 ♠ A 8 7 3
high-card points plus ♥ —
3 distribution points ♦ A K 8 6 2
for the heart void. ♣ Q J 7 5
That results in a 17-point, medium-strength opening bid.

Per Jerry: What response from partner is most likely when holding this hand? Would it be so surprising if partner’s longest suit were hearts? If the auction were to conclude with any number of hearts as the final contract, would it ever occur to you to proudly table the dummy proclaiming 17 support points? Similarly, if the bidding ever ground to a halt at any level of notrump, is this hand really worth 17 points? Methinks not!

Hand evaluation might better be called “guesstimation.” Using some type of guideline, you attempt to guess the probability that the cards you hold will take tricks on either offense or defense.

The quality of points matters, the concentration of points matters, 10s and 9s matter, long suits matter, and short suits may or may not matter. Aces and kings are slightly undervalued by traditional point-count systems; queens and jacks are slightly overvalued.

Connected honors are more valuable than scattered honors. A good long suit is better than a bad long suit. Sometimes, in a suit contract, shortness merely stops a loser, but other times it both stops a loser and creates a winner.

I would consider the example hand worth a hefty 15 points or so: three quick tricks—the ♠A and ♥A–K—, plus connected honors in a five-card suit. After opening 1♦, if partner were to shockingly respond 1♠, my emotions would skyrocket, perhaps resembling the classic James Brown song, “I Feel Good”!

From my perspective, spades are now established as trump, making the heart void clearly valuable. In fact, I would reevaluate this hand and add a full 5 points for the void, bringing the total from a sound minimum, past medium, and into a maximum 19+ hand with which I would insist on game opposite what could be a meager 5 or 6 points.

Why 5 points for the void? If the ♥A were led, my void is worth more than that particular ace!

Enough about basic evaluation.

Perhaps the crux of your question is this: Is shortness equally valuable in both dummy and declarer’s hand?

Usually not. Compare these two seemingly similar yet very different six-card layouts where spades are the trump suit:

NORTH (DUMMY)

♠ 9 8 7

♥ 8 3 2

	N	
W		E
	S	

SOUTH (DECLARER)

♠ A K Q J 10

♥ 7

In this layout, with the shortness in declarer’s hand, exactly five tricks are available. If the opening lead is the ♥A followed by the ♥K, declarer can ruff to prevent a loser, but declarer cannot create a winner.

NORTH (DUMMY)

♠ 9 8 7

♥ 7

	N	
W		E
	S	

SOUTH (DECLARER)

♠ A K Q J 10

♥ 8 3 2

In this layout, with the shortness in dummy, seven tricks are available—unless the opponents lead trumps. By ruffing twice in the short hand, losers are prevented and winners are also created.

Except for something called a “dummy reversal,” ruffing in the hand with the most trumps stops losers but doesn’t create winners. Ruffing in the short hand stops losers and creates winners. For this reason, I think it is a mistake to automatically add full value for short suits in the hand with the longer of the two trump holdings.

In general, the hand that is going to be declarer should value high cards and length, while the hand that is going to be the dummy should value high cards and shortness. —JH