## Upgrading and Downgrading

### Part 1: Evaluating your hand

1. Counting points, shortness and length only gets you so far.

2. What are the negatives? What are the positives. Are your honour cards worth their full HCP value?

3. These are things I'm working on. You're such an experienced group of good bridge players, you may find these ideas old hat - I'm hoping, though, there may still be something here for you by bringing some of this together to consider as a whole. I'm not saying I'm right on all of these things - these are the thoughts I'm working through.

4. History of bridge - point count became popular in the late 40's and transformed bridge. Before that, bidding was based on conclusions about the playing strength of your hand, with a focus on the value of controls (QT's). Some players were good at that. Some were hopeless. Point count bidding levelled the field, but could only go so far. If you read bridge books by old, cantankerous bridge players, they rightly complain about the zombie approach to using point count, as if all A's, K's, Q's and J's were created equal - HCP's are a guide to evaluating your hand, not the final decider. Unless you actually consider whether your points are likely to be useful, you will not be an effective bidder.

5. *Here's the basic principle*: as a general rule an honour only has its full point count value if it is working with other values in that suit: other honours, intermediates, or a long suit.

You can sometimes get a good idea of how an honour will work from your hand: an isolated doubleton J is likely to be worth less than part of a sequence, like JT9xx. Or when it's combined with an A, K or Q :)

6. You can sometimes get a good idea of how an honour will work from listening to the bidding, to find out if it is in a suit that P has, or likely to combine with values P has, and therefore will help. Or in a suit that the Opp's have, and therefore might have little value.

9. You can't say that an A is worth 4 points and leave it at that:

Axx AQTx Axxxxx A

The usefulness, and therefore the value, of the A in each of these cases depends on your contract and your P's hand.

10. *Overkill - surplus honours*: Suppose P bids 1H and you have AKQJ of H's and other values - are they worth a full 10 points?

98765 AKQJ?

98765 AKxx?

If the suit splits 2-2, the Q and J in your trump suit will have no more value than little cards, and would be more useful if they were in a side suit.

### Part II - Particular Examples of Upgrading and downgrading

1. Opening bids in a suit.

What rules do you use to determine whether you have enough values to open a 1 bid? - Rule of 20 (you can open at the 1 level even without 12 points, if your HCP added to the number of cards in your two longest suits equals 20 or more).

Are these opening hands?

**KQ98 43 KQJ98 96?** this is made up to show a reasonable application of the rule of 20

**9843 KQ QJ986 K9?** my P and I ended up in 3N, down a bunch, after this hand was opened 1D.

**K Q JT876 A76543?** Opp's decided to open this hand 1C and got into trouble, with opening bidder justifying her actions by the Rule of 20

### Q54 KQ7 KT862 QT?

I passed, adjusting my point count because I had no A's, and too many Q's. But passing this one didn't work out well - P's hand was A76 J8543 A K865, and bidding went

### P (1C) 1H (1S)

2C (P) ? P decided she didn't like her hand enough to make a game try, and her trumps were too poor to get excited. I'm not sure that's correct, with all of this shape and controls. But getting to 4H is definitely easier if I open 1D, which I assume most people did. I still think that this hand is better treated as having limit values, and would only open a similar hand if my best suit was a bit stronger (so it's a useful lead direct).

**Q54 KJ5 QJ86 K54** here, the rule of 20 helps a lot: 12+7 doesn't get you there - it tells you a flat hand isn't usually as valuable as a hand with 2 reasonable suits. I would pass. But if P decides to open it, that's fine with me - my job is not to tell P how to bid, but remember what P's approach to the game is, and fit with that.

What is often left out, when bridge players are taught the rule of 20, is that your points must for the most part be in your 2 suits. If you use the rule of 20 to open a minimal hand, and your hand has a substantial part of its values outside your 2 suits, you are regarded as playing "Very light" openings. When my P did this in a Regional in Olympia, we were told we had to mark that on our Convention Cards (at the top, just above the Forcing Openings check boxes).

I don't really like the Rule of 20. I prefer the Rule of 22: Length of 2 longest suits + HCP + 2 QT's. If the total is 22 or more, then you can open at the 1 level with less than 12 points. Using the rule of 22 rather than the rule of 20 means that P can rely upon you to have some minimum level of defensive strength when you make a 1 level opening bid.

But this is always a matter of partnership style. And with one P, I play the rule of 18 - always leads to wild situations!

### 2. Responding to an opening bid

Does everyone play 2/1? What kind of hand do you need to make a 2/1 GF bid?

### (1) Your hand is: **AK7 J642 K3 J953**

P opens 1S.

Is this a GF hand or a LR? 2 QT's and 12 points. A common rule of thumb is that you can bid 2/1 if you would have opened the hand. Would you open this hand? Probably.

Do the J's have any value when your P opens 1S?

If you treat this as a limit raise, then all is good, your P will stop in 3S. If you treat this as a GF, you will be in 4S-1.

Same hand, what are your thoughts if P opens 1H instead of 1S?

The hand now works quite differently. You have only 1 unsupported J, and you have controls in 2 of the side suits, as well as 4c support for P. This would definitely be a Jacoby 2N bid.

(2) Do these hands have the same value?

P opens 1H and you hold

- 1. J54 A43 KQ2 QT54 Is this a GF hand?
- 2. **T54 Q432 AJ KQ54** What about this one?

Both are technically GF hands, but your chances are much better with the 2<sup>nd</sup> one. The first hand was discussed in a BB article, where experts uniformly downgraded it to limit values. The 2<sup>nd</sup> hand is an example of "in and out valuation": The idea is that, if you have a fit with P, any A's and K's you have in suits "outside" of your trump suit, are more valuable for P than in if thay are "in" the trump suit. So a If P bids 1S and you are Responder, holding **QJ54 A43 K432 42** is a much better hand than **AK54 Q43 J432 42**, even though they each have the same HCP total.)

3. Major suit raises

P opens 1S - ?

P opens 1H - ?

Are these all limit raises?

- (1) J874 AJ3 Q63 QT5
- (2) **Q873 A73 943 A32**
- (3) 987 AK42 Q43 Q43
- (4) A42 QJ54 K76 J94
- (5) A42 J542 K76 QJ4

The 1st hand, with all those Q's and J's, is overvalued at 10 HCP's. One or more of them is likely to be worthless.

For the 2nd hand, the A's are nice. But they are still not enough to overcome the 4333 shape.

So whether P opens 1H or 1S, raising to the 2 level is the limit of either of the first 2 hands. (This is from Mike Lawrence, Counting at Bridge, Hand 32).

My thoughts on the 3<sup>rd</sup> hand: it has 11 points, but is flat with unprotected Q's and probably calling this a limit raise is too generous as well.

The 4<sup>th</sup> hand has 11 points, and is flat, but using in and out valuation, is much better - controls in side suits, with 4c support.

And hand 5 is even better.

4. P opens with 1C/D/H/S

If P makes a 1 bid, what are your rules for responding?

Mine: I will keep the bidding open if:

- I have 6 HCP's or more,
- I have an A,
- I have any K and Q

What about 2 Q's and a J? I will keep the bidding open with less than my rules if I'm prepared to play at the 4 level if P decides to put me there next bid :(

So, with Jxxxx and shortness, you can respond with fewer than 6 points. How many fewer? That's something I'm still working out!

5. Inviting game after P opens 1NT

What are your rules for inviting if P opens 1NT?

Mine are:

- usually, with any balanced 9 count

- an 8 count with at least some of my values in a 5c suit.

Is this an invitational hand after P opens 1NT? A96 KQ T7 987532

I think there are 2 many negatives - the KQ tight is a lot of value wrapped up in a doubleton. And your long suit without any top honours may not produce any tricks. And even if you can set up the suit, good opp's will be busy killing your entries before that takes place.

I passed 1NT with this hand (at matchpoints - at IMPs, I'd invite game). Everyone else managed to get to 3N, down 1 or 2.

Is this an invitational or GF hand opposite a 1NT opening bid?

## 865 KT9 9872 AJ9

- when figuring out whether your hand is invitational or GF opposite a 1NT opening bid, how often do you consider the power of 8's, 9's and T's?

- Rule of 16 and valuing intermediates: Add HCP plus 1 point for every card that is an 8 or higher. If the total is 16 or more, you have a GF hand in NT (not in a suit!)

- in the example, you have 8 HCP, plus 9 points for cards that are 8's and higher, for a total of 17.

- using that rule, this is more than an invitational hand - this is a 3N bid.

5. Opening 1NT

- what is your range? 15-17? 14+-17?

Is this a 1NT opening bid? KJ9 AT4 KT754 K5

I opened 1D - and my 2 well known Canadian expert opponents, after the hand, expressed surprise. This hand was a clear 1NT opener from their perspective.

You have:

- teamed honours
- a reasonable 5c suit
- controls rather than Q's and J's
- 2 T's and a 9!

I play regular BBO challenges against local experts who always beat me - and one of the things they do that is very effective is to routinely open good 14 counts with 1NT.

What's happening here is that your hand is way too good for a 1NT rebid. The only way to get to game when P has limit values opposite this hand is to upgrade.

If you open this hand 1D, and then rebid 1NT, P will not try for game with lots of hands where game is a lock - that's why it's important to upgrade appropriate hands.

Of course, how aggressively you upgrade or downgrade, depends upon the rules you and your P use for inviting opposite a 1NT opener, or where opener rebids 1NT. If you know that P will not invite with a hand that has the values for making game, then you have to appropriately upgrade or downgrade to take that into account. Either that, or miss out on lots of reasonable games.

Is this a good 1NT opener? **KT AT9 AQT87 KJT?** 

No, it is way too strong - with all of the interior strength (the 7's, 8's, 9's and T's), combined with honours, as well as very a nice 5c suit, which is very likely to be a source of tricks - this is better than a lot of 18 and 19 counts you can come up with. When you are at the top of the range of a limited bid, be careful you are not ignoring all sorts of positives that remove it from range! Again, the problem is: if you open this hand 1NT, there are all sorts of hands where partner will have values less than the usual rules for an invitational hand - a balanced 8 count, or a good 7 count, for example - where game is a lock, but P won't invite. So you can't afford not to upgrade in these cases! Open 1D and rebid 2N.

What about: QJ2 AJ4 AK K854?

A balanced 18 count looks like an automatic 1C opener, planning on rebidding 2N. But there are so many negatives - the hand is flat, the long suit does not have interior strength, nor is it much of a "long" suit so not a likely source of tricks, and too much value is tucked into the AK doubleton of D's - this is probably worth 17 or less, and opening 1NT may very well work out much better.

6. Opening 2NT

What would you bid with this hand: KQ AKQ A876 J876

An experienced player I played against opened this 2N, thinking that was a reasonable upgrade.

What do you think? What are the negatives?

- with KQ tight and AKQ tight, you have 14 HCP locked up in 5 cards - not teamed with anything.

- your J is largely unsupported.

- so there is no reason to upgrade this hand.

- if anything, this might be a reasonable 1NT opening bid. (but upgrading or downgrading any hand by 2 points is usually going too far).

What about: KJ7 AQJ3 KT3 AJT?

I opened this 2N in the Victoria Regional playing against 2 grandmasters. Results were tragic!

But I asked better players what they thought and the consensus was that this was worth an upgrade.

For some, the rule for upgrading a 19 count to 2N is that you need a reasonable 5c suit.

That's my current working rule :)

When I become a better declarer, maybe I will try upgrading balanced 19 counts....

7. Position of cards

# Q83 982 KJ3 T765

(1D) 1S (P) ?

If you bid 2S, you buy the contract, but P will go down 3.

What's wrong with this hand?

- it's too balanced

- your main values are in front of the opp who bid this suit, and you're pretty much guaranteed this will be the opening lead.

- your QS is in P's suit, but you have no help in H's or C's.

# K96 A63 7642 T85

(1S) 2H (2S) ?

- another flat hand and the KS is wrongly placed. 3H is unlikely to work out well.

- you have only 3c support. With 4c support, and these values, the Law of Total Tricks is working in your favour - also, when you have a 9c fit, opp's may be slow to double

- this hand is from Mike Lawrence, who said pass.

- But there is a general principle at matchpoints: don't let your opp's play at the 2 level once they've found a fit!

- vulnerability is a factor.

this is also a know-your-opp's /know-your-field kind of situation. You can get away with it if you think your opp's won't double. Or if you expect most others holding your hand will bid 3H.
so I'm not arguing with ML - playing in 3H is unlikely to work out well - but you also need to put pressure on your opp's - so sometimes you end up playing poker, rather than bridge.

# 8. Strength of Field?

How should you use these principles?

Does it make a real difference in competitive situations?

I think it depends on the strength of the game.

Vancouver club games, players tend to be highly aggressive - if you spend your entire time downgrading, you will probably do poorly in these games... unless you like to defend and you trust your P to defend accurately.

Playing matchpoints, the stronger the field the more it pays to make reasonable upgrades and downgrades, and play a less aggressive game.

If you are playing in a tournament in an experienced open field, against players who defend accurately, playing aggressively with the wrong values will cost you.

#### Part III - Summary

1. What are the negatives? When are honour cards not worth full value?

(a) Q's and J's in general are overvalued.

(b) isolated honours. To work for you, honours need to be:

i. connected to other values in your suits: the Q in a sequence such as QJT or AQ42 is more valuable than Q54 or Q5.

ii. part of a long suit (with the idea that you can promote smaller cards in the suit)

iii. connected to values in your P's suits: Q54 is worth more if it's in a suit that P's bid than if it's in an unbid suit, or a weak suit you have bid.

iv. combined in short suits: KQx is worth more than KQ tight. AK tight may be worth a full 7 points, but more often it represents a lot of your values that will not work with your other cards (unless partner has length in the suit).

v. a special category of isolated honours is singleton honours: A's, K's and Q's - it's always difficult to figure out how to value a singleton K or Q, unless P bids that suit. Everyone seems to like singleton A's, though - it looks like a singleton A combines the best of both worlds - HCP's and shortness! But it's very easy to overvalue - 4 HCP plus 2 or 3 shortness points? 6 or 7? But if you do that, you will often be disappointed when the singleton A turns into just 1 trick :(

The problem with a Singleton A is that it often faces low cards which means it does not combine to gain other tricks.

vi. isolated Q's and J's in the Opp's suits - tend to give them no value at all.

vii. honours in the Opp's suits that are positioned poorly: Having the KJx in a suit is usually great if your RHO has bid it...but may not have any value if bid by your LHO.

viii. Q's and J's in the partnership's combined long suits are often overvalued.

### 2. Positives:

i. controls outside your trump suit,ii. honours teamed with other honours in your hand or in your P's,iii. 9c fits and unbalanced hands

#### 3. How do you take these principles into account?

It's possible to go on identifying negative and positive factors, but these are a good start for trying to figure out if point count valuation has done a good job of helping you figure out just how good your hand is in the circumstances.

How do you take these factors into account?

- what do you do right now?

- it's possible to adjust point count by deducting points. Common adjustments are:

(a) subtract a point if your hand is 4333

(b) subtract a point if your hand has no ace

(c) subtract a point if you have shortness in P's first bid suit

I don't usually do these kinds of adjustments. I take the HCP valuation, and then consider whether I have negative or positive features.

### 4. Does this cover everything? Not by a long shot!

**Conclusion and the major take-away:** be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of your hand. This will sharpen your overall visualization, *because it makes you focus on how the hand will be played*. By doing this kind of evaluation as a general principle, you will find you will continually sharpen the accuracy of your bidding. It's a journey, and this is part of your road map to being a better bridge player.