

BRIDGE JUDGMENT

Judgment in bridge is nothing more than experience. That's it!

The more you play the more you learn to pay attention to certain warning signs and "bell-ringers" - the plus features and minus features of a bridge hand that tell us all, from novice to expert, when to bid more and when to stop bidding.

The difference in judgment between the novice and the expert is simply the amount of experience he has had at the table. And of course, there is another important difference: the expert also pays attention to, and *learns* from, his experience. AJxx in RHO's suit may mean something quite different to Giorgio Belladonna than it does to Mrs. Guggenheim.

To the average bridge player it may seem almost miraculous that his expert opponents know when to stop in 3♠ making three, while his own teammates were in the "normal" 4♠ going one down when every card was wrong. And he wonders, "How did they know to bid on to 5♠ over our 5♥ save? Our teammates were practical and took their plus score, but we lost 9 IMPs: -650 to +300."

The expert player - the experienced player, the guy with the great judgment - is not a magician or a fortune-teller. He has simply learned to pay attention to what he hears and sees, and to add up the pluses and minuses of a hand and come up with an educated guess about which action will be right more often than wrong.

EMOTIONS

One reason why the expert has better judgment than the new player is that he is realistic and objective. He is emotionally detached from his decisions. He analyzes the clues available and makes a calculated, hopefully unemotional, decision. The less experienced player is often overly optimistic. And he is not always logical and unemotional. He *wants* to make 4♠, so he bids 4♠. Or perhaps he is a pessimist and worries too much about what will go wrong. Trumps may be 5-0 and he is so afraid of going for a number that he fails to press on with a normal, good offensive hand.

Again, experience is the cure. As you play more hands you become more objective about, and detached from, your results. The cockeyed optimist gets tired of going down. He sees that it is his own fault and stops overbidding - because he wants to win more than he wants to make 4♠. And the cautious pessimist sees that bad things don't happen so often, and that he is losing IMPs too often to the optimist. He learns to start bidding his cards. Each moves more toward the middle, toward more rational decisions. Judgment improves!

Courtesy of K.T.McCallum

FOUR HANDS - FIFTY-TWO CARDS

Perhaps the major reason judgment is easier for the experienced player is that he is looking at the whole deal, not just at his own hand. And, in addition, he considers *all* of the pluses and minuses of the deal, not just one negative feature or one positive feature of his own hand.

The new player has tunnel vision. He can only see his own hand. The more experienced player has given up tunnel vision in favor of paying attention to all four hands at all times. He's expanded his vision and awareness to extend to every possible aspect of the deal. The more experienced the player the more likely he is to have a newspaper diagram of all four hands in his head from the moment the first bid is made.

So how does the aspiring player learn to do this?

THERE IS NO SHORTCUT. You must gain experience at the table in order to know what is going on around you, what your hand is worth, who has what, and who can take how many tricks. Consider that there is a vocabulary of only 17 words permitted to describe the hands. And, as if that weren't difficult enough, you can see only 13 of the 52 cards. It's no wonder that many players who have played for a lifetime never learn to "see" the entire deal. Certainly, a player who has played bridge for 50 years is experienced. But he hasn't always had the kind of experience we are talking about.

If you are serious about becoming a good player you have to make some effort along these lines. You must make your experience count. You have to put some real work into it. It does not come naturally to most of us. It is difficult at first to all but a very lucky few.

CONSTRUCT THE HANDS

The first step you can take in the direction of acquiring some bidding judgment is to develop the habit of constructing all of the hands as soon as the bidding starts. If you find this too difficult at first, then focus only on constructing your partner's hand. When that becomes easy for you to do, work on constructing the opponents' hands. If you know the distribution of all four hands you are much better placed to know how many tricks each side can take. Already, you have developed some "judgment." Don't worry if you aren't good at it at first. Just keep doing it and eventually (sooner than you think) you will find that it is quite an easy thing to do.

PLUSES AND MINUSES

As we've seen, the short definition of "bidding judgment" is "experience." The long definition might be as follows:

Judgment at bridge is recognizing a hand's plus features and negative features, weighing them all in the balance, and making an intelligent and informed conclusion about what tricks your side is likely to take, and what tricks the opponents are likely to take.

In a nutshell, when a hand has a lot of pluses, you bid aggressively. This is usually easy to see, of course. Conversely, when a hand has a lot of minuses, you bid conservatively. This is not often difficult either. The truly difficult hands are those which have few of either, or some of each. Unfortunately, this is the case on most of the bridge deals you will see. There will be some pluses and some minuses, and it is often difficult to know which is most relevant or important at the moment. Only the experience of years at the table will help you "balance the scales" and make the right decision most of the time.

But some careful thought about each of the plus and minus features of a deal, and its relative importance when examining the circumstances of a specific deal, will help you to make better decisions starting now. So let's take a look at some of them.

You're probably familiar with many of these factors already:

Pluses

When a hand contains two or three of the following features, it is probably a *good* hand, i.e. the deal lies well for your side. A larger portion of the "Total Tricks" will belong to your side.

1. **The opponents are bidding your short suit(s).** A singleton in the suit they are bidding to a high level is a great holding if you are thinking of bidding on yourself. It's exactly one trick better than a doubleton. And a void is two tricks better!
2. Your **short suits are being bid on your left, your long suits on your right.**
3. **Purity:** Your honors are working - Aces and Kings in your suits, no "Quacks" in the opponents' suits.
4. **Good Fit.** Remember the Law of Total Tricks. The more trumps we have between us the more tricks we can take.
5. **Double Fit.** There will be a lot of tricks available to both sides.

6. **Fitting Honors** in partner's suits. Kx and Qx are worth far more than their hcp value. Compared to the same holding in LHO's suit, they may be more than doubled in value.
 7. **Length in RHO's suit.** The hand lies well for you when your length is over RHO's length. You will be able to ruff losers in the dummy without fear of an overruff.
 8. **Good suits.** Good suits mean lots of tricks if we are allowed to declare.
 9. **Good spot cards.** T9876 . Grand slams have been made because declarer held the six-spot over his RHO's five-spot. They are much underrated by the average player - but, an 8 or 7 IS higher than a 5 or a 4, and will win the trick. You cannot win a trick on power with a deuce, trey or four-spot.
 10. **Good intermediates** in your own suits (QJT9). Perhaps the most ignored, and underrated feature by the average player. QJT98 will ALWAYS take 3 tricks as a trump suit. AK432 can only guarantee two tricks. But, the average player will underbid the prior holding because he has only 3 points, and overbid the latter because he has 7, when the QJT98 holding makes for a considerably better hand. However, that said, don't overdo it. Take note that QJT98 opposite partner's 765 has two definite losers; while AK432 opposite 765 may have only one loser.
 11. **Unbalanced Distribution** - Long suits, singletons and voids. Two-suiters. When you see these things you know you have lots of tricks.
 12. **4441.** A better hand for NT than most people imagine. Why? You have 3 possible suits to develop. No other bridge hand has three potential sources of tricks.
- .When you see these factors in your favor on a deal you may bid a little more than usual. Perhaps a LOT more if you see a lot of pluses. But be wary. Some pluses do not necessarily mean that you should declare, but only that the hand lies well for your side. If they are bidding your long suits, and your hand is a "PLUS" hand, it's very likely that you'll want to get out your red cards (double) and "get yourself a basket."

Minuses

The following factors are indications that the hand does not lie so well for your side. Your share of the total tricks may be less than your opponents' share.

1. **Three small** cards in RHO's suit
2. **Doubletons** in suits bid by both opponents
3. **Minor honors** ("quacks") in the opponents' suits. Those Queens and Jacks are of little or no value on offense, and even on defense may prove to be useless.
4. **Lack of spot cards.** QJT9 will take 2 tricks on power. QJ32 may take none at all.

5. **Flat distribution.** 4x3 is the worst. No ruffing value. Only one long suit, i.e. only one source of tricks.
6. **No five-card suit.** No length tricks available.
7. **Lack of Primes.** When we have no Aces and Kings, whether we declare, or defend, we won't take so many tricks as our high-card points might suggest. Those tricks belong to the opponents.
8. **No fit.** We won't take as many tricks as we will with a good fit. If we suspect we have at best a 7-card fit, it's a definite negative sign.
9. **Misfit.** A big trouble sign. When you have a 5-5 hand, or a 6-5, and partner is bidding the other two suits, you know you may not take a lot of tricks, even when you have a lot of high-cards.
10. **Bad Suits.** QJT9876 is a certain 5 tricks when your suit is trumps. AQ5432 may take only two tricks on a really bad day. (I've seen a hand where it took only one!) But many players bid more with the second holding because it is 6 hcp, and underbid the first because it is only 3 points. x
11. **Bad Position.** You have Kx in LHO's suit and xxx in RHO's suit. It's looking good for them and bad for us. Or perhaps, LHO is bidding your long suits, RHO is bidding your short suits. Your finesses won't work, their's will. You won't make as many tricks as your high-cards may indicate. If you bid at the wrong moment you may very well be doubled, and the result will not be a pretty thing.
12. **Opponents are preempting.** Things will not be breaking well. A good time to slow down the bidding. Good games and slams will go down.

When you see one of these "problems" in your hand, bid a little less. When you see more than one of them on the same deal, you may bid a LOT less than you would normally. You are now exercising good judgment!

So what it all boils down to is this:

POINTS DON'T TAKE TRICKS

- Good suits take tricks. Bad suits don't.
- Good fits take tricks. Misfits don't.
- Well-positioned honors take tricks. Under-their-suit honors don't.
- Prime cards take tricks. Queens and Jacks are questionable.
- Fitting honors in partner's suits are gold. In their suit, they are paper.

Learn these bridge truths, apply them at the table, and your "judgment" will improve automatically = and dramatically.

Courtesy of K.T.McCallum

RECOMMENDED READING

Mike Lawrence: Judgment at Bridge