



Ask Jerry

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Dear Jerry,

A friend just returned from one of your recent seminars. She was particularly impressed with your explanation of short-suit evaluation. Could you explain it for me?

Hannah

Hi Hannah,

Let's start with some history about evaluating for distribution. In the 1940s, Charles Goren expanded Milton Work's 4-3-2-1 Point Count System for aces, kings, queens, and jacks to suggest certain values for short-suit holdings. According to Goren, prior to finding a trump fit, the total worth of a hand should be the sum of the high-card points plus the following: 1 point for a doubleton, 2 points for a singleton and 3 points for a void.

As dealer, you hold:

♠A 9 3 2 ♥— ♦A K 5 4 3 ♣Q J 8 7.

Goren would have suggested that with 14 HCP plus three distributional points for the heart void, your hand was in the intermediate range of 16-18. I strongly disagree. Wouldn't it be shocking if you open this hand 1♦ and your partner responds 1♥?

Irrespective of how the bidding continues, if the final contract becomes any number of hearts, will you happily table this dummy and proclaim your intermediate strength? What if a series of bids leads to the conclusion where your partner becomes the declarer in a notrump contract? In each case, not only is the heart void not a positive, it

is, in fact, a negative.

My personal decision would be to ignore the heart void for now because I have no idea whether it is a good thing or a bad thing. I would count the five-card diamond suit as a plus factor because it might help create winners in any final contract.

Holding the identical hand, it might be pertinent to consider what your reaction would be if you open the bidding 1♦ and your partner responds 1♠. Perhaps it would be something that James Brown made famous years ago: I feel good!

Fifty percent of your bidding problems are effectively resolved: We will play some number of spades, and at some point, I will table my hand for you to be declarer. The only remaining issue is how many spades to play. Your 14-point hand has now grown in value. Goren also suggested re-evaluating to reflect post-fit values, and I agree with these adjustments:

Post-fit hand re-evaluation

1 point for a doubleton
3 points for a singleton
5 points for a void

Here's part of the thinking: Say an opponent leads the ♥A against a spade contract. The play of a low spade from dummy wins the trick, making it perhaps more valuable than the 4 points assigned to the ♥A.

Without trying to be too wordy (something I am often guilty of!), do not add value for short-suit holdings until you know your shortness is valuable.

Another consideration is where the short suit is located. Look at two different partial hands with spades as trump.

1.	West	East
	♠ 8 5 2	♠ A K Q J 10
	♥ 9	♥ 8 6 3

2.	West	East
	♠ 8 5 2	♠ A K Q J 10
	♥ 9 8 7	♥ 5

With each of these hands, declarer loses the first heart trick. But if hearts are continued, declarer can ruff and win the second trick. The big difference? Ruffing in the hand with the short trump holding (No. 1) both stopped a loser and created a winner, while ruffing in the hand with longer trumps (No. 2) stopped a loser but did not create a winner.

My editor will not allow me to continue this sermon much longer. To wrap it up, shortness held in the hand with the most trumps is not as valuable as shortness held in the hand with fewer trumps.

Oops! What about when trumps are evenly divided? That must wait for another day. ■