Evaluation of the Hand – Point Count Adjustment.

We start off with a very basic concept. The universally accepted Milton Work method of point count evaluation. It was first introduced back in 1915 and is still going strong: -

Ace = 4, King = 3, Queen = 2, Jack = 1.

This is widely accepted and very simple. It does, however, sometimes need adjusting.
A trivial example would be a thirteen card suit, this is clearly worth more than 10 pts.

It is generally accepted that this is the best method to use provided some corrections are allowed. The Ace (and King) are slightly undervalued. There are various theories as to how much to 'add on' for each Ace, or deduct for an Ace-less hand. I prefer to keep it simple, and just bear in mind that Aces and Kings are 'good' and that Queens and Jacks (Quacks) are not so good. Quacks are often virtually useless in suit contracts, especially if defending. Re-evaluate up or down accordingly. Now what about 10's? Clearly undervalued at zero. A ten is often significantly better than a 2 (but not always). It all depends upon the context, a ten in a long suit is worth a bit, a doubleton 10 is usually not. A ten accompanied by a J,9 or even another honour is often good.

Aces High

As indicated above, Aces are excellent cards. In a suit contract, the ownership of the Ace of trumps is often critical. It often enables declarer to remain in control; if defenders hold the card, then they can hold off till the correct moment, unlike any other card, you will not loose it if you hold up. An Ace in a side suit may also enable you to obtain the lead and discard losers before the opponents regain the lead: -

West	East 1	East 2	Both Easts end up in 4♥. East 1 loses the first 4 tricks. East 2 has an Ace in place of 2 Queens and 2 Jacks. He proceeds to make an overtrick. The ownership of ♣A stopped the rot in that suit and enabled losing ♣'s to be discarded.
♠ 63	♠ QJ74	♠ 9874	
♥ AQ64	♥ KJ932	♥ KJ932	
♦ AKQJ	♦ 7	♦ 7	
♣ 632	♣ QJ10	♣ A94	

Now what about NT contracts? Surely Aces are not so important? – Not so. If you have a weak suit, say xx opposite Axx, you can safely hold up for 2 rounds and maybe cause communication problems for the defence. Also, an Ace in opponent's suit may enable you to get the lead and run 9 tricks before they run their 5+: -

West	East 1	East 2	Surely a KJ is as good as Ax in a 3NT contract? West ends up in 3NT. With dummy 1, the defence took the first 7 tricks. With dummy 2, the contract is cold on any lead. The only difference is that there is an Ax instead of KJ.
♠ 63	♠ AK42	♠ AK42	
♥ 64	♥ KJ32	♥ A732	
♦ AKQJ43	♦ 102	♦ 102	
♣ K32	♣ 986	♣ 986	

So, aces are extremely valuable in both suit and NT contracts;you should give yourself a good + if holding Aces, and a – for an Ace-less hand.

Intermediates

Here we consider the 10's, 9's and even 8's !

Just consider the following hands. All are a balanced 15 count, so qualify for a strong 1NT opening (or 1NT rebid if using a weak NT), ….or do they?

Hand A	Hand B	Hand C	Clearly Hand C is better than Hand B which is better than Hand A. Hand A is
♠ K64	♠ K108	♠ K109	not even worthy of a strong NT opening.
♥ AQ64	♥ AQ94	♥ AQ109	Hand C, on the other hand, is not only
♦ QJ4	♦ QJ8	♦ QJ10	worth a strong NT opening, but should
♣ QJ3	♣ QJ9	♣ QJ9	go to 3 opposite a 2NT raise!

Responder	Holding this hand and playing a strong NT, the bidding should be: -	
♠ 75	Hand A:	1♣ - 1♦ - 1NT - pass
♥ J5		
♦ A9632	Hand B:	1NT - 2NT - pass
♣ K642		
	Hand C:	1NT - 2NT - 3NT - pass

Let's have an example of the power of intermediates: -

You are East and partner has opened a strong NT which you obviously raise to three.

West	East A	East B	With a balanced 11 count opposite 15-17 it should be easy. So why did partner go down with East A and make with East B after
♠ KJ3	♠ Q652	♠ Q1095	a ♥ lead? Both hands are balanced with at
♥ A64	♥ K73	♥ K109	least two stops in every suit!
♦ A10632	♦ J75	♦ J98	Surely an easy 3NT? The answer is that the
♣ K5	♣ AJ4	♣ AJ10	East A hand is not worth 11 pts whereas East B certainly is, these intermediates solidify the suits

and in this case are worth well over one point in all. In this particular example the intermediates in the ♦ suit make it easier to set up and the intermediates in the other 3 suits make them far less prone to attack.

Unproductive Honours

What is the combination ♦ KQJ worth? Cleary a nice solid sequence, so very handy in NT; is it worth 6 pts or more (or less)? Consider the following example.

West	East	Strong NT:		Weak NT:	
♠ KQJ	♠ 1097	1NT	3NT	1♣	1♦
♥ A108	♥ KQJ			1NT	3NT
♦ K97	♦ A842				
♣ Q864	♣ 973	See below for how this hand should be bid.			

Now both players have evaluated their KQJ holdings as 6 points. So they have a combined 25 points with bundles of intermediates and probably only make 7 or 8 tricks, why? The answer is that KQJ is not worth 6 points. Something like KQJ5 is worth 6 pts and KQJ65 is worth well over 6 points. Honours are worth more if they are in long suits (or long suits are worth more with honours, however you like to look at it).
There are numerous examples of unproductive honours, all of which should be downgraded. Some examples are: -

KQ, AK, Qx AQ, A, K, AQJ etc.

So how should the hand above be bid?

West	East	Strong NT:			Weak NT:	
♠ KQJ	♠ 1097	1♣	1♦	(1)	1NT	pass
♥ A108	♥ KQJ	1NT	pass			
♦ K97	♦ A842					
♣ Q864	♣ 973	(1) In our system, we bid 1NT here, which will be passed.				

Both players should downgrade their KQJ holding to 5 pts. Their good intermediates are balanced out by flat shape and lack of a 5 card suit.

At this juncture, let's have a break and a light-hearted look at a real-life example from the Camrose 2002 final, an International championship involving the Republic of Ireland and the four nations of the UK. This hand was played 4 times, and only once was 3NT avoided (this was when an ex-partner and colleague of mine, Tim Reese, opened 1♣ for Wales and correctly resisted any temptation to rebid NT after the opponents had intervened and supported in ♠'s). Indeed, I suspect that the only other thought to enter his mind was to double and collect the 500.

West	East
♠ KQJ	♠ 106
♥ Q974	♥ KJ5
♦ AQJ	♦ 10843
♣ QJ5	♣ K842

However, there was no need to be greedy, and occasionally these internationals have their bids; so doubling 2♠ is certainly dangerous at teams. Collecting 200 was a fine result on this partscore (!) hand. Let us first consider how we would bid the hand with no intervention.

West opens with? The hand is not worth 18 pts, the KQJ needs downgrading, as does the AQJ. The hand is totally flat and the only 'suit' contains a lonely Q. The hand has less than average Aces for the high card count and it is only 1 card short of a Quack symphony. This hand barely warrants a strong NT opening!

So, playing a strong NT, we open 1NT and partner passes. Playing a weak NT, the bidding goes 1 ♣ - 1♦ - 1♥ - 1NT - pass or 1♣ - 1♦ - 1NT - pass if you play Walsh. If East were to (incorrectly) reply 1NT to our 1♣ opening we would pass (as I said, this hand is certainly not worth 17 points which is what a raise to 2NT would mean here) and even if we did stretch, East would pass the 2NT try. The East hand is worth just 7 pts; it has reasonable shape and intermediates but is Ace-less and the ♦ suit has no honours.

So we have a pretty easy auction to 1NT (or 2NT if both of us overbid). But what if the opponents interfere and get to 2♠? Without interference, we are happy with 1NT; after the opponents have advertised a 5-3 ♠ fit and we have 3 Aces missing and are assured of a ♠ lead, it would appear to be masochistic to bid 3NT. But three internationals did! I'm sure that Tim had the correct amount of sympathy and told them where they went wrong.

The Lonely Honour

Just a word about 'lonely' honours. An example from above is Q974. This is not usually a very desirable holding, with the Q not being supported by another honour. However, if partner has bid this suit it is a good holding; partner is almost sure to have honours, so we would not downgrade this.

Fitting Honours

The opposite of the lonely honour is the fitting honour. The following examples show why you should upgrade when partner has bid the suit. The theory holds equally well for queens or kings. We shall first consider the same Q974 holding.

West	East 1	East 2
♠ AK63	♠ 9742	♠ Q974
♥ K8	♥ Q73	♥ Q73
♦ A9643	♦ KQ7	♦ KQ7
♣ 32	♣ QJ6	♣ 964

Clearly 4♠ is a good contract with East 2 It appears that a fitting Q may be better than an outside Q and J.

West	East 1	East 2
♠ A863	♠ KQ42	♠ KQ74
♥ AK864	♥ 973	♥ Q73
♦ 86	♦ Q73	♦ 973
♣ A2	♣ 964	♣ 964

Qxx should also be upgraded if fitting. In this example, West opened 1♥ and, of course, the 4-4 ♠ fit was located. With virtually identical hands, both Easts bid perfectly: East 1 refused the game invitation but East 2 bid game.

West	East 1	East 2
♠ AK103	♠ QJ942	♠ QJ942
♥ 862	♥ 9753	♥ Q974
♦ AK96	♦ Q3	♦ 93
♣ Q2	♣ A6	♣ A6

Even Qx should be upgraded if partner bids the suit. West opened 1♦ and the bidding proceeded: 1♦ - 1♠ - 3♠ - ? (or an equivalent game try). This time, East 1's holding was upgraded and he bid 4♠. East 2 fails if he bids on. The ♦Q3 had become a fitting honour, whereas the ♥Q974 remained lonely.

'Bad' holdings such as ♥ KQJ may also turn good. If partner opens or overcalls 1♥ (5 card suit) then this holding clearly needs upgrading.

♠ J93	Sometimes you have to re-evaluate later in the auction. You are playing a
♥ A10875	strong NT and partner opens 1NT; you transfer and then bid 2NT after opener's
♦ QJ96	2♥. The hand is only worth an invitational bid. Partner then bids 3♥. This shows
♣ 2	a minimum, but with ♥ support, the hand is now worth a shot at game.

Touching Honours

Now we shall consider honour combinations such as KQ, QJ, KJ etc with one or more additional cards in the suit. Is there a great deal of difference between QJxx and KJxx apart from the fact that the latter is worth 1 point more? The answer is yes. And in fact there is an analogy with an opening lead problem. Suppose you are on lead and have to choose between leading from either AQ63 or KQ63 against a NT contract. Most people would lead small from the KQ63 - why? Because this is good if partner holds either the Ace or the Jack. If you lead from AQxx then partner has just one 'filler', the king. The same principle applies in hand evaluation. If you have, say, a queen and a jack then they are far more useful together in the same suit (with at least 1 more card) than in separate suits.

Perhaps I need to demonstrate what I am getting at. Consider West 1 and 2. On the face of it they would appear to be of equal strength and you would like to play in 3NT opposite a balanced 12 count and either will do, won't it? Maybe, but partner has the East hand shown, a quite respectable 12 count. So which out of West 1 and 2 would you prefer to hold? Many people would prefer West 1 as it has honours in all suits.

West 1	West 2	East
♠ KJ76	♠ QJ76	♠ A94
♥ K92	♥ KQ6	♥ A83
♦ A96	♦ KQ9	♦ J753
♣ Q74	♣ 974	♣ K105

In fact, West 2 is far superior. It has three examples of our 'touching honours' and 3NT stands a decent chance of making whereas West 1 needs a lot of luck.

Why has the West 2 hand turned out to be better fitting? Because the two KQx combinations both found a touching honour with partner. So, holdings such as KQx(x), QJx(x) and J10x(x) are a plus factor compared to lonely honours or suits such as AJx(x), AQx(x) or KJx(x). Touching honours are twice as likely to find a fitting honour with partner. For the same reason, a holding such as QJ10x is far better than QJ9x.

Hand A	Hand B
♠ KQ76	♠ KQ7
♥ QJ53	♥ QJ5
♦ A96	♦ A96
♣ 74	♣ 9874

One important point about these touching honours. We have seen above that KQx is a good holding as you may find either the A or J with partner, but it is a bit of a shame if he turns up with AJx or AJ. When you have the fitting honours, then a long suit is a definite plus. KQxx opposite AJ is one trick more than KQx opposite AJx. For example, Hand A is far superior to Hand B.

Now consider this suit, holding the king and queen. Is the touching honour distribution (B) better? Or are you better off with an honour in each hand (A)?

Distribution A		Distribution B	
West	East	West	East
Kxx	Qxx	KQx	xxx

Generally speaking, B is better. With A you will make just one trick but with B you will make two tricks when the ace is onside (50% of the time). Touching honours are a plus.

Long Suits and Productive Honours

Just consider the following two hands: -

Hand A	Hand B
♠ AK974	♠ A8543
♥ AQ86	♥ Q864
♦ 764	♦ KJ8
♣ 8	♣ K

Now both hands have exactly the same point count and shape.But which one would you prefer to have? Clearly hand A is far superior. This is because all of the honour card are productive or 'working', i.e. in long suits. Also, the ♥Q in hand B would really like some royal support. We open 1♠ on both hands. If partner gives us a 3 card limit raise (say via 1NT forcing), we accept with Hand A but not with Hand B.

Responder
♠ QJ6
♥ KJ2
♦ A93
♣ 10942

Responder has a balanced 11 count (this hand is just about worth 11 pts as ♠ QJ6 need not be downgraded when partner has 5 of the suit), so he makes a 3 card limit raise (in our system via forcing NT). Hand A above will accept and bid 4♠ whereas Hand B should pass responder's 3♠ bid.

Let's have an example, where we combine intermediates and long suits. This time we are playing a weak NT (12-14) where a rebid of 1NT shows 15-16.

Hand C	Hand D
♠ KQ5	♠ KQ10
♥ KQ5	♥ J109
♦ Q943	♦ AJ1094
♣ K54	♣ K10

Now this time, the two hands do not have the same point count and shape. Hand C is 'stronger'. So the point count pundits open Hand C with 1♦ and rebid 1NT (15-16). With hand D they have a 'mere' 14 count, and so open a weak NT. (playing a strong NT, they open Hand C with 1NT and rebid 1NT with Hand D – the result is the same).

Responder
♠ 762
♥ A64
♦ K52
♣ A763

Responder has a balanced 10 count (this flat hand with no intermediates is not worth 11 pts), so he passes the weak 1NT opening of Hand D but goes to 3NT opposite hand C. The 'weaker' Hand D proceeds to comfortably make 2 overtricks, whereas Hand C had a real struggle, played well, and managed to go just 1 down. So what went wrong? Responder's bids were fine. Thus it must have been the opening bids.

There are a number of factors here. They just about summarises everything we have said so far in this chapter: -

We downgrade Hand C because: -	We upgrade Hand D because: -
- it is aceless	- it has an ace
- it has no long suit	- it has a source of tricks
- no intermediates	- good intermediates
- the ♦Q and ♣K are 'lonely'	- all the honours are working.

Of course, had we evaluated the hands correctly, we would have opened them the other way round! Hand C should be opened with a weak NT and Hand D with 1♦ followed by a 15-16 NT rebid. Now of course it is not just opener who has to evaluate his hand. Your partner opens a weak 1NT (or the bidding goes 1♣ - 1♦ - 1NT if playing a strong NT).

♠ K62
♥ QJ5
♦ Q763
♣ K52

What do you respond? – obviously an invitational 2NT….
Wrong! You should pass. This hand is not worth 11 points. It is aceless, is totally flat, has no intermediates and the honours are not working. It's only redeeming feature is that it contains 13 cards.

♠ A943

A look at opener's hand will confirm this. He has a solid maximum

♥ A104 but would certainly feel happier playing in 1NT rather than in 3NT
♦ A92
♣ Q83

How about this example from a recent club tournament. You hold this hand and partner opens 1♦. You obviously reply 1♥ and partner rebids 1NT(12-14). What now? Let's evaluate the hand. The hand is totally flat with no intermediates, the ♠ honours are in a short suit, the ♥ suit is weak with a lonely K, ♦'s are fine as partner bid them but the ♣'s are a joke. Is the hand worth 11 pts (2NT)? Consider possible hands for partner. I say possible, but I would not recommend a 1NT rebid on some of these (5 & 6).

East
♠ KQ6
♥ K642
♦ QJ7
♣ 753

1	2	3	4	5	6
♠ A85	♠ AJ10	♠ AJ10	♠ A93	♠ A9	♠ A9
♥ J83	♥ 765	♥ 765	♥ Q7	♥ Q7	♥ Q7
♦ A853	♦ AK108	♦ AK108	♦ A8642	♦ AK864	♦ AK864
♣ K94	♣ 876	♣ Q87	♣ A42	♣ J642	♣ J1094

Let us suppose that you do, indeed, bid 2NT with the East hand. What is the probable outcome? With hands 1 & 2, partner will pass and stands an excellent chance of going down. With hands 3 – 5 partner will push on to game and all 3 are more than dicey. Obviously there would be no story if one of these cases is what actually happened. East passed (I believe correctly) and West had hand 6, so what went wrong? Now this is something that you need to discuss with your partner, but I feel that Hand 6 is far too strong for this sequence and should open a strong NT.

So with Hand 6 I would open a strong NT. And Hand 5? Some people would also open a strong NT – fine, but if you do elect to open 1♦ then I would rebid 2♣ over partner's 1♥.

‘Big Hands’

If you hold a powerful hand, then it is more than likely that you will be the declaring side. You should then take extra account of plus features like long suits, working honours and source of tricks. Consider the following hand: -

♠ AK7	22 points and balanced, so clearly a 2NT (20-22) opener ……
♥ AJ1097	I disagree! This hand has everything going for it. It is more like 24
♦ AJ	points than 22, well worth 2♣ followed by 2NT. Let’s have a look
♣ AJ10	at partner’s hand: -
Responder:	This hand has hardly any redeeming qualities. Over a 2NT opening a bid of 3NT is automatic. However, opposite a 23-24 point hand,
♠ 932	this is well worth a go. The bidding goes 2♣ - 2♦ - 2NT – 6NT!
♥ Q54	(or responder enquires about a possible ♣ slam and then settles for
♦ K64	6NT). Indeed, declarer has a shot at an overtrick.
♣ KQ73	

Source of Tricks

Now ‘good’ long suits provide a ‘source of tricks’. This is often of critical importance in NT contracts and in slams. Consider the following hand: -

West	East	West	East	With just a combined 23 count, this stands good chances of making.
♠ K97	♠ 5	1♣	1♦	This is because ♦ KQ9643 is an
♥ AQ7	♥ 854	2NT	3NT	excellent ‘source of tricks’. If you
♦ A52	♦ KQ9643			move ♦43 to ♠43, then East would
♣ AJ106	♣ 873			pass the 2NT bid.

Evaluation of Shortage

Now how do we evaluate singletons and voids? Obviously they are of little use unless we have a fit for partner. Consider the following hand. Your partner has opened 1♠ (5 card major). What do you bid? Many people would choose a 4♣ splinter. If, as in some systems we can explicitly shows a ♣ void, then that would certainly be the choice of many people. Indeed, partner would need to have a weak hand and be unlucky to go down in 4♠, so let's give partner a strong hand.

♠ K742 ♥ K9854 ♦ K1074 ♣ -

West	East
♠ AQ8653	♠ K742
♥ J32	♥ K9854
♦ A3	♦ K1074
♣ AK	♣ -

What happens here? West has an enormous hand. He starts cue bidding, but stops in 5 (or even 6)♠'s. The opening ♥ lead goes to South's ♥AQ and North gets his ruff. Were we unlucky? To an extent, but we have to make our own luck. West clearly expected more from East. Can this problem be solved? The problem is that East has valued his void without knowing how useful it is. It is not sufficient to know that you have a trump fit. Sure, he should upgrade his hand, but only to a limit raise. But this is the real world, and East wants to show his void; you cannot do this with a limit raise? The answer is, of course, that you could not in the 20th century, but this is the 21st. Even with a basically natural system, we can now show explicitly singletons and voids over major suit openings for both invitational and game forcing hands! All is explained in a book that I will be bringing out later. For now, we just need to know not to over-value shortage unless we know it is useful.

4333 Shape (any order)

We have seen that long suits are a + factor, often providing a source of tricks. Also, in suit contracts, if you have a long suit, then you must have a short one, which may enable a ruff. Now the 4333 shape is doubly bad; no long suit and no ruffing possibility.

♠ K75
♥ J109
♦ A98
♣ KJ87

A balanced hand. 12 pts with good intermediates, so a 1♣ opener (or a weak 1NT)? Not really, the hand is not worth a full 12 pts because of the flat shape and lack of a source of tricks. Pass this hand in any position. A reasonable guide is to deduct 1 pt for a totally flat hand

Let's have an example from a 2002 international competition. What do you open as West?

West	East
♠ J62	♠ AKQ105
♥ Q95	♥ J763
♦ AK8	♦ Q3
♣ Q864	♣ 93

A balanced 12 count with a few intermediates; so 1NT (or 1♣ if playing a strong NT)? The English West got a good swing on this board simply by passing. If you open this flat heap, then there is no way that that East can sensibly stay out of game. The West hand is nowhere near any sort of opening bid; it is totally flat and the only 'suit' is rather pathetic. I cannot think of any scenario where anybody would want to open this hand (but one international did!).

The 9th Trump

Now you will often have read about the significance of having the security of a 9th trump. In this book we certainly distinguish between hands with 3 or 4 card support when a major suit is opened. However, one point that is never mentioned is that this 9th trump may be vital if it improves a known 5-3 fit into a 5-4 fit, but is not so significant if it improves a 5-3 fit into a 6-3 fit or when there is an established 4-4 fit. What am I getting at? The 5-3 fit is not always suitable for a trump contract, it is much less flexible than a 4-4 fit. So if partner opens a 5 card major, then upgrade 4 card support. If the bidding shows that partner has a 4 card major, then it is nice to have 5 card support, but 4 good trumps are usually quite adequate, so do not upgrade to the same extent.

Just to emphasise the above, the example below shows that a good 4-4 fit is better than a 6-3 fit. Playing in ♠'s, the 9th trump will not help you here.

West	East	This is a hand from an international tournament. Popular Contracts were 4♠ and 6♠ (+1 and -1). 6♣ would have got a good score. Very few reached 7♣, would you?
♠ K108	♠ AQJ943	
♥ 1052	♥ A64	
♦ 765	♦ -	
♣ AKJ9	♣ Q1083	

Positioning – Getting the correct hand as declarer

Now sometimes when we are dealt bad holdings, we can do something about it. Consider the holding Qx. Normally we would downgrade this. But look at the following deal.

West	East	Played from East, the ♥ Q7 may be waste paper. A ♥ lead to the king and down goes 3NT (♥'s do not split and the king is offside. ♦A is, of course, with the long ♥'s). Played by West there is no problem. This Q7 holding is magic. An initial ♥ lead even gives us an overtrick. When you are dealt a bad holding, try to manipulate the auction so that it becomes a good holding! Now with this Qx, it is usually
♠ A87	♠ K94	
♥ Q7	♥ A54	
♦ KJ1072	♦ Q85	
♣ A98	♣ K652	

better to be declarer in a NT contract opposite virtually any honour holding with partner, we should always try to bid NT ourselves. How do we do that? Simple, in the example above – we open 1NT with the West hand if we are playing a weak or strong NT. To 'lie' by half a point or so is well worth it in order to get the contract played by the correct hand. In this example, if we had opened 1♦, then partner would doubtless have responded 2NT. There are plenty of other examples of 'positioning', holdings such as Ax or Axx are usually best in dummy as they do not need protecting.

Later in this book, you will meet examples of how to encourage partner to get in the NT bid first if you have holdings such as Ax and Axx. Indeed, if partner cannot bid NT then it is probably not the correct strain. We will also see slam examples where it is imperative that the Qx holding is declarer in any small slam (not just NT).

Pros and Cons

Sometimes you have to balance out positive factors against negative ones.

Consider this hand. It came from a club tournament. You are playing a strong NT throughout and there are 3 passes to you. What do you bid?

♠ 975 ♥ A75 ♦ AK64 ♣ A65

1NT? You have to evaluate the hand. On the plus side, you have Aces and have values in your 'long' suit. On the minus side the hand is totally flat and lacks intermediates. So is the hand worth a strong NT? Now there are no set rules here and it is really a matter of experience and judgement. In this case, the –ve factors outweigh the +ve and you should open 1♦ (or a weak NT). This hand would be quite good if partner had opened, but since he is a passed hand it definitely needs downgrading.

What happened in real life? You (I mean me) opened 1♦, the next hand overcalled 2♣ and partner bid 2♠ (showing 5 ♠'s and 9-11 pts). What do you do now? Your hand has not changed, it is still probably only worth 4 tricks. Partner is a passed hand and it seems remote that he (actually she) can manage the 6 more required for game, so you pass.

The outcome? Partner had a 9 count and just scrambled home in 2♠ for a cold top. Virtually everybody else opened a strong NT and got way too high.

Another example from the club. You are playing a strong NT, deal yourself this hand and open….? Not a super hand but is it worth 1NT?

♠ J84 ♥ Q7 ♦ KQ94 ♣ AK106

In real life, the holder opened 1♣ and got a 1♥ response. Now the hand is definitely worth a 1NT opener, but it is too late. He rebid 1NT and his partner passed with a 10 count, making +2. The answer is that the hand *is* worth 15 points. The balanced hand with points in the longer suits, reasonable intermediates, touching KQ in a 4 card suit and that magic Qx holding all cry out for a strong 1NT opening. Sure, it is minimum, but still well worth it.

The +'s are at least equal to the –'s and youi should try to be declarer with Qx.

Playing Tricks

For most of this book, we use the 4-3-2-1 Milton Work hand evaluation as defined previously. There are other good methods (such as losing trick count) but the 4-3-2-1 method is universally accepted and is simple. For strong opening 2 bids and pre-empts, however, we do refer to the concept of playing tricks.

Playing tricks are tricks that you reasonably expect to make if you are playing the contract, and are different from defensive tricks. For the purpose of evaluating playing tricks, we assume that our long suit(s) break evenly between the other 3 hands. Now many players are confused by the concept of playing tricks. For example, a nine playing trick hand does not mean a hand that will make 9 tricks opposite a completely bust partner. The playing trick philosophy assumes reasonable breaks around the table in both points and distribution. A trivial example: -

♠ 64 ♥ AKQJ1052 ♦ 64 ♣ J7	Obviously both of these hands have only seven guaranteed tricks, but it really would be a little too pessimistic to treat the 2nd as the same as the 1st.
♠ K4 ♥ AKQJ1052 ♦ Q4 ♣ KJ	Kings and Queens are worth something.

So, the generally accepted philosophy is that Kx is ½ a playing trick, AQ(x) is 1½ etc.

♠ K4 ♥ AQJ752 ♦ 64 ♣ AQ7	This hand contains 7 ½ playing tricks. 5 ½ in ♥'s, 1½ in ♣'s and ½ in ♠'s.

When our long suit is not solid or semi-solid, the estimation of playing tricks is more tricky.

♥ KJ8652	This suit is worth about 3½ playing tricks. With normal distribution, it may make either 3 or 4.

Now this concept of playing tricks has been around for eons, and it is very useful for evaluating strong opening bids and also for pre-emptive bids. There is, however, one important point which is generally overlooked: -

The Problem with Playing Tricks with Strong Twos

The concept of playing tricks has been around for decades and that is how we evaluate our strong two openings (and has been since the birth of Bridge). But when you come to consider responder's action to a strong two opening you may realise that there is a problem. Now I would not be so pretentious (pretentious – Moi ?) as to suggest that the whole concept of playing tricks and opening twos is in error, but there is one major point that needs considering.

There is a flaw in the playing trick calculation! Take the simple example AQx. This is defined as 1½ playing tricks as the Q stands a 50% chance of making. Actually, this is incorrect. A more realistic figure is 66% as it makes if RHO or partner holds the K or if LHO leads the suit. Kx is equally undervalued at ½, it is really 66%. This flaw is easily demonstrated by considering the following suit: -

AQx opposite Kxxx

This is defined as 2 playing tricks (1½ plus ½). In reality, it is of course 3 (or even 4!).

So what is to be done? We are not going to adjust the requirements for a strong opening two bid, but *responder* does need to look carefully at his cards. In the definition of playing tricks, I say something like 'reasonably expect to make a trick' and in the case of a strong two opening it is responder who should take this under valuation of playing tricks into account. A holding such as Kx should be considered as a more than reasonable expectation of a trick, so should the Q of trumps.

Remember when we said that ♥ KJ8652 may make either 3 or 4 tricks and should be evaluated as 3½? If partner holds just ♥ Q3 the expectation suddenly springs to 5! (but if partner is void then the expectation is somewhat less).

So should we re-evaluate our criteria for a strong two? No - it is best to leave it all up to responder as he knows that opener has values and responder can readjust. Opener cannot do this as even the current calculation may be optimistic if partner is bust. We need to get to dummy to take our 50% finesses and our AQx is probably only one trick if dummy has no entry. Our 'adjustments' are only valid if both parties have some values, and only responder knows that.