

The Rule of Twenty

What are your criteria for opening the bidding with one of a suit? 12 HCPs? Good 11's? Really good 10's? Yes, HCPs are the most commonly used measure, but, as we all learned early in our bridge career, counting HCPs is only part of the story, we must also factor in our distribution.

One increasingly popular method for evaluating hands is the Rule of 20. Here is how it works. Add up your HCPs, and to that add the length of your longest suit, and your second longest suit. If the total comes to 20 or higher, then you are looking at an opening bid. Some examples:

♠ AK65 ♥ Q75 ♦ 986 ♣ K87

12 HCPs, so some might open this crummy hand on that basis alone. But add the length of the two longest suits, and we get $12+4+3=19$. Only 19 "Rule of 20" points, so this is *not* an opening bid. Nor should it be, those square hands should be devalued, as indeed they are by the Rule of 20.

♠ AK65 ♥ QT5 ♦ 98 ♣ K874

Still 12 HCPs, and still not much of a hand. But, the improved distribution gives us $12+4+4=20$. An opening bid!

♠ AQT65 ♥ Q754 ♦ 98 ♣ K8

Now we have 11 HCPs, but $11+5+4$ equals 20, and another opening bid.

♠ KQT65 ♥ AJ754 ♦ 98 ♣ 8

Yes, there is a trend here. The more extreme we make our distribution, the fewer HCPs are required to make up the magic number of 20. Here, $10+5+5$ gets us to that number.

As a corollary to the above, what is the top end of your Weak Two bids? If it is 11, then you are not following the Rule of 20 ... you cannot have a 6-card suit and 11 HCPs without reaching 20 "Rule of 20" points. A hand that good should be opened one of a suit.

Adjustments

The beauty of the Rule of 20 is that it factors in HCPs *and* distribution into a single number. But, that does not relieve us of the obligation to actually think. Just as there is a difference between a good 12 HCPs and a bad 12 HCPs, so there is such a thing as a bad Rule of 20 hand:

♠ KQ865 ♥ Q754 ♦ Q8 ♣ Q8

This one passes the Rule of 20 by virtue of its $11+5+4$. But, what an ugly 20! Those minor suit doubleton Queens are not pulling full weight, the hand is Aceless, there are no fillers ... not an opening bid!

♠ KJ865 ♥ Q9742 ♦ J3 ♣ K

This one gets to 20 via $10+5+5$. But more minor suit wastage, and, again, not an opening bid.

Conversely, just as some 20's don't cut the mustard, there are some 19's that are just too good to pass. Here is one such example:

♠ AT975 ♥ AJT96 ♦ 542 ♣ --

Only $9+5+5$, for a total of 19, but who could possibly resist opening this delicious 9 HCPs with 1♠? The void, the fillers, the Aces ... this hand isn't merely an opening bid ... it's an opening bid with extras!

So, there you have it ... the Rule of 20. It's a better evaluation method than HCPs alone ... but, don't use it blindly ... as we saw there is still room for judgment when deciding whether to open one of a suit.