

Playing Tricks

In most of the articles in this web site, we use the 4-3-2-1 Milton Work hand evaluation. There are other good methods (such as losing trick count) but the 4-3-2-1 method is universally accepted and is simple. For two sections of bidding, however, we do refer to the concept of playing tricks. The sections concerned are strong opening 2 bids and pre-empts.

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 fairly 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
♠ K4	♥ AKQJ1052	♦ Q4	♣ KJ	7 guaranteed tricks, but it really would be
				a little too pessimistic to treat the 2 nd as the
				same as the 1 st . 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 7½ playing tricks.
				5½ 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. This suit is worth about 3½ playing tricks. With normal distribution, it may make either 3 or 4.

♥ KJ8652

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

The concept has been around for decades and that is how we evaluate our strong two and pre-emptive openings (and has been since the birth of Bridge).

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.

I have not mentioned this earlier, but 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 much better if partner has values. These flaws are easily demonstrated by considering the following suit: -

AQx opposite Kxxx

This is defined as 2 playing tricks (1½ opposite 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 next section, I say something like 'reasonably expect to make a trick' and it is responder who should take this under valuation of playing tricks (when partner has something) 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 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.

Strong Twos forcing for one round?

In traditional Acol, a strong two is forcing for one round (with 2NT as a negative). This is also usually the case with the more modern Benjamin Acol System which has strong 2♥/♠ (via 2♣).

Now this hand is clearly rather an extreme example,
♠ 2 ♥ 432 ♦ 65432 ♣ J632 but you would consider yourself lucky if partner's 2 bid was not doubled, and surely it would be lunacy to bid?

There may be a better spot (unlikely), but equally well you may just be adding another hundred or so to the opponent's score or inviting a double. If game is a prospect opposite this heap partner would have opened 2♦ playing Benjamin Twos, which is forcing to game.

So let's use our common sense. As I indicated in the previous section, responder should upgrade any assets that he has; but zero is zero. As little as a king, the queen of trumps or even just 3 or 4 trumps is enough but we can only stretch so far.