

## Two Dimensional Bridge Hand Evaluation

Have you ever wondered how the bridge experts always seem to know when to stretch in the bidding and when to be conservative? The rest of the field has overbid and the expert hasn't? What does it mean when the expert pair describes their bidding as "occasional light opening"? What "occasion" are they talking about? This discussion covers the basics of a reliable technique that will allow average bidders to know when to bid aggressively and when to bid conservatively.

The secret is to be able to assess both the offensive strength (How valuable is this hand if our side wins the contract?) and the defensive strength (How valuable is my hand if the opponents win the contract?) If the hand is worth more in offensive terms than defensive terms then you should bid it aggressively. If the hand's strength is primarily defensive then you should allow the opponents to overbid. The expert can look at a bridge hand and instinctively know the balance between offensive value and defensive value. What follows is a tool that will allow the novice to do this same evaluation.

### The Two Metrics

The first metric is the normal Point Count (PC): Ace=4, King=3, Queen=2, Jack=1, doubleton=1, singleton=2, void=3.

The second metric is called "Loser Count" (LC): For suits four cards or longer, count each MISSING Ace, King, or Queen as one loser. For three card suits count each card below Queen as one loser. For doubletons we have two losers = xx or Qx; one loser Ax, KQ, or Kx; no losers AK or AQ. All singletons except singleton Ace are one loser. Total up the losers and that is the Loser Count for the hand.

### Similarity of Point Count and Loser Count

For hands that are balanced between offensive strength and defensive strength a 13 point opener (PC=13) corresponds to a 7 loser hand (LC=7). Each one down in LC (one fewer loser) corresponds to three up in PC (another king). An opener opposite an opener is usually enough for a major suit game. In PC this means a total partnership PC of 26 for game. In LC this means a total LC of 14 or less for game in a major. Typical examples:

PC=13, LC=7

spades	KQJxx
hearts	Qxx
diamonds	KJx
clubs	xx

PC=13, LC=7

spades	xxxx
hearts	Kx
diamonds	Axxx
clubs	AQx

Totals: PC=26, LC=14

PC=16, LC=6

spades	KQxxx
hearts	KQx
diamonds	KJx
clubs	xx

PC=10, LC=8

spades	xxxx
hearts	xx
diamonds	Axxx
clubs	AQx

Totals: PC=26, LC=14

### Difference between Point Count and Loser Count

While PC measures both offensive and defensive strength, LC measures primarily offensive strength. So if the opponents get the contract or your side has a misfit then using LC way over values the hand. Using the baseline above, i.e. one in LC is worth 3 in PC, we can compare the actual (PC,LC) pair for a hand and determine whether the hand is primarily offensive or defensive in nature. The table that follows is instructive for assessing the (PC,LC) pair for a particular hand:

Two Dimensional Hand Evaluation								
LC								
0								
1	Offensive							
2								
3								
4							Strong	
5							neutral	
6						neutral		
7					neutral			
8				neutral				
9			neutral					
10		neutral						
11	Weak							
12							Defensive	
13								
	0-3	4-6	7-9	10-12	13-15	16-18	19-21	22-25
					PC			

The point is that if your hand is heavily in the red you should bid cautiously—your best chances will be on defense. If your hand is heavily in the blue corner of the table then you should bid aggressively.

## Extreme Examples

PC=19, LC=0

spades	AKQJxxxxxxxx
hearts	--
diamonds	--
clubs	--

On offense this hand will take thirteen tricks with spades as trump. Defensively this hand will take no tricks. This hand has offensive strength. At PC=16 and LC=0 this hand is five levels away from neutral toward offensive in our Two Dimensional Hand Evaluation Table (2DHET). This hand should be bid aggressively.

PC=16, LC=8

spades	Axx
hearts	Axx
diamonds	Axx
clubs	Axxx

On offense, this hand will take only four tricks despite its 16 high card points. Any additional offensive tricks will have to come from partner's hand. On defensive this hand has four solid tricks—the other side is not going anywhere on this deal. A hand that produces the same number of tricks on defense as on offense is an extreme defensive hand. At PC=16 and LC=8 this hand is two levels from neutral toward defensive in our 2DHET. Despite its sixteen high card points, this hand should be bid cautiously. Better to let the opponents overbid.

## Why Loser Count Works

At first glance one might say, "This is ridiculous. You can't count Queens the same as Aces!" The presumption here is that both partners are tempering their bidding with LC considerations. So if one partner is counting his Queen as an Ace then other partner is counting his Ace as a Queen. So the net effect is that the **partnership** gets to the correct level.

## Changing Gears

If you have opened primarily on the basis of LC (the expert's "light opening") and you discover no fit with partner then you have already overbid you hand. Time to go silent and wait for this deal to blow over.

## Should You Try Two Dimensional Hand Evaluation?

Absolutely. This is the single most effective technique I have found for increasing the bidding judgment of novice players. If you already have an instinct for when to push the bidding then the 2DHET will help you to further hone your instincts.