



Adventures in Bridge

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This Week in Bridge

(3) Defining Hand Strength - “Buckets”

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Level: 1

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Introduction to Buckets

When we pick up our hand, one of the first things we do is count our high-card points (HCP) and make adjustments for length, location of honors, shape, and many other factors. Once we have a number of points, we need to figure out how to make use of that information and how to effectively communicate it to partner. We usually won't be able to communicate our exact strength to partner (we can't tell them we have exactly 14 HCP), but we will be able to give partner a general idea of the strength of our hand – a range. Our range of strength is often referred to as which “bucket” our hand falls into...

Opening Hand Strength

For opening hands the bucket strengths are:

- 12-14 pts “Minimum”
- 15-17 pts “Extra Values”
- 18+ pts “Strong”

Note: Sometimes we open the bidding when we have a distributional hand with fewer than 12 HCP. These opening bids are referred to as “Subminimum Openers.” cf. Rule of 20, Losing Trick Count

Responding Hand Strength

Once partner has opened the bidding we respond on any hand with 6+ pts. Thus, we want to classify these Responder's hands as well. The “buckets” for responding hands are listed below:

- 6-9 pts “Minimum”
- 10-11 pts “Invitational”
- 12+ pts “Game Forcing”

Note: Often we will respond to partner's opening bid with fewer than 6 HCP (We respond with any hand with 4-5 HCP if we have a fit for partner and we respond with any hand that has an Ace.) When we respond with these hands we call these “Subminimum Responses.”



Making Use of the Bucket Information

Once we know the range (bucket) of partner's hand, then if we know that we have 24 or more points together we bid game. If we don't know that we have 24+ pts (but we might have 24+ pts), then we need to find a way to invite game or decide if we should bid game. We want to find a way to ask partner is the bucket "full" or "empty" – are you at the top or bottom of the range?

Bidding Game – Fitting Buckets together

Danger – small amounts of math contained below!

Generally speaking, if we have a combined 24 pts we want to bid a game. So now we want to try to understand how these buckets help us decide how high to bid – how to figure out if we have about 24+ pts combined in our two hands!

Opener "Minimum" (12-14 pts)

<i>Responder's Strength</i>	<i>Do we bid Game?</i>
6-9 pts (Minimum)	No
10-11 pts (Invitational)	Maybe
12+ pts (Game Force)	Yes

When Opener shows a "minimum" hand (by making a simple rebid, for example) then it is clear that we bid a game with all "Game Forcing" hands. Additionally, with all "minimum" responding hands we do not bid a game. The interesting question is what we do with the invitational hands.

Maybe

When Responder has an invitational hand, we might still want to bid a game or we might not. Fortunately, since partner has not jumped (and eaten up bidding space), we can still show our invitational hand. Thus, we don't have to be the one that makes the decision – we ask Opener to decide! Opener can bid game if he is at the top of his range or pass if he is at the bottom of his range.

- (12 to Bad 13 pts) + (10-11 pts) = (22 to Bad 24 pts) : **Don't Bid Game!**
- (Good 13 to 14 pts) + (10-11 pts) = (Good 23 to 25 pts) : **Bid Game!**

Example Auction

1♠ 1NT
2♠ (12-14 pts) 2NT (10-11 pts)
___?



Opener “Extra Values” (15-17 pts)

<i>Responder’s Strength</i>	<i>Do we bid Game?</i>
6-9 pts (Minimum)	Maybe
10-11 pts (Invitational)	Yes
12+ pts (Game Force)	Yes

When Opener shows extra values (by jump rebidding his suit, for example) then we bid a game with all “Game Forcing” and “Invitational” hands. When we have a “Minimum” hand, we still might want to bid a game. We generally assume that partner has 16 pts (his average.) Thus, if we are at the top of our “Minimum” Bucket (8-9 HCP), we bid game.

(16 pts) + (8+ pts) = (24+ pts) : Bid Game!

Example Auction

1♠ 1NT
3♣ (15-17 pts) ___?

Opener “Strong Hand” (18+ HCP)

<i>Responder’s Strength</i>	<i>Do we bid Game?</i>
6-9 pts (Minimum)	Yes
10-11 pts (Invitational)	Yes
12+ pts (Game Force)	Yes

When Opener shows a strong hand (either by a jump shift or jump notrump rebid) then we bid a game with any normal responding hand.

(18+ pts) + (6+ pts) = (24+ pts) : Bid Game!

Example Auction

1♠ 1NT
3♣ (18+ pts) ___?



1NT Opener Example

When partner opens 1NT he shows 15-17 pts. In this case, the Opener starts off the bidding by showing “Extra Values.” As we saw above when Opener shows 15-17 pts with something like a jump rebid, Responder decides to bid game with 8-9 pts and to pass with 6-7 pts. Similarly, in the 1NT opening case, Responder invites game with 8-9 pts and passes 1NT with 6-7 pts.

Opener:	1NT	15-17 pts	
Responder:	2NT	8-9 pts	(Asks Opener, are you at the top of bucket?)
Opener:	3NT	Good 16 or 17 pts	(Pass with 15 to Bad 16 HCP)

Conclusion

Don't let any math or analysis in this document overwhelm you. Just think about what you are telling partner and what your partner is asking you during the auction. Understanding what question your partner wants answered is the first step to getting the answer right!