# Skat

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Skat is a three-handed trick taking game. It can also be played by four people with the dealer sitting out. This document was created by Tom Kazimiers with permission to use content from John McLeod, published on his website at *http://www.pagat.com/schafk/skat.html*. It can be redistributed under a Creative-Commons Attribution-NonCommericial 4 license (CC-BY-NC 4).

## Overview

Each player gets 10 of the 32 cards and the remaining two form the *skat* and are placed face down in the middle of the table.
The game starts with an auction of which the winner becomes the *declarer*. This player has to play alone against the other two, who play as a team. The declarer has the right to exchange the skat cards for two of the own cards. The declarer also chooses the trump suit or instead to play *Grand* (jacks are the only trump) or *Null* (no trumps and declarer must not get any tricks).
All *card points* combined add up to 120, while some cards don't contribute any points. To win, declarer has to to take at least 61 points. For the opponents, 60 points is enough to win.
Each game has a *value*, in *game points*, that depends on the trumps or game chosen, the location of the top trumps (*matadors*) and whether the declarer used the skat. The declarer generally wins the value of the game if successful, and loses the game value (doubled if skat was exchanged) if unsuccessful. The game points one wins and loses are separate from the card points (which determine whether one wins or loses)

## Cards

Skat is often played with German suits. However, French suited cards are common as well. There are 32 cards in use. For each suit there is: A K Q J 10 9 8 7:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| ♣ | clubs |  | acorns |
| ♠ | spades |  | leaves |
| ♥ | hearts |  | hearts |
| ♦ | diamonds |  | bells |
| **A** | ace | **A** | ace |
| **K** | king | **K** | king |
| **Q** | queen | **O** | ober |
| **J** | jack | **U** | unter |

## Ranking of cards and games

The ranking depends on the game the declarer chooses to play.

### Suit games

All four jacks are trump, regardless of the suit. Their ranking follows the ranking of suits: ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦. Next and also trump are the remaining seven cards of the chosen suit. This makes eleven trumps in total: ♣ J ♠ J ♥ J ♦ J **A 10 K Q 9 8 7**. The other three suits contain just seven cards, ranked: **A 10 K Q 9 8 7**.

### Grand

The four jacks are the only trump: ♣ J ♠ J ♥ J ♦ J. The remaining four suits each contain seven cards ranking from high to low: **A 10 K Q 9 8 7**.

### Null

There are no trumps. The eight cards of each suit rank from high to low: **A K Q J 10 9 8 7**. Notice that they are *not* ordered by card value.

# Deal

The first dealer is chosen at random. Thereafter the turn to deal rotates clockwise. The dealer shuffles and the player to the dealer's right cuts. Cards are dealt face down in four steps: 1. Three cards to each player 2. Two cards in the center (the skat) 3. Four cards to each player and finally 4. Three cards to each player.

## Card values

In suit games and grand, the cards have the following values:

| **J** | **A** | **10** | **K** | **Q** | **9** | **8** | **7** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2** | **11** | **10** | **4** | **3** | **0** | **0** | **0** |

## Auction

Each bid is a number which is the *game value* in *game points* of some possible game (see below for calculation of game values). The possible bids are therefore **18, 20, 22, 23, 24, 27, 30, 33, 35, 36, 40, 44, 45, 46, 48, 50, 54, 55, 59, 60** etc.. If you bid or accept a bid it means you are prepared to play a contract of at least that value in game points.

The player to the dealer's left is called *forehand (F)*, the player to the forehand's left *middlehand (M)*, and the player to the middlehand's left is *rearhand (R)*. If there are three players, R is the dealer. If there are four players, R is to the dealer's right. Throughout bidding F is senior to M who is senior to R. The principle is that a senior player only has to *equal* a junior player's bid to win the auction, whereas a junior player has to bid *higher* than a senior player to win.

The first part of the auction takes place between F and M. M speaks first, either passing or bidding a number. There is no advantage in making a higher than necessary bid so M will normally either pass or begin with the lowest bid: 18. If M bids a number, F can either give up the chance to be declarer by saying "pass" or compete by saying "yes", which means that F bids the same number that M just bid. If F says "yes", M can say "pass", or continue the auction with a higher bid, to which F will again answer "yes" or "pass". This continues until either F or M drops out of the auction by passing - once having passed you get no further opportunity to bid on that hand.

The second part of the auction is similar to the first part, but takes place between R and the survivor of the first part (i.e. whichever of F and M did not pass. As the junior player, R either passes or bids a succession of numbers, the first of which must be higher than any number mentioned in the first part of the auction. To each number bid by R, the survivor must answer "yes" or "pass". The winner of the second part of the auction becomes the declarer, and the bid is the last number the declarer said or accepted.

If both M and R pass without having bid, then F can either be declarer at the lowest bid (18), or can throw in the cards without play. If the cards are thrown in there is no score for the hand, and the next dealer deals. Here are three examples:

| F | M | R | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 18 | | |
| yes | 20 | | |
| yes | pass | | (F wins first part) |
| | | 22 | |
| yes | | 23 | |
| yes | | 24 | |
| pass | | | (R is declarer in 24) |

| F | M | R | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | pass | | (F wins first part) |
| | | 18 | |
| yes | | pass | (F is declarer in 18) |

| F | M | R | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 18 | | |
| pass | | | (M wins first part) |
| | | 20 | |
| | pass | | (R is declarer in 20) |

To remember whose turn it is to start the bidding, German players sometimes say "geben, hren, sagen" (deal, listen, speak), pointing in turn to dealer, forehand and middlehand. If middlehand forgets to begin, forehand can start proceedings by saying "I'm forehand" or "I'm listening", or "Speak to me!".

## Possible Contracts

The winner of the bidding is entitled to pick up the two skat cards, add them to your hand without showing them to the other players, and discard any two cards face down. The cards discarded may include one or both of the cards picked up, and their value counts along with your tricks. Having discarded, you declare your game. If you looked at the skat, your contract is a skat game. There are seven possibilities:

**Diamonds, Hearts, Spades, Clubs** (in which the named suit is trumps and the declarer tries to take at least 61 card points),

**Grand** (in which the jacks are the only trumps and the declarer tries to take at least 61 card points),

**Null** (in which there are no trumps and the declarer tries to lose every trick),

**Null Ouvert** (Open Null) (like Null but with declarer's cards are exposed).

You may choose not to look at the skat cards, but to play with the 10 cards you were originally dealt. If you don't look at the skat you are playing a hand game, and again there are seven possibilities: Diamonds Hand, Hearts Hand, Spades Hand, Clubs Hand, Grand Hand, Null Hand and Null Ouvert Hand. In this case no one must look at the skat cards until after the play.

If you are declarer in a Suit Hand or Grand Hand game, you can increase the value of the game by announcing **Schneider** (undertaking to win at least 90 card points), or **Schwarz** (undertaking to win all the tricks), or **Open** (Ouvert) (undertaking to win all the tricks with your cards exposed). Such announcements must be made before the first trick is made. *These announcements are not allowed if declarer has looked at the skat.* Also (obviously) they do not apply in Null games.

## The Play

Play is clockwise. No matter who is the declarer, forehand always leads to the first trick. Players must follow suit if they can. A player with no card of the suit led may play any card. Note that in Suit and Grand games the jacks belong to the trump suit, *not* to the suits marked on them. For example if hearts are trumps, the jack of clubs is the highest *heart*, and has nothing whatever to do with the club suit.

A trick is won by the highest card of the suit led, unless it contains a trump, in which case the highest trump wins it. The winner of a trick leads to the next.

If you are declarer in a **Suit** or **Grand** game you win if the cards in your tricks plus the skat contain at least 61 card points. The opponents win if their combined tricks contain at least 60 card points.

If the declarer's opponents take 30 points or fewer in tricks, they are *Schneider*. If they take 31 or more they are said to *be out of Scheider*. If they take no tricks at all, they are *Schwarz*. The same applies to the declarer - as declarer, you are *Schneider* if you win 30 card points or less including the skat, and Schwarz if you lose every trick. Note that Schwarz depends on tricks not points - if a side wins just one trick and it has no card points in it, that is sufficient to get them out of Schwarz.

If you are declarer in **Null** or **Null Ouvert**, you win the game if you manage to lose every trick. If you take a trick, you have lost and the play of the hand ceases at that point.

If you are declarer in an Open (Ouvert) contract - i.e. you are playing **Null Ouvert** or have announced Open in a Suit or Grand contract - you have to spread out your hand face up on the table before the lead to the first trick. Play then proceeds normally, and you play from your exposed hand. The opponents are not allowed to discuss tactics.

# Calculating the Value of the Game

## Suit and Grand contracts

The value of a Suit or Grand contract is obtained by multiplying together two numbers: the base value and the multiplier. The base value depends on the trump suit as follows:

| **Contract** | **Base value** |
|---|---|
| Diamonds | 9 |
| Hearts | 10 |
| Spades | 11 |
| Clubs | 12 |
| Grand | 24 |

The multiplier is the sum of all applicable items from the following table (n/a = not applicable):

| **Multiplier** | **Skat game** | **Hand game** |
|---|---|---|
| Matadors (with or against) | 1 each | 1 each |
| Game (always applies) | 1 | 1 |
| Hand (declarer did not look at the skat) | n/a | 1 |
| Schneider (one side took 90 or more card points) | 1 | 1 |
| Schneider announced | n/a | 1 |
| Schwarz (one side took every trick) | 1 | 1 |
| Schwarz announced | n/a | 1 |
| Open | n/a | 1 |

Note that all applicable multipliers count - for example

- if you make the opponents Schwarz, you count the matadors, game, Schneider and Schwarz multipliers;
- if you announce and make Schneider you count matadors, game, Hand, Schneider and Schneider announced;
- if you announce and make Schwarz you count matadors, game, Hand, Schneider, Schneider announced, Schwarz, Schwarz announced.

Open contracts are extremely rare: you can only play open if you did not look at the skat and you also undertake to win every trick. By implication, an open contract includes announcements of Schneider and Schwarz, so you count: matadors, game, Hand, Schneider, Schneider announced, Schwarz, Schwarz announced, and Open.

### Matadors

The jack of clubs and any top trumps in unbroken sequence with it are called matadors. If as declarer you have such a sequence in your original hand plus the skat, you are with that number of matadors. If there is such a sequence in the opponents' combined hands, declarer is against that number of matadors.

**Examples of matadors** (Hearts are trumps)

| Declarer has | Declarer is |
|---|---|
| ♣ J, ♥ J, ♦ J, ♥ A, ♥ 10, ♥ Q, ♥ 9 | with 1 |
| ♣ J, ♠ J, ♥ J, ♦ J, ♥ A, ♥ 10, ♥ K | with 7 |
| ♠ J, ♥ J, ♥ A, ♥ K, ♥ Q, ♥ 7 | against 1 |
| ♦ J, ♥ A, ♥ 10, ♥ K, ♥ Q, ♥ 7 | against 3 |

Note that for the purposes of matadors, cards in the skat count as part of declarer's hand, even though in a Hand game declarer does not know what is in the skat when choosing the game.

The game multiplier is always counted, whether declarer wins or loses. The calculation of the value of a game sounds something like this: "with 2, game 3, Schneider 4, 4 times spades is 44". The declarer must always be with or against at least one matador (the jack of clubs must be somewhere), so the smallest possible multiplier is 2, and the smallest possible game value (and the lowest possible bid) is 18.

## Null contracts

These are easy to score. Each possible Null contract has a fixed value unaffected by multipliers. As with all contracts, an unsuccessful declarer loses twice the value of the game. The Null values are:

| **Contract** | **Fixed Value** | **Amount lost if unsuccessful** |
|---|---|---|
| Null | 23 | 46 |
| Null Hand | 35 | 70 |
| Null Ouvert | 46 | 92 |
| Null Ouvert Hand | 59 | 118 |

These rather eccentric looking numbers are chosen to fit between the other contract values, each being slightly below a multiple of 12. (Before the rule change of 1st Jan 1999, Null Hand cost only 35 when lost and Null Ouvert Hand cost only 59.)

# Scoring

If declarer wins the game **and** the value of the game is as least as much as the bid, then the value of the game is added to the declarer's cumulative score.

If the declarer loses the game **and** the value of the game is as least as much as the bid, then **twice** the value of the game is subtracted from the declarer's score.

If the value of the declarer's game turns out to be less than the bid then the declarer automatically loses - it does not matter how many card points were taken. The amount subtracted from the declarer's score is **twice** the least multiple of the base value of the game actually played which would have fulfilled the bid.

If as declarer you announce Schneider but take less than 90 card points, or if you announce Schwarz or Open and lose a trick, you lose, counting **all** the multipliers you would have won if you had succeeded.

**Example**: Middlehand holds ♥ J, ♦ J, ♣ 10, ♣ K, ♣ 9, ♣ 8, ♠ A, ♦ A, ♦ 10, ♦ 7, and decides to play Clubs Hand. This should normally be worth 48 game points ("against 2, game 3, hand 4, 4 time clubs is 48"). Rearhand has a Null Ouvert and bids up to 46, to which **M** says yes. **M** plays clubs hand and takes 74 card points (including the skat cards), but unfortunately the skat contains ♣ J, ♥ Q. **M** is therefore with 1 matador (not against 2 as expected), and the game is worth only 36 ("with 1, game 2, hand 3 times clubs"), which is less than the bid. **M** therefore loses 96 game points (twice the 48 points which would be the minimum value in clubs which would fulfill the bid). Had **M** taken (say) 95 card points, the Schneider multiplier would have increased the value of the game to 48 ("with 1, game 2, hand 3, schneider 4 times clubs") and **M** would have won 48 game points.

A side effect of the method of scoring is that if there are four players at the table, the dealer of a hand is effectively against the declarer, winning or losing the same as the declarer's opponents.

# Variations

## Kontra and Rekontra

This variation is very widely played in social games. Either opponent of the declarer, at any time before they play their card to the first trick, may say **kontra**. This doubles the score for the contract, whether won or lost. The declarer may immediately answer with **rekontra**, which doubles the score again.

Note that it is the **score** that is doubled, not the **value** of the contract. For example suppose I bid up to 20, look at the skat, and play in diamonds. I am only with one matador, but am hoping to make the opponents schneider. One of the opponents says Kontra, and in the play I win 85 card points. As I am with 1, the game value is 18, so I have overbid (the Kontra does not affect this). So I lose based on the lowest multiple of diamonds which would have been sufficient, namely 27. I lose double because I looked at the skat and the score is doubled again for the Kontra, so I lose 108 game points altogether.

There is some variation as to when Kontra and Rekontra can be said. Some play that Kontra can only be said before the first lead (and a declarer who is Forehand must wait before leading to give the opponents an opportunity to Kontra).