

Play of the Hand – Part 2

Counting

“Counting in Bridge is like line memorization for the actor – it doesn’t guarantee success but one can not succeed without it”. – George Kaufman

Count is key to both sound declarer play and good, accurate defense. It seems it should be easy. After all if one asks a 4th grader to add 2+3+4 and subtract the total from 13 we would be dismayed if the student didn’t arrive at the correct answer. Yet many Bridge players sit down at the table and fail this simple test all the time. Similarly if 3 of the 4 players at the table hold 32 of the 40 total points it is not hard to deduce that the 4th player has 8 points. This is the case when the bidding goes 1♠ – X - ? If you are in the 3rd or 4th seat and hold 10 HCP. Opener and Doubler have approx 12 HCP each and you have 10; the 4th player can not have more than 6 HCP. It’s a quick, easy and vital assessment.

There are three parts to Counting 1) **High Cards**, 2) **Distribution** 3) **Tricks**. We will discuss these and then look at tools for the defender and declarer.

The Tools of Counting – Inference and Deduction

Deduction is a conclusion based on fact. Example: When an opponent shows out in a suit one has an exact count in that suit. An inference is a conclusion based on an assumption. Example: An opponent passes his Partners Opening bid, you can infer that he has less than 6 HCP. These are the two tools we use; Inference and Deduction. We first use them in the bidding and then in the play.

Inferences from Bidding: Many of these are items you have already encountered.

A Responder who answers 1NT has 5-10 PP, lacks support for Partners suit, has no 4-Card Major.

A Responder who changes suit at the 1-level has at least 6 HCP.

A Responder who answers at the 2-level has at least 10 PP. (unless they are playing 2/1)

A NoTrump Opener has no Singleton or void and no 6-Card suit.

A preempt Opener has 6-Cards in his bid suit if he bids 2-level; 7-Cards at the 3-level, and 8-Cards at the 4-level.

If Opponents open and raise in the same suit and your side has 5 cards their distribution is 5-3.

A 1NT Opener has a small HCP range 15-17 or sometimes 15-18.

An Opener in a Major has at least 11HCP. If you can locate 8 HCP in Openers hand Then he must have the Trump Ace. He might have both the A and Q; but he must have the Ace.

A responder who passes his Partners Opening bid has less than 6 HCP. If you later locate a K in his hand he cannot have a second K.

If a passed hand shows up with 11 HCP, she cannot have a missing Q.

Inferences and Deductions from the Play-of-the-Hand

Whenever a player shows out in a suit you have an exact count for the other three hands.

If you know the exact cards held in 3 of the hands you know the 4th hand as well.

Given a 13-Card hand, if you know a players count in 3 suits, you know the count in the 4th

In a NoTrump Contract the Opening leader leads a 2, he doesn’t have a 5-Card suit.

If an Opening leader leads a low card he doesn’t have a sequence containing an Honor in that suit

If an opening leader leads a low card it is either a singleton, or from a holding of 3 or more topped by an honor.

If as Declarer you are missing the A and K in a suit and the Opening leader doesn’t lead either the A or the K she doesn’t hold both.

If the Opening leader does not lead the suit bid by his Partner there are 3 possibilities

- a. He has a good Honor sequence of his own (it will be apparent from the lead)
- b. He holds the Ace in the suit
- c. He has a void in the suit

There is a 4th reason; the player is a novice who hasn't learned the importance of Opening leads to a good defense.

If a player discards a suit in which the Dummy holds 4-Cards he doesn't have 4 cards in that suit.¹

If an opening leader does not lead a Trump card when the bidding suggests a Trump lead it is because he holds the trump Ace.

If an opening leader leads a Trump card when the bidding doesn't suggest a Trump lead it is because he doesn't have a better option. e.g. the lead may be protecting tenace(s) in other suits; or has suits headed by an Ace.

Note the abundance of clues, many available even before POTH (Play of the Hand) goes beyond the Opening lead. Let's now discuss how these clues can be used during POTH. There are five examples that cover most everything you need with regard to Counting. We will start with the first part:

Counting High Cards

Consider this the bidding example, the opponents are silent, so no clues there.

P – P – P – 1♥; P – 3♥ – P – 4♥; all Pass

The Dummy holds ♠973 ♥J842 ♦KT3 ♣AQJ.

The Opener/Declarer hand holds ♠86 ♥AQT95 ♦AJ4 ♣KT5

The Opening leader cashes the ♠A and ♠K and continues with ♠J and you Trump. You cross to the Dummy with ♣5 so that you can take the finesse in ♥'s. The finesse loses to the ♥K, now, you can't afford anymore losers. You can draw the rest of the Trump safely, the ♣'s are safe but you are faced with having to guess which way to finesse for the ♦Q. You are fortunate that you have a two-way finesse, but having to guess which way raises the tension. LHO has already shown 11 HCP (♠AKJ, ♥K). That's not too much to remember. He Passed, so 11 HCP is all he held; your RHO has all the remaining outstanding HCP. You now know to finesse your RHO for the ♦Q!! Even if the ♠J hadn't appear the 10 HCP held by LHO suggests the same.

Counting Distribution

When the necessary information is not readily available you might be able to ferret out what you need by what is termed the DISCOVERY PLAY. This is just a line of play designed to reveal information about the hidden hands. It is generally applicable when there is one critical suit that is in question. Let's look at two examples, the first an elementary one. You are in a 7NT Contract by South. West leads the ♦9.

The Dummy holds ♠AQ5 ♥KT5 ♦K42 ♣AJ87

The Opener/Declarer (you) hold ♠KJ4 ♥AJ9 ♦AQT ♣KQT3

Declared can count 3♠ Tricks 2♥ Tricks? 3♦ Tricks and likely 4♣ Tricks. His 13th Trick must come from "guessing" the location of the ♥Q. Again it is fortunate that there is a 2-way finesse available. If it wasn't there, no guessing, the finesse has to work; if it doesn't it's also not going to work for other Declarers. When confronted with this situation it is best to play the other suits first trying to discover the distribution of suits. In "working" the other suits the Declarer discovers that LHO held 2♠'s 2♦'s and 3♣'s. LHO has 6 cards remaining, all ♥'s. Since the offense also has a total of 6♥'s, RHO must hold only a single ♥. Declarer can now play the ♥A or to the ♥A and if RHO

1 Again be wary of the beginner/novice lack of knowledge on discards.

doesn't play the ♥Q, LHO has it and is finesse-able.

Let's look a little more difficult example. The bidding has gone: 1♣ – P – 1♦ – P; 1NT – P – 3NT – P; all Pass. LHO leads ♠Q (he has at least ♠JT remaining)

The Dummy holds ♠864 ♥A95 ♦KQT7 ♣AT4

The Opener/Declarer holds ♠A32 ♥K64 ♦A98 ♣K732.

RHO overtakes with ♠K and continues suit. The overtake indicates RHO likely has only 2♠'s and is unblocking the suit for Partner. You properly duck the continuation and LHO continues the suit for a 3rd round. On this 3rd round RHO shows out, discarding the ♥3 (he probably doesn't have 3♥'s). Now Declarer can see 8 Tricks: 1♠, 2♥'s, at least 3♦'s and at least 2♣'s. The necessary 9th Trick can come from either the 4th♣, if ♣'s split 3-3 and LHO doesn't have both ♣Q and ♣J. The Contract can also be made by locating the ♦J. Testing ♣'s first Declarer leads a low card to the ♣T. RHO wins with ♣J and returns ♥Q. The Declarer ducks in both hands allowing Opponents their 4th Trick in order to gain more information. RHO is out of ♠'s so LHO is the **Danger Hand**, if you must give up the lead it is RHO you want in the lead. After all she may help you by making a bad ♦ lead – bad because that would allow you to either win a Trick with the ♦T or capture the ♦J making all your remaining ♦'s good. No luck RHO returns another ♥ which you win with the ♥A and continue with another ♥ to the ♥K. West shows out of ♥'s, discarding a ♠. You return to ♣'s cashing the ♣A and ♣K with LHO showing out on the 3rd round, discarding another ♠. So you now know that LHO started with 5♠'s, 2♥'s and 2♣'s; LHO has 4♦'s left, RHO has two. You can play a ♦ to the ♦K and return a small ♦ to the ♦A. If RHO has the ♦J it will be captured, if he doesn't LHO's 4♦'s would be headed by the J so that is in place to be captured. The essence of this example is that you do not have to always keep track of all suits or even both opponents hands. Counting one opponent and remembering the distribution of your two hands (in this case 6,6,7,7) enables you to DISCOVER the correct line of play.

Counting Tricks

Consider the following auction 2♠ – P – 2NT – P; 3♣ – P – 4♠ – P; all Pass. The Opening bid is a weak-2 bid and the Responder's bid is asking for a feature. The 3♣ bid shows a feature, i.e. ♣'s can be used as an entry into Openers hand. Another way to view the feature is: it's a stopper in that suit. You are the Partner of the Opening leader (playing after the Dummy).

The Dummy holds ♠K5 ♥KQ94 ♦AKQ7 ♣T73

Partner ♥2

(you) ♠32 ♥AT6 ♦T8653 ♣Q94

Opening lead: ♥2, Dummy plays ♥K and you capture it with the ♥A. What should you play at Trick #2? If Declarer's ♣ indicated stopper is ♣A (rather than ♣K) chances of defeating Contract are slim. Before leading you can do a suit-by-suit analysis; you have 1 Trick and need 3 more hopefully before Declarer gains control. You can see 4♠'s and Declarer has 6 so Partner has 3 but likely no winners; but if he does the ♠K will capture it; what can he lead back to you? Partners ♥ lead indicate 3 or 4 ♥'s. You see 5 and 4 have been played so Declarer has 1 or 2 left and has the ♥Q stopper for next ♥ Trick. You see 9♦'s and they have the top 3, the only chance for Tricks in♦'s is in Partner's Trumping a♦ Trick, but it's not likely going to happen on first♦ lead. Looking at the other 3 suits screams for you to return a♣; but which one? If you lead a low♣ Partner will likely win the Trick (that's 2, 2 more to go). If he wins, the only suit he can lead (so that your side can stay in control) is another♣. A♣ return on his part is going to throw your ♣Q in front of Declarer's known♣ stopper, after which you might get 1 more♣ Trick later on but that's not enough. You need 3♣ Tricks to set the Contract. Hoping that Partner holds ♣AJx, leading the ♣Q you will be able to hold the lead, to lead a second♣ through the hand with the stopper. Partner winning the second♣ Trick can then lead a contract setting♣.

In the previous example it was the defender who, using a count of the oppositions Tricks, found a way to an effective defense, but by far the more common Trick counting situation is by the

declarer. Most players learn that that when the Dummy comes down the Declarer counts his Tricks. But counting the sure Tricks is only the first step in the process of counting. In addition to the initial Trick count, one may have to combine inference and deduction about HCP, distribution and Tricks as the following illustrates. The auction proceeded 1♦ – P(you) – 1♥ – P; 1♠ – P – 3♦ – P; 3NT – all Pass.

The Dummy holds ♠JT ♥K7643 ♦KT95 ♣A5

You hold ♠K86 ♥Q85 ♦62 ♣T9764 and lead ♣T and Partner wins the Trick with ♣K as Declarer plays ♣2. At Trick 2 Partner returns ♣8, Declarer plays the ♣3 and Dummy wins with the ♣A. At Trick 3 Declarer leads the ♦K, Partner plays the ♦4, Declarer the ♦3 and you play ♦2. Trick 4 Declarer continues with the ♦T, everyone following with 8,7,6. Next Trick Declarer plays the ♦5, Partner plays ♦Q, Declarer the ♦A while you discard ♣4. Declarer now leads ♠3 toward Dummy; what should you do? Your side has won 1 Trick and they have 4. We know we can win this ♠ Trick but what's next? Deducing the ♣ layout is the key. 9♣'s have been played. Your Partner was allowed to win the first Trick with the ♣K when after Trick 2 it is clear that Declarer had the ♣A but where are the ♣Q and ♣J? Declarer must hold ♣Q, if Partner was holding it he would have played it, rather than the ♣K! And, if Partner held the ♣J that is the card he should have returned at Trick 2. Declarer must have started with ♣QJ32. A review of the bidding: Declarer bid 1♦ and rebid 1♠; he must have 4-Cards in each of those suits so he started with 4♠'s, 4♦'s and 4♣'s and thus must have only 1♥. Let's now look at the High Cards; based on bidding Declarer started with 12-14 HCP, We know about the ♣QJ and have seen the ♦AJ. To accept the 3♦ invitation and go to 3NT Declarer must have either one or both the Major suit Aces, but probably only 1. Now let's look at the Tricks: Declarer has 3♣ and 4♦ Tricks. If he has both Major Aces he has 10 total Tricks. With only the singleton ♥A there are 9 sure Tricks. The hope of setting the Contract is in the ♥ suit. Winning with the ♠K and leading the ♥Q will either force the ♥K off the board to be captured by Partners ♥A making Partners ♥JT top winners; or it will hold to be followed by your ♥8 to Partners ♥AJ. Either way the ♥ suit gives your side 5 total Tricks setting the Contract.

Counting on Defense

Counting on defense is much harder, as we have just seen. While each defender can see 26 cards they only control 13 cards and thus can not control the play so as to gain counts the way we have seen Declarers do. The Declarer does not have to signal the Dummy on the order in which cards must be played, how to obtain a ruff or gain an entry into the opposite hand. These are all important aspects in the play of the hand – for either side. It was for this reason that defensive signals were created. In another section we discuss the three common signals: ATTITUDE, COUNT and SUIT PREFERENCE.

Declarer

Declarer should pay close attention to the signals that the defenders are sending one another, because they can be as valuable to him as they are the defenders. In addition, when you are trying to DISCOVER which defender has a particular card it helps if you can get a distributional count on the suit. Example: if you decide that one defender has 5-Cards and the other 2-Cards then, simply, there is a 5-2 chance that the defender with 5 has a particular card. This line of reasoning can be extended to situations where you can't get a count in a specific suit, simply deduct the known lengths in each defenders hand and subtract each from 13. The result is the number of 'slots' in each hand that could be filled by the missing card. For example, defender #1 had opened a weak two bid in ♥'s; you as declarer have 5 ♥'s between the two hands leaving 2 ♥'s for defender #2. If perchance you are wondering where the ♠K might be: defender #1 has 7 'slots' and defender #2 has 11 'slots' available for the ♠K, so there is a 11-7 chance that defender #2 has it.

* Declarer has "shown" 8 HCP, 1 Ace gives her 12, 2 Aces → 16, the more probable HCP count is 12-14 in this sequence.