

# Counting For Better Bridge

Paul Tobias  
6/03/2023

This lecture will look at how counting high card points and counting suit distributions can be a significant help for declarer play or defense.

## Counting Points: Use What You See, What was Bid and What Was Played

*Point counting should begin the minute you see dummy. Add your points to dummy's points and then add in points for any hand that bid (based on the likely point range the bid showed). Subtract from 40 and you have a very good idea of how many points are in each hand.*

***On Defense:*** *As the play progresses, note every point partner and declarer show up with and you will often be able to place all the missing high cards well before the end of the hand.*

***On Declarer Play of the Hand:*** *Add your points and dummy's points and points shown by opponents bidding to help locate missing honors.*

## Example 1 (Declarer Counting Points)

West (LHO) opened 1NT and you and partner reach an ambitious 4 Spade contract, Partner comes down with 9 points and you have a nice 14 point hand. What does East (your RHO) have? **Answer:** LHO, Declarer and Dummy total 38 to 40 points (add 15 to 17 to 9 plus 14). So your RHO has at most 2 points.

### North

1084

KJ9

A732

J64

### South

AKJ93

Q84

KJ9

73

### West   North   East   South

1NT   P   P   2S

3C   3S   P   4S

West leads the AC, continues the K and the 2 to partner's Q, which you ruff. Plan the play.

**Solution:** COUNT! Clearly all remaining points are with West and a Spade finesse will lose, as will a diamond finesse to the KJ. So you hope West has a doubleton trump and play the A and K. When the Q drops doubleton you can be pretty sure West's distribution is 2-3-3-5 and the diamond Q will probably not also drop doubleton. The best (and probably only) chance is to play West for the diamond Q and East for the diamond 10. Lead the J and when West covers with the Q win the Ace and finesse the 9. Result making 4S!

Note that the diamond "backward" finesse depends on having the 9♦ – if declarer had the 10 she would have 2-way finesse options and could finesse the Q directly. Without the 9 or 10 declarer would have to hope West opened 1NT with 2 doubleton Queens and play for the drop. Here's the whole hand for reference.

	♠ 1084 ♥ KJ9 ♦ A732 ♣ J64	
♠ Q7 ♥ A106 ♦ Q86 ♣ AK1098	Declarer: South  Contract: 4S	♠ 652 ♥ 7532 ♦ 1054 ♣ Q52
	♠ AKJ93 ♥ Q84 ♦ KJ9 ♣ 73	

### Example 2 (Declarer Counting Points)

This example makes use of counting and using what was learned from the bidding to make an aggressively bid game.

	♠ J9xx ♥ KQxxx ♦ xx ♣ QJ	
♠ K ♥ Axx ♦ QJxx ♣ 109xxx	Declarer: South  Contract: 4S	♠ xx ♥ 10xx ♦ AKxx ♣ Kxxx
	♠ AQ10xxx ♥ Jxx ♦ xx ♣ Ax	

The auction begins with East passing. South opens 1S, North invites with 3S (because of the 4-card support) and South raises to 4S. West led the Q of diamonds and then a diamond to East's K. East, afraid losers would go on dummy's hearts, then led a low club which declarer won in dummy and then led the J of spades. After East played a low spade declarer rose with the A and dropped the singleton K!

Why go against the usual odds and not finesse? Because declarer had been counting and knew East had already shown up with 10 high card points (the A & K of diamonds and the K of clubs). If East also had the K of spades, he would have opened the bidding. So, West has that card and the only hope is that it is a singleton. Even if there were 4 or 5 outstanding trump, playing for the drop would be the right play.

### **Counting Suits: Use the Bidding, What You See and What You Can Discover**

Get in the habit of reviewing the bidding and forming a first guess at the opponent's distributions

Count the cards in each suit visible between you and dummy. Subtract from 13 and you know how many remain in the other 2 hands. For example, if you have 8 cards visible then there are 5 remaining. These will most often split 3-2, but occasionally 4-1 or (rarely) 5-0.

- **Watch count signals between defenders for more clues – but they may not be honest when it is clear it will help you!**
- **As cards are played, use all the information you have gained to refine your picture of how the cards lie.**
- **Be careful to give honest count signals to your partner on defense when partner will have to decide when to hold up or win tricks or what cards to keep when declarer runs a long suit.**
- **Practice “*Discovery Play*” as declarer – this is when you play side suits first, instead of the key suit with, say, a 2-way finesse – in order to “discover” more information about the opponents hands. This often tells you who is longer in the key suit (and thus a better finesse candidate) and sometimes even tells you who has the missing Q.**

**Note 1:** There are many variants of this kind of counting. The key is to make a guess of the suit distributions based on the bidding and lead and modify this guess as you learn more. For example, if an opponent bids a (at least) 5-card major and then rebids 2NT, she is probably 5-3-3-2 but may possibly be 5-4-2-2. If a NT opener did not support partner's transfer to a major and elects to play 3NT, he is probably 5-3-3-2 or 4-4-3-2, with 2 in the transferred major. If a player who opened a weak 2 bid later follows to 3 rounds of your trump suit, he is most likely 6-3-2-2 or 6-3-3-1.

**Note 2:** Partnership agreements about, and careful attention to, suit length signals are important aids to counting – but declarer is also watching the cards you play so don't always be honest when it might help declarer more than partner (this also holds for "attitude" signals). Declarer should be aware of this and not expect honesty from players when it helps declarer more than the defense.

**Example 3 (Counting Distributions With a 2-Way Finesse)**

**Dummy**

AQ9  
765  
A432  
K102

**Declarer (South)**

K10865  
842  
K7  
AJ5

<b><u>RHO</u></b>	<b><u>You</u></b>	<b><u>LHO</u></b>	<b><u>Partner</u></b>
1H	1S	Pass	4S

***Opening lead:*** Jack of hearts

RHO overtakes the heart jack and cashes the AKQ. LHO pitches two small clubs on the second and third heart. RHO exits with a spade and you cash the AKQ. RHO follows with the J74 of spades. LHO follows with the 2 and 3 of spades and pitches a small club on the third spade.

Your contract depends on guessing the location of the club queen. With nothing else to go on, you might finesse RHO for the queen just because he opened the bidding and is therefore more likely to hold the missing high-card points. If you're counting the opponents' cards, though, you might come to a different conclusion. And if you use a discovery play, you may be able to insure three club winners.

**Your Thought Process:** Focus your count on opener (RHO). So far, you know 9 of his 13 cards -- 6 hearts and 3 spades. You've seen 10 of his high-card points -- the AKQ of hearts and the jack of spades. Did he need the club queen to open the bidding? No. He could hold the diamond queen or QJ, which would give him 12 or 13 points.

**Extra insurance -- the Discovery Play:** Before you make the critical play in the club suit, play on diamonds to gather more information about RHO's distribution. Cash the king and ace and trump one of dummy's small diamonds. RHO will follow to all three diamonds, so you now have all the information you need to take three sure club tricks. You may also see more of RHO's high-card points on the diamond tricks, but the most important information here is his distribution.

You now know 12 of RHO's 13 cards -- 3 spades, 6 hearts and at least 3 diamonds. That leaves him with a void or singleton in clubs, so you have a "marked" finesse. Cash the club ace, just in case RHO has the singleton queen. If the queen doesn't fall, finesse LHO for his known queen.

	♠ AQ9 ♥ 765 ♦ A432 ♣ K102	
♠ 32 ♥ J ♦ J965 ♣ Q97643	Declarer: South  Contract: 4S	♠ J74 ♥ AKQ1093 ♦ Q107 ♣ 8
	♠ K10865 ♥ 842 ♦ K8 ♣ AJ5	

## Example 4 (Counting Distributions and Discovery Play)

You are South playing 6NT after opening 1NT and partner inviting with 4NT.

	♠ KQ4 ♥ AQ ♦ AQ4 ♣ 86542	
♠ 86 ♥ 9875 ♦ 108 ♣ KQ973	Declarer: South  Contract: 6NT	♠ J973 ♥ 632 ♦ 97532 ♣ 10
	♠ A1053 ♥ KJ104 ♦ KJ6 ♣ AJ	

West leads the 9H against your 6NT contract – there was no opposing bidding to give you any clues. You have 11 top tricks and chances for a 12th trick in spades if either the J drops doubleton or the suit is 3-3 or East has 4 to the J and you play the K and Q and then finesse. How should you play?

Try to “discover” as much as you can before you play spades. You can play 3 rounds of diamonds, 4 rounds of hearts and 1 club. What will you learn? That West had 4 hearts but only 2 diamonds – leaving 7 cards that were either clubs or spades, while East turns out to have 5 diamonds and 3 hearts – leaving less room for spades and clubs. It looks like you have to play the top 3 spades and hope the J drops.

Is there any way to possibly discover more? Yes. Before cashing all the hearts and diamonds lead the J of clubs. Win the return and then cash all your winners outside of spades. What happens? East shows out on the second club (when you play your AC). So, East has 5 diamonds, 3 hearts, 1 club and therefore 4 spades. Play the K and the Q of spades and confidently finesse the 10!

Apart from “discovery” and “counting” this hand also illustrates another important declarer tactic - ***if you have to lose a trick at some point, and there is no danger losing it early, it is often best to lose the trick as soon as you can.*** Many good things can happen – as is the case here! (The exception is when you are planning an *endplay* – a subject covered in other lectures).

### Example 5 (Declarer Adding Inferences From Lead to Improve Counting)

	♠ AJ10x ♥ Qxx ♦ x ♣ QJ10xx	
♠ ♥ ♦ ♣	Declarer: South  Contract: 4S	♠ ♥ ♦ ♣
	♠ K9xxx ♥ xxx ♦ ♣ AK9xx	

After 2 passes, South opens the bidding 1S and North raises to 4S. The 10H is led and wins, followed by a heart to East's J and then the heart K – all following suit. At trick 4 East leads a low club. How should you play spades?

You know East has 8 points in hearts. What else can you infer based on the lead? If West had the A and K of diamonds, that would have been a clear cut opening lead – so East has at least one of those cards. That gives East a total of at least 11 points outside of spades. Give East the QS and she would have opened the bidding – so West has the QS and you should play the K and then finesse West for the Q if it does not show when you lead towards the AJ10.

### Example 6 (Counting Distributions and Discovery Play)

After West opens a weak 2S, North and South bid very aggressively to 7H. West leads the KS and you win and play 2 rounds of trumps and everyone follows. Counting tricks you need either the QJ of clubs falling or an extra diamond trick to make 7H. So you play the A, K and ruff a club. Assume all follow but the QC and JC do not both fall. How should you play diamonds?

	♠Ax ♥AK9x ♦Kxx ♣AK10x	
♠ ♥ ♦ ♣	Declarer: South  Contract: 7H	♠ ♥ ♦ ♣
	♠xx ♥QJxxx ♦AQ10x ♣xx	

Count out West's hand. You have seen at least 3 clubs and 2 hearts. Assume 6 spades from the weak 2-bid. That leaves only 2 diamonds at most. Play diamonds carefully by starting with the A and then the K in dummy. That way, if West has a doubleton J, you drop it. If it doesn't fall you confidently finesse East for the JD and make 7H.

## Summary

Make counting an automatic routine part of your Bridge game. At first it will seem to require too much memory and effort but as you practice counting, the stronger your Bridge memory will become. Next, improve or augment your basic counting with discovery plays and add inferences based on the bidding and cards led. Soon, you will reach the stage where counting allows you to make better plays both on defense and as Declarer.