

Counting HCP – II

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Defense & Declarer Play Level: BASIC & Intermediate

Tuesday Night Lecture Series

- **Stop**

- **Look**

- **Listen**

- **Analyze**

- **Plan**

- **Execute**

In Counting I we saw how declarer counted HCP and shape in the same hand placed in 5 different bidding contexts. We also looked at how common bidding offers clues as to what the opponents hold in HCP and shape. Now we take a closer look where HCP counting can be helpful to finding the right play.

Counting begins with a clear

understanding of the bridge language (**bidding and signals**).

We add **judgment** – inferences that stand the

test of time – to build our estimates. Then we adjust our count as the hand progresses. Each trick tells a count story.

How do we count HCP?

1. Bidding
2. Opening leads/New Suit leads
3. Information from Dummy
4. Defensive Signals
5. The play of the hand (Discovery)

Assume a 2/1 Game Force approach – the more common duplicate system. Use the bidding to create an approximate picture of the hands you don't see.

Bidding Data (Examples – at the table **ASK** what opponents' agreements are)

1) HCPs for opener's NT Bids and Rebids:

Open 1NT	Rebid 1NT	Open 2NT	Jump 2NT	Simple 2NT Rebid	System
15-17	12-14	20-21	18-19	12-14 18-19 Ask	2/1, Standard American
16-18	12-15	22-24	19-21	12-15 19-21	Goren
12-14	15-17	5-10*	18-19	18-19	Kaplan Sheinwold
14-16	11-13	22-23	14-15/1♦♥♠ 20-21/1♣	11-13/1♦♥♠ 20-21, 24+/1♣	Precision
10-12*	13-14/1♣ 15-17/1♦	20-21	18-19	12-14 18-19 Ask	2/1, Standard American Mini NT

* = One inference against the mini notrump, if they pass, they don't hold a 10-12 balanced hand.

Opener's 3N rebids are typically gambling (e.g. 1♣-1♠-3N) with opening count and a long suit with no slam opposite partner's lower range. In auctions with minor suit invitation raises (1♣-1♠-1N-3♣) at 3 level, opener might bid 3N on a gamble for 9 tricks – HCP count not precise. Opener's NT rebids after 4th Suit Force are 2N = 12-14 and 3N=18-19.

- 2) Passing partners 1-bid. Many strain to respond w/5, so count 4 or fewer HCP.
- 3) Passing opener's 1N shows 8 or less. With 6 or less & 44 in the majors bid Stayman.
- 4) Passing then overcalling – 10 HCP or less or a major flaw for opening a weak 2 bid (void, side 4-card major, 2 Aces or Quick Tricks).
- 5) Passing opponent's 1- or 2-level overcall of partner's opening bid and not sitting for partner's takeout double (playing negative doubles). Shows <6 HCP if 1-level and <8 HCP if 2-level. Most players make off-shape negative doubles with 9+ high card points and no good bid.
- 6) Suit (Bergen) Raises: A simple raise shows 5-9 HCP (only 3 cards if 7-9) constructive raise shows 7-9 and 4 card support, Limit 10-11, Forcing 12+ and so on. Inverted minors show 11

HCP +. 2N in competition or BPH shows 11-12 balanced (denying 3 cards in partner's major). Pay attention to control bids they show Aces (or Kings) and can help count a hand.

7) HCP for responder's NT Bids and Rebids:

Auction	HCP	Comments
1♣/♦ - P - 1N	6-10 (sometimes 8-10 / 1♣)	Stopper in competition.
1♥/♠ - P - 1N	6-10 Standard, Not Forcing 5-11 Forcing/Semi-forcing	
1♣-P-1♦-P-1♥/♠-P-1N	5-9(10); 5-7 if 1N=8-10/1♣	Denies major(s)
1♣-P-1♥-P-1♠-P-1N	5-9(10)	denies 4 ♠s
1♣-P-1♥-P-1♠-P-2N	(10)11-12	denies 4 ♠s
1♣-P-1♥-P-1♠-P-3N	13-15(16)	denies 4 ♠s
1♥-P-2♣-P-2♦-P-2N	(10)11-12 - Standard 12-14 or 18-19 - 2/1 GF.	denies 4 ♠s w/♠s stopped. Ask if Fast Arrival in NT
1x-P-2N	GF Raise (Jacoby) / Major 12-14 or 13-15 Natural 11-12 Bal/minor open'g or BPH	Jacoby = 13+ Bal 4-card+ Natural = Balanced Inv. Denies 4-card major
1x - 1N (15-18 HCP) - 2N	Limit raise or better for "x"	

8) Opening in 3rd seat might be only 10 HCP (weaker at favorable vulnerability). Passing a passed partner's 1-over-1 suit bid could still show 13 HCP (23 HCP max, no game). Responder's 2N jump by a passed hand is (10)11-12 -- mostly 11.

How can counting HCP come in handy? Let's look at a few hands.

Partner leads the ♦K. Before you play to trick, one take 90 seconds to see what we can determine from the facts so far. Dummy has a 6 HCP minimum response and 4-4 in the majors. South

Dummy	You	LHO	Partner	RHO	You
♠Q673	♠KJ102	1♣	Pass	1♥	Pass
♥Q983	♥K10	1N	Pass	Pass	Pass
♦987	♦J10532				
♣Q3	♣J8				

might have 4 ♠s and a balanced hand (a favored expert treatment) but likely has fewer than 7 cards in the majors. LHO has 12-14 HCP and a balanced hand. 27-29 HCP are accounted for. Partner must

have 11-13 HCP. Why would partner pass twice with an opening hand?

The only logical reason is that partner has length in ♣s, shortness in ♦s, and no major to bid. Partner's pattern is likely among 3=3=2=5, 3=2=3=5, 2=3=3=5, or 3=3=3=4. It is possible for partner to have a 4 card ♥ suit, but not 4♠s (declarer would then have a singleton ♠, inconsistent with the bidding). Partner's pass over 1NT also suggests he doesn't have 3 aces and probably not even 2 aces. So we can surmise that dummy's likely shape is 3=3=3=4, 3=3=2=5, 3=2=3=5, or 2=3=3=5. Let's encourage ♦s and see how the HCP count and shape count matures trick by trick. Declarer wins the ♦A and leads a low ♣ toward Dummy immediately. Partner wins the ♣K (6 HCP so far) and cashes the ♦Q (8 HCP now). A small ♠ follows, and declarer plays low from dummy. What do you do now?

Partner's small ♠ implies an honor (It has to be the ♠A, right? This makes 12 HCP so partner will have nothing else on the side) so you finesse the ♠10 and win. You cash your 3 high ♦s, partner pitching 2 ♥s and 1♣. A small ♠ to partner's ♠A and a ♠ back gives the defense 1♣, 4♦s, and 4♠s.

(You don't score your ♥K because you are end-played). Down 3. Nice Counting (and signaling)!!!

In high level competition an expert partner would make a penalty double of 1NT. Why penalty? Because s/he could have made a takeout double at their 1st chance. Passing indicated a desire to penalize NT or opener's 1st suit. (Some play this double would be takeout for the remaining 2 suits. Be sure you are on the same page).

Partner	You	LHO	Partner	RHO	You
♠Q6	♠KJ1042	1♣	Pass	Pass	1♠
♥A983	♥KJ104	Pass	2♣	Pass	2♥
♦KQ	♦2	Pass	4♥	Pass	Pass
♣A7643	♣QJ3	Pass			

On this hand, RHO's 1st pass is revealing. We hold 26 HCP. Give LHO at least 12 HCP for opening and RHO can't have more than 2 HCP. Therefore you expect to lose

2 pointed aces and find the ♣K onside. You take care to lose the ♦A first so you can park your ♣ loser on the ♦Q. You then have a relatively safe choice in ♥s for the overtrick. If you think RHO has 2 HCP you know it's the ♥Q. Of course there are no guarantees. Isn't it nice to have the game guaranteed, so that the guess you face is for an overtrick? They should all be this simple...

Both opponent's opening bid and revealing pass mark key HCP in LHO. Often when they open or overcall a strong NT we have an easy time counting HCP too. Bidding tools have improved so when our side can reach game (25 HCP) after their strong NT we can be sure where the remaining points are.

Here's a toughie. Counting will see you through. You face 4 losers in a pushy game. LHO leads the ♠8 to LHO's ♠A & ♠K all following. The ♦5 is covered by your ♦Q and RHO wins with the ♦K (You duck your ♦A since no return can hurt and several will help). You suspect RHO would respond with 5 HCP. Even so RHO might have the ♥Q or the ♣Q. RHO continues the ♦7 which you win with your ♦A. If LHO is 5=2=3=3 then RHO is 2=3=4=4. While the 3=4 ♣ split offers more spaces to RHO for the ♣Q, there's a better play.

Partner	You	LHO	Partner	RHO	You
♠Q764	♠J9	1♠	Pass	Pass	Double
♥K983	♥AJ104	Pass	3♥	Pass	4♥
♦Q4	♦A1032	Pass	Pass	Pass	
♣AJ10	♣K93				

Count your possible winners:

Plan 1: 1♠, 5♥s (win the finesse, 3 rounds of trump and 2 ruffs), 1♦, and 3♣ (guess the ♣Q).

Plan 2a: 1♠, 5♥s (win the finesse, 3 rounds of trump and 2 ruffs), 1♦, and 3♣ (end-play LHO).

Plan 2b: 1♠, 6♥s (2♦ ruffs (dummy), finesse ♥Q & draw 3 trumps, ruff 1♠ in hand), 1♦ & 2♣s.

Unfortunately plan 2a went down the drain when the 3rd round of ♠s was played. Plan 2b works when LHO has the ♥Q and avoids the ♣ guess entirely. You must ruff one ♦ and finesse the ♥Q before ruffing the 2nd ♦. To do this you must ruff the 3rd ♠ with the ♥10, preserving the ♥4 for the finesse!

Therefore when LHO plays the 3rd round of ♠s, ruff in hand with the ♥10 so you can lead the ♥4 from hand to the ♥9. The ♣J (RHO might cover!) to the ♣K is followed by a ♦ ruff, then ♥K and ♥3 to the ♥A clears the trumps and you are in hand to ruff the 2nd ♦. When back in hand you cash the ♠Q and ♣A and tally up 10 or 11 tricks (the ♣Q might fall you know!). Whew!

Learning Points

- 1) Counting HCP can help locate missing honors for declarer and for defenders when opponents make revealing passes or limit their hand in common ways.
- 2) Counting distribution and HCP together is a powerful in guide to the best choice of plays.
- 3) Counting takes work and concentration – start during the bidding and build your pictures of the hidden hands throughout the play. Even simple hands can offer big dividends!

Good Books

Edwin Kantar, [Advanced Bridge Defense](#)

Marty Bergen, [More Points Schmoints](#)

Mike Lawrence, [How to Read Your Opponent's Cards: The Bridge Experts' Way to Locate Missing High Cards](#)

Eric Jannersten, [Card Reading: The Art of Guessing Right at the Bridge Table](#)

Marshall Miles, [Inferences at Bridge](#)

Keywords: HCP, Shape, Tricks, Planning the Play.