

Counting HCP – III

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Defense & Declarer Play Level: BASIC & Intermediate

Tuesday Night Lecture Series

- **Stop**
- **Look**
- **Listen**
- **Analyze**
- **Plan**
- **Execute**

In Counting HCP I & II we saw how declarer counted HCP in different bidding contexts. We continue looking at cases where HCP counting provides useful information for declarer or defense. 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. 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.

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)

Preemptive raises happen often in competition. They take valuable bidding space away from opponents and are often made on trump length and severe weakness. A preemptive jump raise is usually 0-6 HCP with 4 or more trumps, and never as strong as a constructive raise (7-9 HCP). Perhaps both sides can make game. Nevertheless there appear to be 4 losers (1♠, 1♥, 2♦). The opening lead is the ♦A from LHO. RHO discourages and LHO continues with the ♥9. RHO places the ♦4 on the table and you choose to finesse. Folks just don't lead A from AQ. The

Partner	You	LHO	Partner	RHO	You
♠A1074	♠QJ1082	Pass	Pass	1♥	1♠
♥4	♥73	3♥ ¹	4♠	Pass	Pass
♦9862	♦KJ107	Pass			
♣KJ104	♣A3				

1 = Preemptive Raise

finesse wins as LHO follows low. How do you tackle trumps? LHO has shown up with the ♦A. Before committing trumps take time for a little discovery. Play 3 rounds of ♣s trumping the 3rd round. Sure enough, LHO plays the ♣Q on the 3rd round. Now you know that LHO has 6 HCP and made a preemptive raise in ♥s. The likelihood that LHO has the ♠K is very small. That would be 9 HCP and more suitable for a competitive raise (or a limit raise with a singleton). Ratcheting up your courage you play a small ♠ to your ♠A and watch as RHO plays the singleton ♠K. After all, since RHO has to have the ♠K for the opening bid, it might as well be singleton!

A 1NT Overcall often paints a very clear picture for declarer that can be an edge when bidding a close game. You and partner have agreed to play 2-way game tries and you trot out the short suit try showing partner a singleton

Partner	You	You	LHO	Partner	RHO
♠A87	♠J10942	1♠	1NT	2♠	Pass
♥A983	♥KQ104	2N ¹	Double	3♣ ²	Pass
♦109	♦2	3♦ ³	Pass	4♠	Pass
♣J764	♣AQ3	Pass	Double		

1 = Short Suit Game Try Trigger

2 = Forced reply 3 = Short in ♦s

or void in ♦s. Partner announces blind faith in your play – can you count your way to success? The opening ♦K lead wins. RHO encourages. LHO continues a low card to partner's honor expecting you to ruff, fearing an end play in any of the other 3 suits. RHO plays the ♦A as you ruff.

At this point you have a complete count of their HCP. You and partner combined hold 21 HCP. RHO has shown 4, leaving LHO with exactly 15 – **LHO must have all the rest of the high cards**. Now counting the shape for South is the next step toward unraveling this hand. LHO should have 5 or 6 ♦s. 4♦s seems unlikely and 3♦s is impossible (RHO would bid with 7 ♦s opposite a 1N hand).

Let's count LHO's shape as we play trumps. We lead a small trump toward the dummy and South splits honors. We win and immediately return a small trump. RHO follows to both rounds and LHO wins the 2nd trump. LHO continues the 3rd trump (fearing a sluff ruff in ♦s and a free finesse in ♣s or ♥s). **LHO shows 3♠s and 5♦s so far**. We play a small ♥ to the ♥Q, Cash the ♥Q and play a small ♥ toward dummy's ♥A, felling LHO's ♥J as RHO pitches. We now know LHO holds 3♠s, 3♥s, and 5♦s – therefore s/he has room for only 2♣s one of which is the ♣K. The ♣A followed by a small ♣ seals their fate. In all we lose 3 tricks – 1♦, 1♠, and 1♣ - making a doubled game. Nice Counting!!!

Responder's passes offer some HCP counting help too. If RHO passes in a competitive auction, count them for 7 HCP or less. LHO tables the ♠A. All

Partner	You	LHO	Partner	RHO	You
♠4	♠9762	1♠	2♣	Pass	2♦
♥K983	♥104	Pass	Pass	Pass	
♦962	♦KQJ1043				
♣AQJ103	♣K				

follow. LHO switches to the ♥A then a small ♥, dummy's ♥K wins (all follow). It looks like RHO held 5 ♥s and perhaps the ♦A (LHO might have cleared trumps holding the ♦A). RHO never made a negative double ♥s so RHO has 7 HCP or less. RHO never made a spade raise, so they must hold only 2 spades. We might get 2 ♠ ruffs with dummy's ♦s. Let's play along that line. A small ♣ to the ♣K is followed by a ♠ ruff. 2 ♣s dropping 2♠ losers and a ♣ ruff HIGH (!) is followed by trumps. Whether RHO over ruffs the ♦9 with the ♦A or not doesn't matter. We just made 4♦s. You are a counting demon!

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: Bids that limit HCP, Shape, Tricks, Planning the Play

Counting HCP – III Examples

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Here's a situation you've seen several times. Most aspiring players have a healthy respect for the opponent who overcalls 1NT. There are times when that overcall hands you a roadmap to the winning contract. Since you are a **HCP Counting WIZARD** you smile. You might even remember how you used to get nervous when partner made you declarer

You	Partner	RHO	You	LHO	Partner
♠J9652	♠K1087	Pass	1♠	1N ¹	4♠(!!)
♥A32	♥8	All	Pass	1=15-18	
♦K2	♦AQJ1043			HCP	
♣A32	♣K109				

after they made a strong 1NT overcall. Not any more. You know your LHO has all the missing HCP. Count them: You have 12 and partner (dummy) shows 13 for a total of 25. The missing 15 must be with LHO to justify the 1NT overcall! Play LHO for the ♠AQ and draw trumps. You might just make 12 tricks in spades!!!

Partner	You	LHO	Partner	RHO	You
♠Q62	♠108	1♣	Pass	1♠	2♥
♥832	♥AQJ1062	Pass	Pass	Pass	
♦KJ86	♦32				
♣A32	♣K109				

Here's a tougher example, but one that happens more frequently. They open the bidding and you overcall, winning the right to declare. You see why the auction died

early – the strength is evenly split and between **You** and the **Opponents** (20:20 HCP). Since RHO passed, they can't have more than 7 or 8 HCP. Your job is to count RHO's HCP (counting the weaker hand is often easier than counting the stronger hand because there are fewer honor cards to find). Since LHO passed 1♠, ♠s must be splitting 3-5 (with 4 LHO would raise and with 6 RHO would rebid).

The Play

- 1) You cover the ♠J opening lead and RHO wins the ♠K.
- 2) RHO switches to the ♣8 (you think: this looks like a short suit) and you win with the ♣K.
- 3) You lead the ♦3 toward the dummy as LHO contributes the ♦4. You finesse the ♦J and RHO's ♦A wins.
- 4) The ♣4 comes back and you win the ♣J with the ♣A on the board.
- 5) **How do you play the ♥s??**

- The answer lies with your count of RHO's HCP. RHO had the ♠K and the ♦A. 7 HCP.
- If RHO also has the ♥K, then RHO has 10 HCP.
- If RHO has 10 HCP, then RHO will not pass 2♥! RHO would invite LHO.

So, backing your HCP count you play a low heart to the ♥A, felling LHO's singleton ♥K. If LHO has to have the ♥K, it might as well be singleton (Steve's corollary to the Rabbi's rule). Never take a practice finesse. Never.

You count so beautifully!!!