

## Counting Shape – I

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Defense & Declarer Play Level: BASIC & Intermediate

Tuesday Night Lecture Series

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

In Counting HCP I - III we counted HCP to find the best defense or declarer play. Now we take a closer look at counting SHAPE. 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. Many auctions are common regardless of system.

### How do we count SHAPE?

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

### Common Auctions

O	R	Opener HCP	Responder
1♣ 1N	1♠ P	12+ HCP 4+ ♣s 12-14 Maybe 4 ♥s (3-6 ♣s possible)	5-9 HCP 4+ ♠s 5-9 HCP not 6♠
1♣ 1N	1♥ P	12+ HCP 4+ ♣s (3-6 possible) 12-14 4 ♠s possible – Ask!	5-9 HCP 4+ ♠s not 6♠
1♦ 2♦	1♠ P	12+HCP 4+ ♦s 12-14 Likely 6♦s	5-9 HCP Likely 4+ ♠s not 6♠
1♣ 2♥	1♠ 3♣ <sup>1</sup>	12+ HCP 4+ ♣s 18+HCP, 5♣ and 4♥ or 12-17 with 6♣ and 5♥	5+ HCP 4+ ♠s 5-7 HCP and 2+ ♣s & 4 ♠s Or 9+ HCP 3+ ♣s
1♠ 2♣ <sup>3</sup>	1N <sup>2</sup> P	12+ HCP 5+ ♥s 12-14 <sup>4</sup> 5 ♥s, and 2+ ♣s	5-11 HCP Max 3♠s 4+ ♣s, 5-8 HCP, 0-1 ♠
1♠ 2♦	1N <sup>2</sup> 2♥	12+ HCP 5+ ♥s 12-14 5 ♥s, and 3+ ♦s, ♣s ≤ ♦s	5-11 HCP Max 3♠s 6+ Hs, 5-8 HCP, 0-1(2) ♠s
1♣ 1♠ 2♠	1♥ 2♥ P	12+ HCP, 4+ Cs 12+ HCP, 4+ Ss, likely unbalanced (Ask) 12-14 HCP 55+ in ♠s & ♣s.	5+ HCP, 4+ ♥s 6+ ♥s and 5-9 HCP. 6 ♥s (Bids 3♥ with 7♥s and 8-9 HCP)
1♠ 2♠ 3♥	2♣ 3♦ 3N	12+ HCP 5+ ♠s 12-14 6+ ♠s 12-14 likely. 6♠s + 4♥s	12+ HCP, GF (3)4+ ♣s 12+ HCP, 5+♣s 4+ ♦s. 12-14 HCP 1♠ & 3♥s. 1=3=4=5
1♠ 2♥ 3♠	2♣ 3♦ 3N	12+ HCP 5+ ♠s 12+ HCP 4♥s 15-17 HCP 6♠s and 4♥s	12+ HCP (3)4+ ♣s 12+ HCP 5+♣s 4+♦s <b>Natural not 4SF</b> 12-13 HCP Misfit
1♣ 3♥	1♠ 4♦	12+ HCP 4+ ♣s GF ~18+ HCP ( <b>Ask</b> ) 4 ♠s & 0/1 ♥ splinter, or 18+ HCP and 4+ ♥s or weak 6♣s-5Hs	5+ HCP 4+ ♠s Depends on what 3♥ means. Ask! Either control for slam or natural.

1= Be sure to ask – some play Lebensohl after reverses. If so then 3♣ shows 9+ HCP

2= Forcing 1 Round 5-11 HCP. Might be 3-card limit raise.

3=Usually 3+, but for this auction only 2+ (Opener might be 4=5=2=2)

4= If they open 1NT with 5 card majors. If not then 12-17 HCP and responder will strain to keep bidding open with 8+ HCP.

**Each round of bidding refines the HCP and shape count estimate. Counting is dynamic**

What SHAPE hints are there in Bidding? There are many – here are some common ones:

- 1) 1 of a minor usually shows 4 or more cards. Yes, we open with 3, but rarely (<15%).
- 2) 1 of a major shows 5 or more cards. Opener's simple major rebid is usually 6 cards +, but some rebid their major holding 5 cards when (very) weak.
- 3) A NT bid / rebid usually promises 2 cards in every suit, or occasionally a singleton in partner's suit. Opening a minor then rebidding 1NT w/2 4-card majors, opener's minor is 3 cards long. A rebid of 1NT after opening 1♥ says 5332 shape (2♠s are likely but not guaranteed).
- 4) A new suit rebid is usually 4 cards (and the 1<sup>st</sup> suit bid is then 5+). *Exception: over the forcing 1N response to 1 of a major, opener will rebid on 2 clubs when 4=5=2=2 or 3 diamonds when 5=3=3=2.*
- 5) Rebidding the 2<sup>nd</sup> lower-ranking suit shows 5=5, 6=5, 6=6, 7=5, 7=6, 8=5. If higher ranking, the 2<sup>nd</sup> suit rebid shows the 1<sup>st</sup> suit is longer 5=6, 5=7, 6=7 (Never = length ex. ♠s after ♣s)
- 6) Rebidding the 1<sup>st</sup> suit then bidding a new suit usually shows a weak 6=4 (12-14 HCP)
- 7) Rebidding a new suit then simply rebidding the 1<sup>st</sup> suit shows a sound 6=4 (15-17 HCP)
- 8) Rebidding a new suit then jump rebidding the 1<sup>st</sup> suit shows a sound 7=4 or 8=4 (15-17 HCP)
- 9) Jump rebidding the 2<sup>nd</sup> suit shows offensive strength and implies poor defense.
- 10) A reverse always shows 5=4 or 6=5: 5(6) in the 1<sup>st</sup> suit and 4(5) in the 2<sup>nd</sup> higher ranking suit. (Rare exception when partner has a 4441 pattern with no good strength showing approach). Expect 17+ HCP if 5=4. Opener confirms 6=5 by rebidding the 2<sup>nd</sup> higher ranking suit and shows 12-14 HCP in the suits bid. Responder's reverses are similar as to shape and game forcing in context. (Sometimes the 4<sup>th</sup> suit is artificial). A jump reverse might be natural or show a splinter bid – **ask!**
- 11) Responder's rebid of NT after 3 suits were mentioned typically denies 5 or more cards in their 1<sup>st</sup> suit.
- 12) 4<sup>th</sup> Suit Forcing (a common bidding convention) does not promise any length in the 4<sup>th</sup> suit. It asks opener to support responder's 1<sup>st</sup> suit (a 5+ card suit). Note – the 4<sup>th</sup> suit should be natural (and forcing) in any auction where a game force has been made BEFORE the 4<sup>th</sup> suit has been bid. A 4<sup>th</sup> suit bid later in the auction than the 4<sup>th</sup> bid is NOT 4<sup>th</sup> suit forcing.
- 13) A reverse by opener forces 1 round and is either a 5+4 pattern in a strong hand or a 6-5 pattern in a minimum hand. A jump reverse might be a singleton or void – **ASK!**
- 14) A reverse by responder forces game. The 1<sup>st</sup> bid suit is longer than the 2<sup>nd</sup> bid suit.
- 15) A takeout double or negative double usually shows 4 cards in the other major. If you are missing only 10 or 11 HCP, assume the take-out doubler has perfect 4441 shape.
- 16) Negative doubles show both 4 card majors only in this auction: 1♣ - 1♦ - Double.
- 17) Any time opener takes a 3<sup>rd</sup> bid at or above the 3-level, opener shows either extra distribution or extra strength.
- 18) Preempts – Weak 2's show 6, though they can be 5 or 7 on occasion. 3 bids for the major show 7 and 4 bids show 7/8. 3-bids for the minor 7, but might be 6 only for ♣s since there is usually no weak 2 bid for ♣s.
- 19) Two Suited Overcalls (Michaels Cue Bids, Unusual No Trump, Top & Bottom Cue Bids, Ghestem) – assume 55 and expect 2-1 or 3-0 in the side suits. Over 1NT, the higher ranking suit might only be 4 cards. Again expect shortness in the other 2 suits.
- 20) If you discover an opponent has a 6 card suit and never bids given the opportunity, then assume a weak suit and a worthless hand – give the remaining HCP to their partner. If one

opponent has a 5 card major and fails to overcall at the 1- level, they have a very poor suit or fewer than 8 HCP.

21) A cue bid at the 2 level by a passed hand usually shows 6 cards and is to play (natural) or is a conventional takeout. 1♣-P-1♠-P-1N-2♣/♠. Ask.

How can counting shape come in handy? Let's look at a few examples. What should you bid at your 2<sup>nd</sup> turn? RHO's 1N denies either 4-card major. Opener's pass denies 5 ♠s. The most ♠s opponents can hold are 7. You hold 1 so partner has 5 ♠s!!! Since partner didn't overcall 1 ♠ we can conclude that s/he has a weak suit – ♠Qxxxx at best. You hold 6 ♣s and opener will have 4 ♣s 85% of the time. Partner has either a singleton or void in ♣s. If we give opponents 7 cards in ♥s (the most they can have) then partner should have 1 of these 2 hands:

You	LHO	Partner	RHO	You
♠2	1♣	Pass	1N	Pass
♥AKQ2	Pass	2♦	Pass	???
♦98				
♣J105432				

♠: XXXXX, ♥: xx ♦: XXxxx ♣: x (5=2=5=1)      or      ♠: XXXXX, ♥: xx ♦: XXxxxx ♣: -

You do not want to bid – partner has steered you to a great contract. Pass quickly and pick up your plus before the opponents catch on...

You	LHO	Partner	RHO	You
♠A102	1♠	Pass	2♦	Pass
♥2	3♦	Pass	4♠	Pass
♦J1043	Pass	Pass		
♣KQ1032				

Here's a situation where the mechanical opening lead is the wrong one. Did you have your counting ears on?? Don't you dare touch that ♣ sequence. Opener shows a 5-4 hand (some play 5-3) in ♠s and ♦'s. Since RHO make a 2/1 game force in ♦s, partner

can't have more than 1 ♦ card. Lead a ♦ and if partner doesn't ruff, win the 1<sup>st</sup> round of trumps. Then lead a HIGH ♦ and give partner their ruff. Partner will cash the ♥A and give you a ruff if that's to be. If not, expect to get a ♣ trick later. Be happy to find one extra defensive trick from partner's ♦ ruff.

Now let's look at a situation where the opponents are silent. You bid directly to 6N and get the unhelpful lead of a small ♥. How do you proceed? Looks like you can get 3♣, 3♥, 2♦, and 3♠s. The only extra trick is in ♣s so you have to find the ♣Q. Missing 8 HCP and no outside bidding means counting HCP is not where it's at. Instead try to count the hand pattern of both opponents.

Partner	You
♠Q76	♠AK9
♥K98	♥AQ2
♦J94	♦KQ10
♣AJ104	♣K932

The way to do that safely on this hand is to win the opening trick and play 2 ♦s immediately. The opponent with the Ace will likely hold up. Do not be tempted to cash the 3<sup>rd</sup> round – you're down immediately if you do. Cash the majors leaving the ♣s for last. Watch for show-outs (they can't follow suit) and count signals (in ♦s, the suit you cannot fully eliminate). Trust the show-outs. We're in luck – on the run of the 6 major suit cards, RHO pitches twice: 1♦ and 1♣. This means RHO is likely 4=5 or 5=4 in the minors. It also means LHO is 55 in the majors and holds only 3 minor cards. You already saw 2 of them (♦s). Lead a small ♣ to the ♣A and finesse RHO TWICE for the ♣Q. Your chances are 100% - twice as good as 50% for a pure guess ♣ finesse.

You	Dummy
♠KQ632	♠975
♥A98	♥K42
♦1094	♦KQ10
♣42	♣Q932

In an unrevealing 1N-3N auction you are on lead. You choose the ♠3 (4<sup>th</sup> best), hoping to find partner with a useful card and avoid giving declarer a valuable way to win the ♠A. Partner obliges with the ♠J and returns the ♠4 to declarer's ♠A. Who has the ♠10? Declarer does. Partner would have played the lower of equals. What card should you play on the 2<sup>nd</sup> ♠ trick? The ♠2 is a count signal showing 5 ♠s. However that's not what the defense needs. With 13 ♠s accounted for, your ♠s are running. Better to drop the ♠Q under declarer's ♠A! Then partner will know (and so will declarer) that your entry is in ♥s – a high card shows interest in the higher of the remaining suits. Partner has room for 4-6 HCP – hopefully this blocks declarer's path to 9 tricks and allow the ♥ switch you just asked for. Suit preference comes up in many situations: when looking for defensive ruffs, when following partner's lead and a singleton or void is in dummy, when following partner's lead and partner knows you hold a suit of 6 or more cards, when you are both aware a switch is called for. Here the principle is you want partner who might have an entry to know your entry is in ♥s. Message received! There is a cost to this signal – if declarer has a 2-way finesse and knows you have 9 HCP, they might finesse partner for the missing honor. They count too. So if you believe declarer must lead ♥s before s/he wins 9 tricks, then by all means camouflage your entry and keep declarer (and partner) in the dark.

### Learning Points

- 1) Counting shape helps when declaring and defending. Shape can help when HCP can't.
- 2) Counting distribution and HCP together is a powerful guide to the best choice of plays.
- 3) Never take practice finesses (finesses that are unnecessary but available). Avoid or delay pure guess finesses whenever possible! Count instead.

### 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.*

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Here are common auctions that you should know how to read to estimate the bidder's shapes:

O	R	Opener HCP
1♣ 1N	1♠ P	O: 4+ ♣s Maybe 4 ♥s (3-6 ♣s possible) R: 4-5 ♠s, maybe less than 3 ♣s
1♣ 1N	1♥ P	O: 4+ ♣s (3-6 possible) 2-3 Hearts, maybe 4 spades <b>ASK!</b> R: 4-5 Hearts, maybe 4 ♠s – <b>ASK!</b> maybe less than 3 ♣s
1♦ 2♦	1♠ P	O: Likely 6♦s. 0-3 ♠s but might raise with 3♠s <b>ASK!</b> R: 4-5 ♠s
1♣ 2♥	1♠ 3♣	O: 5+♣s and 4+♥ - this is a reverse R: 0-3 ♥s and 3+♣s.
1♠ 2♣	1N P	O: 5 ♠s and 4 ♣s R: 0-1♠ and 4+♣s
1♠ 2♦	1N 2♥	O: 5 ♠s and 4 ♦s R: 0-2 ♠s, 5+♥s
1♣ 1♠ 2♠	1♥ 2♥ P	O: 5♠s & 5♣s, 0-1 ♥ (Min) This is the only sequence where bidding a lower suit then rebidding the higher suit shows 55. When the 1 <sup>st</sup> suit ranks below the 2 <sup>nd</sup> , rebidding the 2 <sup>nd</sup> implies 6+ cards in the 1 <sup>st</sup> and 5+ cards in the 2 <sup>nd</sup> . Rebidding 1♠ over responder's 1♥ is NOT considered a reverse. R: 6 ♥s likely.
1♣ 2♥ 3♥	1♠ 2♠ P	O: 6♣s and 5 ♥s, 0-1♠, minimum R: 5♠s and minimum ( <i>after partner's reverse, rebidding your own suit only promises 5</i> )
1♠ 2♠ 3♥	2♣ 3♦ 3N	O: 6♣s, 4♥s, Minimum R: 5♣s, 4♦, Game opposite minimum
1♠ 2♥ 3♠	2♣ 3♦ 3N	O: 6+ ♠s, 4♥s, 15+ HCP R: 5♣s, 4♦, 10-14 HCP
1♠ 2♥ 3♥	2♣ 3♦ 3N	O: 5+ ♠s, 5+♥s, Minimum. (♠s longer or equal to ♥s) R: 5♣s, 4♦. No 3-card major. Game opposite a minimum. <b>Note: 1<sup>st</sup> 4 bids are NOT a 4<sup>th</sup> suit forcing auction</b>
1♣ 3♥	1♠ 4♦	O: 5+ ♣s and 4+ ♥s R: 5+ ♠s. 4♦ if natural; ♦ void, ♦A or ♦ singleton if control, <b>ASK!!!</b>