

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♣ ¹	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♣ ³	1N ² P	12+ HCP 5+ ♥s 12-14 ⁴ 5 ♥s, and 2+ ♣s	5-11 HCP Max 3♠s 4+ ♣s, 5-8 HCP, 0-1 ♠
1♠ 2♦	1N ² 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 Natural not 4SF 12-13 HCP Misfit
1♣ 3♥	1♠ 4♦	12+ HCP 4+ ♣s GF ~18+ HCP (<i>Ask</i>) 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 1st 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 2nd lower-ranking suit shows 5=5, 6=5, 6=6, 7=5, 7=6, 8=5. If higher ranking, the 2nd suit rebid shows the 1st suit is longer 5=6, 5=7, 6=7 (Never = length ex. ♠s after ♣s)
- 6) Rebidding the 1st suit then bidding a new suit usually shows a weak 6=4 (12-14 HCP)
- 7) Rebidding a new suit then simply rebidding the 1st suit shows a sound 6=4 (15-17 HCP)
- 8) Rebidding a new suit then jump rebidding the 1st suit shows a sound 7=4 or 8=4 (15-17 HCP)
- 9) Jump rebidding the 2nd suit shows offensive strength and implies poor defense.
- 10) A reverse always shows 5=4 or 6=5: 5(6) in the 1st suit and 4(5) in the 2nd 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 2nd 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 4th 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 1st suit.
- 12) 4th Suit Forcing (a common bidding convention) does not promise any length in the 4th suit. It asks opener to support responder's 1st suit (a 5+ card suit). Note – the 4th suit should be natural (and forcing) in any auction where a game force has been made BEFORE the 4th suit has been bid. A 4th suit bid later in the auction than the 4th bid is NOT 4th 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 1st bid suit is longer than the 2nd 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 3rd 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 2nd 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 1st 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 3rd 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 (4th 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 2nd ♠ 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 in 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 ASK! R: 4-5 Hearts, maybe 4 ♠s – ASK! maybe less than 3 ♣s
1♦ 2♦	1♠ P	O: Likely 6♦s. 0-3 ♠s but might raise with 3♠s ASK! 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 st suit ranks below the 2 nd , rebidding the 2 nd implies 6+ cards in the 1 st and 5+ cards in the 2 nd . 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. Note: 1st 4 bids are NOT a 4th suit forcing auction
1♣ 3♥	1♠ 4♦	O: 5+ ♣s and 4+ ♥s R: 5+ ♠s. 4♦ if natural; ♦ void, ♦A or ♦ singleton if control, ASK!!!