

Counting Tricks - II

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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 & III) and Counting Shape (I & II) we saw how counting guides decisions and how count changes throughout the play of the hand. In Counting Tricks I we reviewed counting HCP for NT contracts, the Law of Total Tricks and the Losing Trick Count valuation method for suit contracts when a good fit is found. **Counting is DYNAMIC.** We continually revise our estimates with each new bit of information. We assume a 2/1 Game Force approach – the more common duplicate system. Now we continue our look at counting TRICKS:

1) To decide how high a SUIT contract we can profitably bid

2) When preparing to play the hand as declarer (covered in detail in “the 1st 90 Seconds”).

3) When preparing an opening lead and while defending against their contract.

Counting tricks is essential to good declarer play. We have discussed declarer’s planning approach in the 1st 90 Seconds series in earlier Learning Points. Here we will focus on counting tricks during the bidding and during defensive play. You probably already figured out that counting tricks while defending can include counting HCP and shape. Defenders who count tricks do a much better job of taking their tricks before they go away.

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. Opponents can count too. So if you believe declarer must lead ♥s before s/he wins 9 tricks, then by all means camouflage you entry and keep declarer and partner in the dark.

LHO opens 1♣. The opponents arrive at 3N by way of a New Minor Forcing auction. Partner leads the ♥J. Declarer calls for the ♥8 from dummy. What do you do at trick 1? You count tricks of course! No, not yours or partners, but declarer’s! Dummy has 5♠ tricks, and partner’s lead says declarer holds the ♥Q – so count 1 heart trick. The 1♣ opening bid usually shows 4 or more cards (don’t be misled by 3+ on the convention card. Declarer will hold 4+ clubs 85%

Dummy	You
♠AKQJ2	♠10987
♥K82	♥A9
♦946	♦QJ94
♣K2	♣1098

of the time). Give declarer the ♣AQJ and s/he has 9 tricks – if you simply cover the ♥8 with the ♥9, declarer will chalk up a game. The time to act is NOW – jump up with the ♥A and switch to the ♦Q, hoping declarer holds ♦Kx(x). If so, you chalk up your 5 tricks before they get their 9. Counting tricks tells you not to wait.

You	Dummy
♠10985	♠AK42
♥K8	♥AQ3
♦K62	♦J954
♣AJ93	♣876

The auction starts with RHO's opening 1♦ bid. LHO responds 1♠ and the opponents arrive quickly at 3N. Partner plays the ♠3 (discouraging) on your ♠10 lead, won by declarer with the ♠A. Declarer leads the ♦J and finesses, losing to your ♦K. What are you prepared to do? Declarer has 4♠s, 3♦s and 2♥s waiting to cash. Partner would have encourages ♠s with as little as ♠Qxx.

The best hope is an active defense. There is just enough room for partner to hold the ♣Kxx. Lead a small ♣ and hope to collect 4 setting ♣ tricks.

Change Dummy just slightly and a passive approach suggests → itself. Now declarer has 4♠ tricks 1♥ trick, 3♦ tricks, and needs to find 1 more trick to make game. A ♣ switch is more risky – declarer could now hold the ♣K. All partner needs to defeat this contract is the ♥Q and ♣Q10x. Without the ♥Q in dummy, 1 of declarer's tricks disappears, and the need for speed on defense with it! Better to go passive when declarer has to work to find the game going trick. Lead a safe ♠.

You	Dummy
♠10985	♠AK42
♥K8	♥A73
♦K62	♦J954
♣AJ93	♣876

You	LHO	Partner	RHO	Your hand: ♠AKJ976 ♥7 ♦KJ32 ♣AJ
1♠	Pass	2♦	Pass	You choose to confirm controls using RKB and partner
3♦	Pass	3♠	Pass	shows 2 key cards with the trump Q. 5N by you elicits 6♣
4♣	Pass	4♥	Pass	showing the ♣K. You show the ♦K and partner bids 6♥
???				showing the ♥K. Counting tricks says you have 7 ♠s, 2♥s, 2♦s, and 2♣s = 13 Bid 7N. What are you waiting for???

Your hand: ♠J10986 ♥AQ3 ♦763 ♣76

Counting tricks can help you choose the right opening lead. The number of immediate tricks suggested by the opponent's auction can direct you to an active (aggressive) or passive lead.

In Auction #1 the opponents bid a tentative game. Lead a normal ♠J and hope partner can contribute a ♠ honor. The opponents do not rate to have 9 tricks off the top. Let them work for their game.

Both auctions #2 & #3 point to an attacking lead. Plunk down the ♥AQ3 and hope to find partner with ♥K10762 so we take 5 tricks before they cash their 10-12 winners in the other 3 suits. You count so well...

RHO	You	LHO	Partner
#1			
1N	Pass	2N	Pass
3N			
#2			
1♦	Pass	2♣	Pass
3♦	Pass	3♠	Pass
3N			
#3			
1♣	Pass	2♦	Pass
3♣	Pass	3♦	Pass
3N			

Sometimes an imperfect count can help as much as an exact count of declarer's tricks. Their 2/1 GF auction was straightforward: 1♥-2♣-2♥-4♥ (our passes omitted). You choose to win partner's low ♠ lead and must decide what to do.

Dummy	You
♠Q	♠AJ42
♥K87	♥76
♦Q62	♦AJ94
♣AQ10943	♣876

You survey dummy and see that the long suit is a source of tricks (and loser discards) for declarer. Whether partner or declarer holds the missing ♣ honors doesn't matter – declarer will run ♣s. With 6 running ♣s and 4-5 ♥ tricks, declarer will reach game easily unless we interrupt. When you see this type of dummy, attack! Lead the ♦4 hoping to find partner with the ♦Kx(x). We take 3♦s for the set.

Put the missing ♣ honors in your hand and Declarer doesn't have → enough tricks (and partner rates to have little more than the ♥Q if that). Go passive – lead a trump every time you are in to exhaust dummy's ruffing power. Declarer can't run ♣s to discard losers. Returning trumps will let you win the 4 tricks due your side. Do not break a new suit for declarer.

Dummy	You
♠Q	♠K542
♥K87	♥76
♦Q62	♦K1094
♣AQ10943	♣KJ6

Learning Points

- 1) Counting tricks helps during the bidding, when declaring, and when defending. Be sure to be ready – they might test you at trick 1 or 2.
- 2) Counting tricks can help you send partner an undeniable signal to guide your defense.
- 3) When opponents bid strongly showing length in 2 suits and stoppers, lead and defend actively (aggressively). You have to take your tricks before they can take theirs.
- 4) When opponents bid tentatively to game, go passive. Make declarer work for their tricks. You don't want your lead to give declarer the game-going trick. Leading a suit they are known to own is passive. Leading an unbid suit is active.
- 5) Counting tricks in your slam auctions will often help you find 12 or 13 and make level and strain decisions easy.
- 6) When declarer has a source of tricks in a side suit, lead the 4th suit. Just do it.
- 7) When you stop dummy's side suit, reduce dummy's ruffing power. Go passive. Declarer's going down hard.

Good Books

Edwin Kantar, [Advanced Bridge Defense](#)
 Marty Bergen, [More Points Schmoints](#)
 Marshall Miles, [Inferences at Bridge](#)

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