

## HOW TO COUNT BETTER

*"There is no real mystique to the art of counting hands. It is simply that people don't know where to start."*  
You can attempt to memorise every card, but all that happens then is that you get worse results as your brain overloads.

### COUNTING HIGH CARD POINTS

This process leads to some seemingly stunning results. For instance, imagine you are defending after opener rebids 1NT, showing 12-14 HCP. Since you know declarer's point range, you should train yourself to try to remember which high cards you see in declarer's hand as the play develops. If declarer wins the first trick with an Ace, then cashes an A-K-Q in another suit, you can place the remainder of the high card points in your partner's hand.

The easiest hands for counting high card points are those where declarer has made a limit bid, often no trumps. However, it also applies to defenders who have passed.

The auction has been:

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
		1♦	Pass
Pass	Double	Pass	2♠
All Pass			

Let's just consider two suits:

♠ A J 8 2

♣ Q 10 2

♠ Q 10 9 7

♣ A J 3

You try the club finesse first, West winning with the ♣K. Now you know that West can't have another King or Ace, given they passed their partner's opening bid. Since you know that East has the ♠K, you cash the Ace first, in case the King is singleton.

Training yourself to count HCPs and using the bidding is a much better use of your brain power than trying to memorise every card that has been played.

### COUNTING THE SHAPE OF THE HAND

Counting the defenders' shape is more challenging, but it's worth persevering.

Here's an auction:

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
1♠	Pass	2♦	Pass
2♥	Pass	3♥	Pass
4♥	All Pass		

We know from the bidding that declarer has 5+ spades and 4+ hearts. Therefore, if declarer follows to three rounds of clubs, he has – at most – one diamond. This is simply counting distribution, based on the bidding.

The trick is to think in terms of 13 cards in each suit. We think about that when we count the trump suit, but it takes more practice to apply the counting to more suits, then notice the enormous benefits.

Let's look at an example of counting the distribution (shape) of a hand:

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
1♥	Pass	1♠	2♣
2♦	3♣	All Pass	

♠ J 10 2  
 ♥ Q 7 6  
 ♦ A 10 6 3  
 ♣ 10 7 2

♠ A Q 9 4  
 ♥ 5 3 2  
 ♦ 7  
 ♣ K Q J 8 5

West leads ♥A, ♥K and a third heart, with East trumping the third round (having played the ♥8 then ♥J). East switches to a low diamond to the West's Jack and dummy's ♦A. A trump is led, East winning with the ♣A. East now tries to cash the ♦K but you trump. You draw two more trumps, West following to both and East discarding one spade and one diamond. What now?

West is known to hold 5 hearts, 4 or 5 diamonds and 3 clubs. Therefore, they have 0-1 spades. But wait! You also know about HCPs...

Your side has 19 HCP (12 + 7), leaving East-West with 21 HCP.

You've seen the ♥J, ♣A and ♦K from East. That's 8 points, leaving 13 HCP for West. It may be possible that West opened with 10 HCP and East held 11 HCP, but surely he'd have bid again with such a good hand?

Really, West is marked with the ♠K, and that King is a singleton. Rather than taking a spade finesse that you know will lose, you lay down the ♠A and watch the King fall. You have counted both points and shape on the one hand, to make a part-score – but transforming your bridge life.

	♠ J 10 2	
	♥ Q 7 6	
	♦ A 10 6 3	
	♣ 10 7 2	
♠ K		♠ 8 7 6 5 3
♥ A K 10 9 4		♥ J 8
♦ Q J 8 2		♦ K 9 5 4
♣ 9 6 3		♣ A 4
	♠ A Q 9 4	
	♥ 5 3 2	
	♦ 7	
	♣ K Q J 8 5	

Here's one more hand (from BridgeMaster):

♠ J 9 2  
♥ J 9 6 2  
♦ A 5 3  
♣ K 8 6

♠ A Q 10 8 7 6  
♥ 5  
♦ K 8 6  
♣ A 5 3

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
1♥	Pass	2♥	2♠
Pass	3♠	Pass	4♠
All Pass			

Lead: ♦J

You have to lose one trick in hearts, diamonds and clubs, so you'd better solve the situation with the spade suit – whether to finesse or whether to try to drop the singleton King offside (less likely).

Meantime, you should also be drawing inferences from the opening lead. West did not lead a top heart, so he is unlikely to hold both the Ace and King, or – equally – the King and Queen. One is far more likely to lead touching honours from a suit bid and raised by partner. Therefore, you should allocate the ♥K to East (and the Ace-Queen to West). You can check the lead methods of the opposition and find that they lead the top of a sequence, marking the ♦Q with East. That means you have already determined 5 of East's HCP.

How many HCP do you expect from East? Your side has:  $13 + 9 = 22$  HCP. East-West have 18 HCP. You are confident that West has the ♠K to give him the points for his opening bid as dealer. You plan to play for the singleton ♠K in West's hand, your only chance to make the contract. (Personally, I rather like crossing to dummy to lead the ♠J and then, when East plays low, you play the Ace, dropping the King. Give the opponents some hope, then smash it to smithereens! And watch West hold his cards up more closely!) It doesn't actually matter whether you have an 8-card fit, 9-card fit or 10-card fit – you just count the defenders' HCPs and play for your only winning option.

**Barbara Travis**

[www.bridgewithbarbara.com](http://www.bridgewithbarbara.com)