

COUNTING, COUNTING, COUNTING

In May 2000, Australian Bridge (magazine) featured a player profile of Alan Walsh, who has represented Australia at international bridge a number of times. He was asked for his best bridge tip:

"Count, count, count – especially in defence.

Count declarer's distribution. Count his points.

If you don't know exactly, then make provisional estimates and modify them as more information comes in.

Do the same for partner's hand.

It is easy to get lazy in this, but the rewards for the effort are tremendous."

Obviously, the following hands will be about counting the hand.

The first hand is from the SA Online League, played during the Covid-19 lockdown.

<i>West</i>	<i>East</i>
♠ A J 2	♠ K 10 9 8
♥ 8 7 2	♥ Q 4
♦ A Q 9 6 4 2	♦ J 10 8 5
♣ 2	♣ J 6 5

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

(1) Negative, showing 4 spades

(2) A good raise to 2♥

North led the ♥6 to South's Ace. South now led the ♣K, then another club, which you (West) ruff. You need to find the ♠Q and the ♦K to make the contract. Have you done your counting? It certainly seems like South holds the ♥A and ♣K-Q. Given their original pass, it is likely that North has the remaining honours.

West led a spade to dummy's 10, which held. Having passed that hurdle, North is marked with the ♦K, because South would have opened with 12 HCP. Since you know the diamond finesse is failing, you should play for the singleton King instead. You'd do that even with only 8 diamonds but, with 10 diamonds, it is even more likely!

It's only a part-score, but we were playing teams, so -100 together with -130 at the other table amounted to 6 IMPs.

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

These "little" contracts are great for practising your counting.

Here's another hand for you to 'solve'. You are playing in 4♠, South, after this auction:

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

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
1♥	Pass	Pass	2♠ (intermediate, 6+ spades)
Pass	4♠	All Pass	

West leads the ♣J against your 4♠ contract. Potentially you have three heart losers and a spade loser. How can you make this hand?

The solution lies in the opening lead. If West had held the ♥A-K, he would most likely have led a top heart. Equally, if West had held the ♥K-Q, he would be more likely to lead one ahead of the ♣J. In that case, West is missing the ♥K (specifically) – otherwise he would have had a sequence of honours in hearts.

Once you place East with the ♥K, you can place both the other Kings with West, since East passed his partner's opening bid.

Win the club lead, cash the ♠A in case the King is singleton with West. If there is a singleton King, draw trumps! If not, take the diamond finesse at trick 2. Then use the ♦A to pitch one of your heart losers. Now you revert to trumps, and make your contract. (Full hand over the page.)

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

Lastly, another part-score:

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

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

West led the ♦3 (3rd and 5th leads). East won the ♦A and returned the ♦6, your King winning. Assuming spades break 3-2, there are four losers outside the hearts: 1 spade, 1 diamond, 2 clubs. Therefore, the contract hinges on working out who may hold the Ace and who may hold the Jack in hearts.

Using some of the logic from the previous hand, the opponents are likely to have split club honours since neither of them led clubs, which would be likely with K-Q-J. So, I explored that suit first.

I cashed the ♠A and ♠K, then led ♣A and another club. East won the second club with the Jack and led a third club, West winning with the King. West cashed his high trump Jack, then led a small heart, dummy's King winning. I trumped a diamond, completing my hunt for information about the opposition hands. When both opponents followed, I knew East held the ♦Q, since the opening lead had now marked West with three diamonds, not five.

It was time to stop and count. East held the ♠Q (which had dropped under the ♠A-K), ♦A-Q and ♣J (and likely ♣Q too). If he had held the ♥A, he would have opened! It was now a simple task to lead to dummy's Queen, confident that West held the Ace.

Surprisingly, half the field failed in this contract. The surprise: this was the final of the Open Butler Pairs, a national event.

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

Looking at the full hand, I now realise that East passed a 12 point hand. However, if he had opened 1♦, eventually I would have realised he could not hold the ♥A because he held a balanced hand but had not opened 1NT! It's all about counting...

Keep counting. Keep drawing inferences from the lead and the auction. You'll quickly notice the difference in your declarer play (and in your defence too).

Barbara Travis

www.bridgewithbarbara.com