

Counting Your Cards

Unlike in rubber bridge, where slow play is merely annoying, slow play in duplicate bridge is downright harmful, as the movements require players to change tables for the next round at regular intervals.

One contributor to slow play is the time most players take to pick up, count and sort their cards at the start of each deal. I call the usual method *Sound-Off*. "Sound off, one two! Sound off, three four! Sound off, one two three four, one two ... three four!" Players who use it must be singing to themselves silently while banging their cards down on the table one by one. Then, "Oops, I have only twelve cards. Who has an extra card? Nobody? I guess I'd better count them again!" I know two ways to avoid such inefficiency.

Sherlock is the brainchild of Gerald the Genius, whose arithmetic is impeccable. "I never count my cards," boasts Gerald. "What a waste of energy! When the other players count their cards and each finds 13, I quickly subtract 13 three times from the 52 cards in the deck and deduce that I have 13 cards also."

Brilliant as Gerald is, I neither use nor recommend *Sherlock*. Just think of the havoc that could arise if two players invoked Sherlock's brand of deductive reasoning. I much prefer *Marilyn*. I grasp all my cards face down and separate them slightly into three groups depicting Marilyn's hourglass figure: 5-3-5. Then at a glance I *see* that I have a beautiful 13-card hand. Not long ago, after my left-hand opponent used *Sound-Off* twice without success, I turned to her and asked, "May I have your cards, please?" She complied cheerfully, whereupon I displayed *Marilyn* in half a second and returned the cards to her.

Early in my rubber bridge career (which was most of my bridge career), I read somebody's advice not to sort my cards lest a highly observant opponent notice from which part of my hand I pulled a card during the play and draw an inference about my holdings therefrom. For years, I followed that advice. Such observation, of course, violates the rules, and it is paranoid to fear it when playing for masterpoints rather than money. So if it makes things easier for you, keeping you from misreading your distribution during the auction or revoking during the play, by all means sort your cards.

However, you need not sort them one-at-a-time from left to right, as some players do. For example, if you pick up $\spadesuit 7$ $\clubsuit K$ $\diamond 9$ $\heartsuit Q7$ $\spadesuit AJ39$ $\clubsuit 43$ $\diamond QA$, you need not put the $\spadesuit A$ on your left, then the $\spadesuit J$, $\spadesuit 9$, $\clubsuit 3$, $\heartsuit Q$, $\heartsuit 7$ in that order, using ten or more separate moves. Instead, put the $\diamond QA$ between the $\diamond 9$ and the $\heartsuit Q$, the $\clubsuit K$ between the $\spadesuit 9$ and the $\clubsuit 4$, the $\spadesuit 9$ between the $\spadesuit J$ and the $\clubsuit 3$, and the $\heartsuit Q7$ between the $\spadesuit 3$ and the $\clubsuit K$ to separate red suits from black, using only four moves.

Meanwhile, as you are sorting (a purely mechanical process), you can use your brain to note your 4=2=4=3 hand pattern, count your Honor Tricks (3 with 2 plus-values, or $3\frac{1}{2}$), your high-card points (16) or (as I do) *sticks* (49, three sticks being equivalent to one HCP) and to plan your opening bid (1NT when playing strong notrumps, 1 \diamond when playing weak notrumps) if the dealer, your right-hand opponent, passes.

You'll be pleasantly surprised how much time you have left before the dealer makes his call. You can use that time productively, deciding on your call if he opens 1 \clubsuit , 1 \diamond , 1 \heartsuit , 1 \spadesuit or 1NT ahead of you, without impeding your other pastimes (e.g. munching on a cracker or ogling the blonde at the next table).