

Counting Tricks and Removing Trump

Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen!

Welcome to this, the 32nd session of Shark's Pointers Online.

Today's topic is "Counting Tricks and Removing Trump".

I don't know how many of you may have seen Rudy Guliani's 90 minute press conference yesterday, but rest assured that we're not going to discuss whether or not Dominion Voting Systems Software had an algorithm that resulted in the cessation of counting ballots in key swing state cities. I'll let Rudy Guliani and the courts pursue all these allegations.

But I did love the play on words - especially with respect to "counting tricks".

In bridge parlance, we usually use the term "counting tricks" to refer to keeping track or estimating the number of cards grouped four at a time, but today we are also going to talk about some of the potentially deceptive stratagems or maneuvers we may use to help us overcome some difficult situations associated with better understanding the distribution of various suits as well as to uncover some the measures we may employ to help improve our defensive prospects.

I'm going to devote a lot of time to our first hand today as it highlights a number of valuable lessons on this theme....

Counting Tricks and Removing Trump

North Deals
None Vul

♠ A Q J 9 6
♥ A 8 7 5
♦ J 8 4
♣ 9



♠ 5
♥ K Q 10 9 4
♦ K Q 2
♣ Q 10 6 3

Opening Lead 2 of ♣

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

4 ♥ by South

West leads the 2 of clubs and East wins the K. OK, let's stop. Let's speak to one of the most important "counting tricks" we have at our disposal.

Before we even play the 9 of clubs from dummy, let's make sure we find out what are EW lead agreements, defensive count and attitude signals (upside down or right side up), and discard agreements (Lavinthal, O/E). If we are playing a NT contract, take a second to ask about Smith or Reverse Smith Echo. Perhaps as our rules or technology improves, we won't be required to do this, but for now, our rules put the burden on declarer to ask these basic questions.

We're told that EW led 3rd and 5th best against suits. So the 2 is either from a 3 card suit or from a 5 card suit. As many of you may remember, in pre-pandemic days, I would frequently advise you to write down the opening spot card that was led in your private score next to the contract - in this case you would write "4H - 2". You'd recall the suit that was led, but frequently forget the spot card, so while you couldn't check back into your card to review this, the mere fact that you would write it down would help you remember. I don't know how you can do this with online bridge, but it's worth considering.

East's winning the K, clearly suggests he also holds the A. It is hard to believe that West would underlead the Ace of clubs. So we know immediately that East started with either AKx of clubs or AKxxx of clubs.

Well, this is helpful as it suggests that our Q of clubs will be able to control the suit. So let's now continue with the 2nd recurring and important technique to "count - or tabulate" our tricks.

Counting Tricks and Removing Trump

North Deals
None Vul

♠ A Q J 9 6
♥ A 8 7 5
♦ J 8 4
♣ 9



♠ 5
♥ K Q 10 9 4
♦ K Q 2
♣ Q 10 6 3

Opening Lead 2 of ♣

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

4 ♥ by South

What we need to do in planning the play with each and every suit contract is to count our winners and count our potential losers. This is like Motherhood and Apple Pie. We all know this. We all know we should do this, but we all - each and every one of us - fail to do this time and time again. Let's continue. We have 2 diamond tricks and 2 sure spade tricks. So this means we need 6 trump tricks. If our 4 missing hearts are divided 2-2 or 3-1, 6 trump tricks will be easy. We'll get 5 trumps in our hand and at least 1 club ruff in dummy.

So the next step is to count our losers. We have a sure loser in clubs and diamonds, and we might lose a spade trick.

Now the next step in this iterative thought process is to go back and ask ourselves, "what could possibly go wrong?" If diamonds are 6-1, ace and a ruff would lower our expected diamond tricks from 2 to 1. This isn't likely, but possible, and we still wouldn't be down necessarily if we could avoid a spade loser.

Counting Tricks and Removing Trump

North Deals
None Vul

♠ A Q J 9 6
♥ A 8 7 5
♦ J 8 4
♣ 9



♠ 5
♥ K Q 10 9 4
♦ K Q 2
♣ Q 10 6 3

Opening Lead 2 of ♣

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

4 ♥ by South

Well, as it turns out, that risk is eliminated when East continues with A and a diamond. West follows with the 6 and the 10. This is intriguing, as it now appears that East started with either AKx of clubs and very likely 5 diamonds to the A. (With only Axxx of diamonds, seems likely he would have returned a low diamond - not the Ace!)

So, now it appears that our only risk is if trumps split 4-0. This is a common suit combination. We can guarantee no trump losers provided we start with the K or the Q.

Let's pause to look at this a little more carefully... If you play the 10, 9, or 4 to dummy's A, and East shows out, West's J will score a trick. But if you start with the K or the Q from hand, you can finesse against the J of hearts in either hand if trumps split 4-0.

So, you exercise proper technique and play the K of hearts from hand, and lo and behold East indeed does show out!

This certainly changes the trick count, because if we proceed to remove trump from the West hand, we will only have 8 sure tricks (5 hearts, 1 spade and 2 diamonds). So, before even playing a 2nd trump from hand, let's reconstruct the hand as we know it with this additional information...

Counting Tricks and Removing Trump

North Deals
None Vul

♠ A Q J 9 6
♥ A 8 7 5
♦ J 8 4
♣ 9



♠ 5
♥ K Q 10 9 4
♦ K Q 2
♣ Q 10 6 3

Opening Lead 2 of ♣

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

4 ♥ by South

We are fairly confident that East started with Axxxx of diamonds. We know East started with AKx or AKxxx of clubs, and we absolutely know that East started with no hearts. Would East have passed the 1 spade opening bid with ?xx Void Axxxx AKxxx?

That doesn't seem likely does it? So let's assume East started with ?xxxx Void Axxxx AKx. I think that if East started with Kxxxx Void Axxxx AKx it is very unlikely that he would pass throughout - or at least not ever squirm!

Our model suggests the following: West started with Kx Jxxx 10x Jxxxx and
East started with xxxxx Void Axxxx AKx.

This was, in fact, the actual layout of the hand. So let's now play the hand double dummy..

Counting Tricks and Removing Trump

North Deals
None Vul

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

Opening Lead 2 of ♣

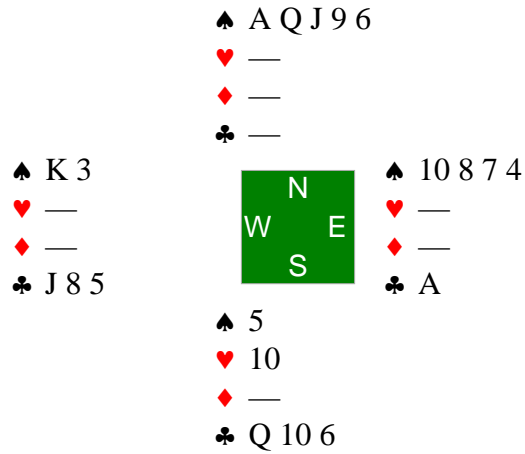
<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
	1 ♠	Pass	2 ♥
Pass	4 ♣	Pass	4 ♥
All pass			

4 ♥ by South

Certainly, we can see a road to 10 tricks now by way of the spade finesse - 3 spades, 5 hearts and 2 diamonds. But can you find an 11th trick?

How about this... Finesse the heart, draw trumps and play off all your hearts and your good diamond. You will achieve the following 5 card ending...

Counting Tricks and Removing Trump



Opening Lead 2 of ♣

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

4 ♥ by South

See what happens when you play your last trump, pitching a low spade from dummy?

East will be squeezed in the black suits. If you pitches the A of clubs, you score your Q and 3 spades via a finesse. If he instead pitches a spade, a finesse will bring home 4 spade tricks!

How about that! Just another example of a S-H-A-R-K squeeze!

OK, now let's look at a hand I went down in the other day, because I didn't stop to count my tricks....

Counting Tricks and Removing Trump

South Deals
None Vul

♠ K J 8 5 3
♥ K 3
♦ 9 8 5
♣ 7 6 4



♠ 10
♥ A J 10 6 5 4
♦ A Q 10 7
♣ A K

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

Opening Lead Q of ♣

4 ♥ by South

You win the A of ♣ in hand. What is your plan?

This hand is actually pretty simple, but I screwed it up!

The key is to count our tricks. We have 5 sure heart tricks, 2 clubs, 1 diamond, and assuming the spade Ace is onside, 1 spade trick - bringing our total to 9.

After winning the A of clubs, it is imperative to play a spade towards dummy, while we have a trump entry to the K of spades. Here was the complete deal...

Counting Tricks and Removing Trump

South Deals
None Vul

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

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

Opening Lead Q of ♣

4 ♥ by South

We're still not out of the woods! The Q of spades dropping really doesn't give us our 10th trick, but we have many options. We'll probably play a high spade from dummy and overruff East's 7 then play the A of hearts, hoping the suit split 3-2. (Note: If trumps were originally 4-1, it is highly unlikely you would make this hand.)

What I did was really pretty sloppy. I didn't play a 2nd spade at trick 2. I immediately played a heart to dummy and finessed a heart - losing to West's doubleton Q.

I didn't count my tricks and I tried to remove trump too soon.

Now I want to shift gears a little bit and share a couple of "tricks" you can use to help you count the hand - or prevent the opponents from getting a good count. Here's my favorite...

Counting Tricks and Removing Trump

IMPs

South Deals

None Vul

♠ Q J 10
♥ Q J 3
♦ K J 9 8 4
♣ J 10



♠ K 8
♥ 6 5 4
♦ A Q 10
♣ A Q 9 8 4

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
			1 NT
2 ♥	2 NT	Pass	3 ♣
Pass	3 NT	All pass	

Opening Lead A of ♥

3 NT by South

Partner's 2 NT bid is part of the Lebensohl convention which forces you to bid 3C. His subsequent 3 NT bid shows a heart stopper. You're declarer in 3 NT, and West leads the A of ♥ after overcalling 2 ♥. East plays the 10 of hearts at trick 1, and follows with the 7, playing standard count and attitude. West continues with the K of ♥, and then the 2 of ♥.

What is your plan?

It sure looks like West has the K of ♣, and his 2 is a very strong signal. But if he has the K of clubs but not the A of spades, then you can come to 9 tricks via 2 spades, 1 heart, 5 diamonds and 1 club - so long as you have a way to get to your 2nd spade winner!

So, you win the Q of ♥, and play A and Q of ♦, then hold your breath and lead the K of ♠ from hand. Unlucky... West wins and runs his heart winners for down one.

Here was the complete deal...

Counting Tricks and Removing Trump

South Deals
None Vul

♠ A 3 2	♠ Q J 10	♠ 9 7 6 5 4
♥ A K 9 8 2	♥ Q J 3	♥ 10 7
♦ 3 2	♦ K J 9 8 4	♦ 7 6 5
♣ 6 3 2	♣ J 8	♣ K 7 5
	<div style="display: inline-block; background-color: #008000; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center; margin: 5px;"> N W E S </div>	
	♠ K 8	
	♥ 6 5 4	
	♦ A Q 10	
	♣ A Q 10 9 4	

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
			1 NT
2 ♥	2 NT	Pass	3 ♣
Pass	3 NT	All pass	

Opening Lead A of ♥

3 NT by South

OMG! THE CLUB FINESSE WAS WINNING AFTER ALL!

West played the 2 of hearts to trick you into not taking the winning club finesse. If he had returned the 9 of hearts on the third round, declarer would have most certainly assumed the spade Ace was with West, and would have run 5 diamonds before finessing clubs and making the rest of the tricks.

On hands such as this, it is very easy for a defender to count declarer's tricks. His 1 NT opener shows 15-17 HCP. He can see 22 HCP between his hand and dummy, leaving only 18 missing. If partner has the K of clubs, which is possible, declarer might be fooled. If partner has the K of spades, then declarer will have the AKQ of clubs, and 3 NT will be cold. So, West's best play is to play partner for the only card that can make a difference and play as if he had the K of clubs and not the Ace of spades. Give declarer the K of spades, the AQ of both minors and this will give declarer 1 heart winner and 5 diamond winners, and at least 1 sure club winner.

Telling declarer how to play the hand is never in your best interest. If your falsecard can only fool declarer - and not partner - then by all means develop a habit of misinformation. Don't pause or break tempo before sending a misleading signal. Just play in tempo. Here partner can not get in the way, so it is perfectly safe to try to fool declarer.

By counting - defenders can trick declarer!

OK, one more final example where helping declarer count, can trick him!

Counting Tricks and Removing Trump

South Deals
None Vul

♠ A Q 8 4
♥ 8 7 6
♦ 5 3 2
♣ A J 10



♠ K J 9 5 3
♥ K J
♦ K Q 6
♣ K 9 5

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

4 ♠ by South

Opening lead J of ♦

The J of diamonds is led to East's Ace. A low heart is returned to the J, and Q. A of hearts drops South's K. 10 of hearts is ruffed. Now, South plays A of spades and spade to the K, both East and West following.

Now, South plays off his top diamonds, and plays a third round of trumps. West pitches a heart and East pitches a diamond. You can tell from the play of the hearts that hearts are 4-4, and spades are 2-2. You know that East started with 4 diamonds.

Now declarer continues with his last trump. West pitches a club and East pitches his last heart.

So now the count is clear.

West is 2-4-3-4 and East is 2-4-4-3. With nothing else to go on, you play the K of clubs and a club to dummy's 10. This was the complete deal...

Counting Tricks and Removing Trump

South Deals
None Vul

♠ 10 7	♠ A Q 8 4	♠ 6 2
♥ A Q 10 5	♥ 8 7 6	♥ 9 4 3 2
♦ J 10 9	♦ 5 3 2	♦ A 8 7 4
♣ 8 7 4 2	♣ A J 10	♣ Q 6 3
	<div style="display: inline-block; background-color: #008000; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center; margin: 5px;"> N W E S </div>	
	♠ K J 9 5 3	
	♥ K J	
	♦ K Q 6	
	♣ K 9 5	

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

4 ♠ by South

Opening lead J of ♦

OOPS! What happened?

That the contract depended on finding the club Q is obvious. East's discard of his 4th diamond is a very subtle but effective play. He wanted to make certain that declarer knew he had only 3 clubs. Against a non-expert declarer, an expert player might even pitch a club from hand, but this is such an obvious bad play, that an expert would find it quite suspicious - and probably work it out.

So, today's Shark's Pointer is to count your tricks, and don't draw trumps if you may need some ruffing to score your contract. If on defense, be alert to opportunities to mislead declarer - provided that your ploys are not going to backfire and confuse partner so as to expose your tricks.

Hope you enjoyed today's hands. See you next week!

Happy Thanksgiving to all!