

MOST players have a vague sort of feeling that if one opponent has opened the bidding it pays to assume he has any missing points. This tends to be true, but the expert aims to replace such woolly thinking with something more precise.

After the following bidding sequence you arrive in a contract of 4♠. North leads the ♥2 and South tries to cash the ♥QA K. Your contract depends on not losing a trump trick. Do you feel confident?

West	North	East	South
-	-	-	1NT ⁽¹⁾
2♠	No	4♠	

⁽¹⁾12-14

♠ AK8742	♠ J109
♥ 73	♥ J109
♦ QJ3	♦ K62
♣ J10	♣ AKQ2

You should feel totally secure. You are only missing 15 high card points. South has 9 points in hearts and must hold the ♠A to bring his total to 13 (within the range of the 1NT opening). If he also held the ♠Q that would come to 15 points so North has it. Because South must hold at least two spades for his hand to be balanced North's ♠Q must be singleton or doubleton, so ruff the third heart and cash the ♠AK.

That wasn't very difficult, was it? The technique employed was to count South's points. When one defender has made a limit bid it tends to be particularly profitable to count the points he has shown and mentally juggle the other missing honour cards to make up his bid.

Now slightly change the hand:

♠ AK8742	♠ J109
♥ 73	♥ 984
♦ QJ3	♦ K62
♣ J10	♣ AKQ2

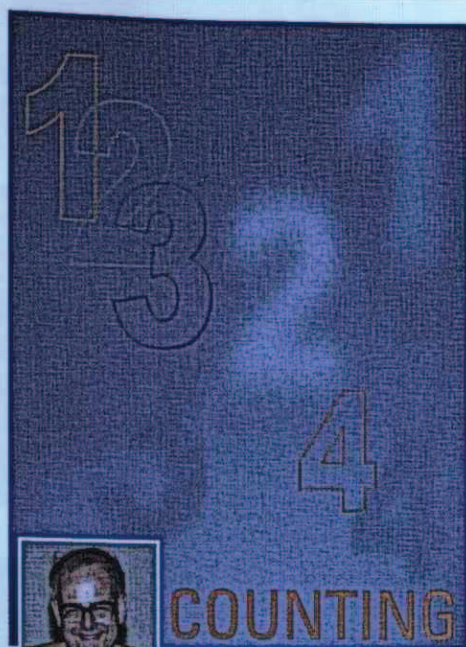
The bidding is the same as above. North starts with the ♥2, South taking with the ♥J and continuing with the ♥A and ♥K. You trump the ♥K and cash the ♠A but both opponents follow suit with low spades. What now?

South is being either rather stupid or very clever. Let us assume the former. He seems to hold ♥AKQJ. In that case to be within the range of his opening 1NT bid he will hold either the ♠A or ♠Q, but not both. It would clear up your problem if you could find out who has the ♠A, so at trick 4 lead the ♦J. In the unlikely event of this holding the trick you should lead the ♦J to your ♠K and aim to discard your remaining diamonds on dummy's clubs. More likely one of the defenders will take the ♠A, telling you who holds the ♠Q.

What if South is being devious? It is possible that North/South are playing modern defensive methods in which you lead a fourth highest card from a picture (jack or above), but lead the second highest card from a suit without an honour. In that case if North has led from ♥Q 6 5 2 South will know North has an honour, so South might be playing the ♥J from:

♠Q63 ♥AKJ10 ♦A98 ♣872

The clues are there for an expert South. He has made a limit bid, so he knows



Andrew Kambites shows how counting improves your bridge...

declarer will find it profitable to count points. There seem to be two heart tricks for the defence plus the ♠A. The contract may well hinge on declarer divining the position of the ♠Q, and if declarer is going to employ 'discovery' techniques, it will pay South to feed him some false information.

So how can declarer know? He can study the defenders' carding methods (South would surely not dare to risk letting declarer win a trick with the doubleton ♥Q) and then judge whether he believes South to be capable of such well reasoned trickery. My advice would be to assume South is being honest unless you have good reason to believe otherwise. How many players at your local club are capable of such beautifully reasoned defence? If he has succeeded in fooling you, take it as a compliment! At least he considered you a good enough opponent to be fooled!

Try your skill at the hand below. North starts with the ♦J, overtaken with the ♦Q and South tries to cash the ♠AKQ. You ruff the third round with the ♠10, discovering that North started with ♦J105. When you cross to dummy's ♠A North shows out so you successfully finesse your ♠J and draw South's ♠Q with your ♠K.

That still leaves you needing to guess the hearts correctly to make your contract. There is no harm in cashing the ♠AKQ, South following with the ♠910J. Decision time! You lead the ♥4 and play from dummy

West	North	East	South
-	-	-	1♦
2♠	No	4♠	

♠ KJ10764	♠ A953
♥ 74	♥ KJ2
♦ 86	♦ 7432
♣ AKQ	♣ 875

Try constructing South's hand. You know he started with 4 diamonds and 3 spades. He seems to be 3-3-4-3 shape, (possibly 3-2-4-4 if he is playing games in clubs).

Does he hold hand (a) or (b)?

- (a) ♠Q82 ♥Q85 ♦AKQ9 ♣J109
(b) ♠Q82 ♥A85 ♦AKQ9 ♣J109

The key here is what didn't happen. With a balanced hand South preferred to open 1♦ rather than 1NT. You need to know the range of his 1NT opening bid. If he plays the weak No Trump he surely cannot hold (a), otherwise he will have had no rebid. Play him for (b): too strong to open 1NT and hence planning a No Trump rebid.

Of course if his opening 1NT shows 15-17 or 16-18 points he won't have hand (b).

When you first discover counting it undoubtedly opens up a new world to your declarer play. At first it will slow you down, perhaps to the frustration of your opponents and the tournament director. With practice you will speed up, but even then, you need to be practical in judging exactly when counting is worthwhile. While playing bridge you have plenty to think about, and unnecessary counting is quite likely to distract your energy from other, more fruitful pursuits.

Obviously you will consider counting when you have a choice of plays.

Equally, in the hands we have seen one of the defenders has made a limit bid, which should always alert you to the possibility of counting points. Another time when counting points is likely to be helpful is when a defender has passed but subsequently shown up with points. Auctions which start: 1♥-No-No are always revealing if the opening bidder becomes a defender. Responder has denied 6 points!

Finally, be aware of what has and hasn't been led. Consider these scenarios:

(1) Defenders bid and supported hearts before you bought the contract in spades. Hearts were not led, instead a diamond from an undesirable holding like ♦Qxxx. Why?

Almost certainly the opening leader has the ♥A and is afraid you hold the ♥K. Therefore leader's partner has the ♥K.

(2) Defenders bid and supported hearts before you bought the contract in spades. The ♥3 is led to the ♥A. Who has what?

The opening leader has the ♥K (otherwise the ♥A by third hand would be a false card). With ♥KQ opener would have led the ♥K, so leader's partner holds the ♥Q.

There really are so many clues available if you train your mind to seek them out.

Six of the best

A beginner part way through the play and holding five cards paused for thought and then said brightly: "We've only got to get six more tricks and we've made our contract".