

Counting points as declarer

Tips for declarers

Study the opening lead.

Ask yourself questions about that suit and why the leader chose it.

- Does the card suggest length or shortness?
- Does it pinpoint the leader's exact length (and therefore his partner's length)?
- Does it show an honour combination or the lack of one?
- What does it tell you about the leader's holdings in other suits?

Some of the strongest inferences may come from a suit that is **not** led. In a trump contract, if your auction suggested an "obvious" lead (an unbid suit, for example), but the leader chooses a different suit:

- If you're missing the ace and king of that suit, assume the leader doesn't have both. You can now "see" at least three or four of the high-card points in his partner's hand.
- If you're missing the ace and queen, the opening leader probably has the ace (the only holding that would make the lead unattractive).

Play on one suit at a time.

Once you begin drawing trumps or establishing a suit, stick with that suit. If you have to lose a trick, resume leading and counting the critical suit as soon as you regain the lead. Resist the temptation to cash high cards in other suits unless you have a clear purpose (you need them for entries, for example).

Collect information from the defenders' signals.

Be aware, however, that you can't trust these implicitly. If your opponent believes that information about his count or attitude in a suit will help you more than his partner, he may not give an accurate signal, especially late in the play.

Opening leads and early signals are usually honest. If you need count information in a specific suit, try to lead that suit early in the play.

Consider the skill of your opponents. The more experienced they are, the more reliable their bidding and carding will be.

Try to disrupt the opponents' signals.

As declarer, you can false-card at will, but be random. Clever opponents may spot a pattern.

If an opponent is cashing a trick and you want him to continue the suit, try to "signal" as his partner would. If they play standard attitude signals (high card is encouraging), follow with a high spot card. If you want the opponent to switch, play your lowest card.

Play the odds.

“Eight ever, nine never” and similar guidelines should almost never be considered in isolation. The division of one suit affects the odds of how other suits will split, so use your picture of the whole layout to decide how to play a suit combination.

If you can determine from the bidding or play that one opponent has greater length in a suit, finesse that opponent for a missing queen. If you have a complete count – you know West has two clubs and East has four – the odds are 2:1 that East holds the ♣Q.

If you don’t know how the suit is splitting, use the theory of “vacant spaces” to determine which opponent is likely to have greater length. Suppose you’re looking for the ♣Q, but the only count information you have is that West has five spades and East has two. That means West has eight “vacant spaces” (unknown cards) in his hand and East has 11. There’s more room in East’s hand for club length, so finesse East for the queen.

Count the defenders’ high-card points to be sure your conclusion is consistent with their bidding. If West opened and has shown up with only 10 points in other suits, you may want to finesse him for the queen.

If possible, delay your important decisions.

Collect all the information you can about the defenders’ distributions before you decide how to attack a critical suit. Run another suit or cash extra trumps (if you can do so safely) and see what you can learn from the opponents’ discards. If you have tricks to lose, consider giving the defenders the lead. It may give you a squeeze situation.

Use discovery plays to get a count on side suits. Here is an example:

(West)	♠K9873	♠AQ102	(East)
	♥842	♥765	
	♦K7	♦A43	
	♣AJ5	♣K103	

South opens 1♥ and you (West) become declarer in 4♠. North leads the ♥Q, and after six tricks are played (three hearts and three rounds of spades), you learn that South started with ♠654 ♥AKJ1093 ♦? ♣?.

With nothing else to go on, you would probably finesse South for the ♣Q because he opened the bidding. If you’re counting, though, you may come to a different conclusion. And if you use a simple discovery play, you might be able to guarantee three club winners.

Continue counting South’s hand by cashing the ♦K and ♦A and ruffing dummy’s small diamond. You may see more of South’s high-card points on these tricks, but the most important information is his distribution. If he follows to all three diamond leads, you’ll know 12 of his cards -- 3 spades, 6 hearts and at least 3 diamonds. He therefore holds a singleton or void in clubs. Cash the ♣A, and if the ♣Q doesn’t fall, take the marked (guaranteed) finesse through North.