

COUNTING BY DECLARER

Counting the hand does not refer to counting the cards of a suit as it is played. For the advancing player it refers to the process of building an accurate picture of the unseen hands to assist in locating the position of an important card. One of the situations where it is important to 'get a count' is where the contract depends on a finesse for one trick. Good players are reluctant to take a finesse for one trick that may mean the success or failure of the contract. One way of avoiding the uncertainty is to end-play an opponent, putting him on lead so that he has to return a card that gives you the extra trick. But if you have already lost your quota of tricks you obviously cannot lose another to bring off an end-play.

The answer is to build up a picture of the unseen hands so as to obtain a count of the opponents' distribution. This is generally considered to be the prerogative of the expert, far above the head of the average player. To an extent counting the hand is advanced, but it is not so difficult if you set about it in the right way. Here is a fairly simple example:

S AK42
H 762
D A103
C 1084

S 7
H J8
D KJ75
C AKQJ92

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
			1C
1H	1S	no	3C
no	3H	no	4C
no	5C	all pass	

After South's jump to three clubs, North bid three hearts to suggest a contract of three no-trumps if South held a stopper in hearts. Not having one, South rebid his clubs and North raised to five clubs on the strength of his controls. After the opponents cash two top hearts the contract would appear to depend on the diamond finesse which can be taken either way. It is in order to avoid having to guess the whereabouts of the queen of diamonds that it is important to get a count of the hand.

West leads the ace followed by the king of hearts and East follows with the nine and the four. West continues with the queen of hearts on which East discards the four of diamonds. South ruffs with the nine of clubs on the principle of always keeping the lowest trump when the suit is solid. So far what is known of West's hand?

He holds:

S ? H AKQxxx D ? C ?

South next draws trumps in two rounds West following with the five and the three. So West's hand is now

S ? H AKQxxx D ? C 53

That leaves five unknown cards. As diamonds are the vital suit it is important to play on the suit that will provide useful information and that suit must be spades. So the next step is cash the ace and king of spades discarding the five of diamonds from hand. Both East and West follow suit so West's hand is now:

S xx H AKQxxx D ? C xx

The unknown cards are now reduced to three. South next ruffs the two of spades in hand with jack of clubs and West follows suit. Dummy is entered by leading the two of clubs to the ten and the four of spades is played from the table and ruffed in hand with the queen of clubs. West follows with the queen of spades. Now the picture is almost complete. West holds:

S Qxxx H AKQxxx D ? C xx

He has a singleton diamond which is either the queen or it is not. South leads the seven of diamonds and when West follows with a low diamond the ace is played from the table and the three returned; when East follows with a low card the jack is finessed. This is 100% certain to win as West is known to have no diamond left.

The important thing is to try and count the hand you know most about. Here West was known to have six hearts, nearly half the hand, and it is not difficult to find out his other cards by playing these suits.

Here is another example:

North	South
S 762	S KQJ
H J85	H AKQ
D A1052	D KQ83
C K76	C AQ8

South is declarer in six no-trumps and West leads the ten of spades. East wins with the ace and returns the three to the queen. There are now eleven top tricks and all that is needed is to make four tricks in diamonds. If they are divided three and two there is no problem. It is tempting to lay down the king and queen and, if East fails to follow, take the marked finesse against West's jack. But if East holds the guarded jack this plan will fail.

In such cases it is best to delay playing the vital suit as late as possible, by which time you may have found out much useful information about the opposing distribution. Play

out the safe winners first. South plays off the king of spades and East discards a club. Therefore West started with five spades and East with two. South next plays off ace, king and queen of hearts and East discards another club on the third round. Therefore West started with five hearts and East with two. West has three unidentified cards. As it is important to leave the diamonds until last, South cashes the ace and queen of clubs and West follows to each of these so his hand is known to have been either:

S 10xxxx	H xxxxx	D ?	C xx or
S 10xxxx	H xxxxx	D None	C xxx

It would be tempting to play a third club to clear the position but this would be a mistake as the king of clubs may be needed as an entry. It is safe to lead the three of diamonds to the ace as West can hold at most one diamond. When he follows with the four, dummy's ace wins and the ten is returned. East covers with the jack and South wins with the queen. Now dummy's king of clubs provides the necessary entry to lead another diamond from the table, South holding the king and eight over East's nine and seven. The full deal:

	S 762	
	H J85	
	D A1052	
	C K76	
S 109854		S A3
H 97632		H 104
D 4		D J976
C 103		C J9542
	S KQJ	
	H AKQ	
	D KQ83	
	C AQ8	

The next hand is of a similar character:

North	South
S KJ108	S AQ975
H K642	H AQ97
D 74	D AK3
C AJ3	C 2

South is declarer in seven spades and West leads the queen of diamonds, taken with the king. On the face of it the contract looks safe. The losing diamond can be ruffed on the table and providing the hearts divide normally the grand slam is lay-down. The only question is with the hearts. If one opponent holds four with the jack-ten they can only be picked up if they are with East,

as dummy's king will take the ten but there is no card in dummy to capture the jack. So it is necessary to count the hand to find out about the distribution of the hearts.

South starts by leading the two of clubs to the ace and ruffing the three with the seven of spades. West follows to these with the queen and ten. South leads the five of spades to the ten and ruffs the jack of clubs in hand with the nine of spades, West discarding a diamond. As West followed to the trump lead at trick four, he is known so far to have one spade, two clubs and two diamonds. South next cashes the ace and queen of trumps, West following and East discarding clubs. The position is now:

North	South
S K	S None
H K642	H AQ97
D 7	D A3
C None	C None

Trumps having been drawn South cashes the ace of diamonds and East throws a club. So West is known to have held:

S xxx	H ?	D QJ10xxxx	C Q10
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South next leads the seven of hearts to the king, West following with the three. The two of hearts is returned, covered by the ten from East and queen from South. South next ruffs the three of diamonds on the table and leads the four of hearts from dummy, holding ace - nine over East's jack - eight. The full deal?

	S KJ108	
	H K642	
	D 74	
	C AJ3	
S 643		S 2
H 3		H J1085
D QJ108652		D 9
C Q10		C K987654
	S AQ975	
	H AQ97	
	D AK3	
	C 2	

Of course, if East had followed with the eight of hearts in the second round, declarer could have finessed the nine with complete confidence.

South can see eight tricks in his contract of three no-trumps on the following hand. There are two possible ways of making the ninth.

North	South
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S A74	S K85
H 952	H A74
D AK102	D Q83
C A105	C K763

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
no	3NT	all pass	1NT

West leads the six of hearts and East wins with the queen, returning the ten. South ducks and West overtakes with the jack and clears the suit with a third round. East discarding the three of spades.

With eight top tricks the ninth could come from either diamonds or clubs. As the diamonds involve the problem of whether to finesse the ten or play for an even break, it is better to leave that decision until later. At trick four South leads the three of clubs on which West plays the two, dummy the ten and East the jack. South has ducked the club into the safe hand. East returns the queen of spades which South allows to win, West playing the ten so partner can safely continue the suit. East leads the jack of spades taken on the table. South now tries the clubs, playing ace and five from dummy. East follows with the four and nine and South wins the third round with the king, West discarding the three of hearts. As the clubs have not divided well it is necessary to play the diamonds.

At this point South needs to build up a picture of the unseen hands. West discarded on the third club and East discarded on the third heart. When the king of spades is cashed West discards a further heart and his hand is known to be:

S 10x	H KJxxx	D ?xxx	C xx
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South leads the three of diamonds to the ace and returns the two to the queen. He now leads the eight. If the jack has not fallen it is safe to finesse the ten. East's hand distribution is 5-2-2-4.

Consider this example:

North	South
S K106	S A87
H K82	H A53
D J84	D A63
C A1064	C KQ95

The contract is three no-trumps by South and West led the five of diamonds covered by the four, ten and three. East returned the queen of diamonds, South winning the third round. With eight top tricks it is necessary to make four in clubs. Before committing himself to the suit South should try to get more information. First he should lead a spade to the ten and jack. East returns the queen of spades to the ace all following. South next cashes dummy's king of spades, West discarding a heart. South next cashes two top hearts, West following. West has shown up with two spades, three hearts and presumably four diamonds. He cannot possibly hold a singleton club. Therefore South plays his king and queen of clubs and East shows out; the marked finesse of the ten of clubs ensures nine tricks.

The contract is 7NT by South in the following hands:

North	South
S QJ6	S AK7
H A9875	H KQ
D QJ3	D AK
C K4	C AQ10762

West leads the ten of diamonds covered by the three, two and ace. The contract appears lay-down providing either hearts or clubs are reasonably divided. It is correct to play hearts first as there is no option as to how to play the suit. Next cash king and queen of hearts on which East plays four and two. South next leads the seven of spades to the queen, all following. On the ace of hearts, East discards a diamond. It is now known that East held two hearts and West four.

It might now be tempting to play clubs but there is a choice: either to play off the top clubs, hoping the jack falls, or finesse the ten. Therefore find out more. Next cash ace and king of spades from hand and notice that East discards a diamond on the third. So it is now known that East held two spades and two hearts and three diamonds (he discarded two). All follow on the king of diamonds. South next leads the six of clubs to the king, West playing the eight and East the three. Next the queen of diamonds is cashed, East and West both following. East has followed to two more rounds of diamonds and therefore started with five, leaving West with three. It is now possible to reconstruct East's original distribution: two spades, two hearts, five diamonds and four clubs. The full deal was:

S QJ6
H A9875
D QJ3
C K4

S 105432
H J1063
D 1098
C 8

S 98
H 42
D 76542
C J953

S AK7
H KQ
D AK
C AQ10762

West had only one club which he has played, so it is now completely safe to finesse the ten. Much better than taking a guess earlier

COUNTING BY DEFENDER

The need to count declarer's hand in defence occurs frequently when you appear to be end-played. Let us look at an example where you are West defending a contract of six spades by South.

S 10973
H A5
D K964
C KJ8

S Q84
H KOJ8
D J75
C 762

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
			1S
no	3S	no	4C
no	4H	no	6S

You lead the king of hearts, which is taken with the ace. South next plays the ace and king of trumps hoping for the queen to fall but East discards a heart. Faced with a certain trump loser he needs to try for an end-play to avoid a second loser. At trick four he leads the five of clubs to the king, East following with the nine. He next ruffs

the five of hearts in hand with the two of spades and follows with the ace and queen of clubs, East following with the four and three. He now leads a trump putting you on play, East discarding the ten of clubs. What do you play next? Having been told many times not to concede a ruff and discard, it seems that the only hope is a diamond. So let us assume you lead the five on which dummy plays the six, East the queen and South the ace: South now leads a low diamond and finesses the nine to make the contract.

Before making the panic lead of a diamond you should have stopped to reconstruct declarer's hand: he had five spades, one heart and showed up with three clubs. Therefore he is marked with four diamonds. If these are headed by the ace and queen their is no hope. But if your partner holds the queen you have a combined trick *provided you do not lead the suit*. With four diamonds in each hand a ruff and discard cannot help declarer, so lead the queen of hearts. The full hand:

	S 10973	
	H A5	
	D K964	
	C KJ8	
S Q84		S 5
H KOJ8		H 1097643
D J75		D Q8
C 762		C 10943
	S AKJ62	
	H 2	
	D A1032	
	C AQ5	

In the next example you are again West, defending six spades by South.

	S J1093
	H AJ42
	D A65
	C J7
S 82	
H 105	
D Q974	
C KQ1063	

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
			1S
no	3S	no	4NT
no	5H	no	6S

You lead the king of clubs taken by South with the ace, East following with the nine. South draws trumps in two rounds, all following. He next plays the king of diamonds, leads the two to the ace and ruffs the five in hand. Then he leads the five of clubs to your queen, East completing a peter by playing the two. As East holds four clubs a club lead will concede a ruff and discard, as also will a diamond. It may be tempting to lead a heart but this will prove fatal. Stop and count declarer's hand: he has five spades, and two diamonds; he evidently has two clubs, leaving four hearts. If East should hold the king of hearts (unlikely) it will always make. If he holds the queen the lead of the ten will be fatal unless East holds queen and nine. Therefore lead a club and let declarer play hearts himself. The full deal:

	S J1093	
	H AJ42	
	D A65	
	C J7	
S 82		S 65
H 105		H Q83
D Q964		D J1083
C KQ1063		C 9842
	S AKQ74	
	H K975	
	D K2	
	C A5	

The natural play for South is to lead the king of hearts and lead the six to the jack for an unsuccessful finesse, losing to the queen. If he plays ace followed by jack, pinning the ten, you should hold your cards up! Without a club lead six hearts is a better contract as North's losing club can be discarded on the fifth spade.

In the next example South is declarer in six spades.

S J9743
 H K6
 D Q3
 C A1064

S 52
 H Q1098
 D KJ76
 C J83

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
			2NT
no	3H	no	4S
no	4NT	no	5S
no	6S	all pass	

In reply to South's two no-trumps North made a transfer bid of three hearts requesting partner to bid three spades, the purpose of transfer bids being to enable the strong hand to remain concealed. South's bid of four spades showed a strong trump suit and prompted North to try for a slam. West led the ten of diamonds on which the queen was played from the table, covered by the king and taken with the ace. South next cashed the ace and king of spades, all following and played the king, ace and another heart, ruffing in dummy, West petering to show four. He now led the three of diamonds which you took with the jack. Now what? Before making a passive lead of a club, stop and count declarer's hand. He has four spades and three hearts and has shown up with two diamonds. He must have the king of clubs to make up twenty points for his opening bid (S AKQ=9, H A=4, D A=4, and C K=3). Suppose you lead a diamond, giving him a ruff and discard? This cannot help him if he has four clubs. If he has three diamonds and three clubs, the diamond return does not give him a discard. Therefore South's shape is 4-3-2-4 or 4-3-3-3. The full deal:

S J9743
 H K6
 D Q3
 C A1064

S 106
 H J743
 D 109854
 C Q2

S 52
 H Q1098
 D KJ76
 C J83

S AKQ8
 H A52
 D A2
 C K975

Obviously the club lead will trap partner's honour enabling declarer to finesse through yours.

You are East defending three no-trump by South.

S 843
H 10872
D KJ64
C K2

S J105
H AQ93
D Q102
C J105

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
no	1H	no	1D
all pass			3NT

West leads the two of spades on which dummy plays the three, East the ten and South the king. South next leads the ace of diamonds covered by the three, four and two. South continues with the five of diamonds on which West discards the six of spades and the jack loses to your queen. What should East return?

There is little point in returning a spade as West's discard suggests no real interest in trying to establish the suit. Possibly the jack of clubs, but West can hardly have much here. South has so far been marked with S AK(+1), D A(+4) and his rebid of three no-trumps indicates about nineteen or twenty points. That only leaves hearts.

The full hand:

S 843
H 10872
D KJ64
C K2

S Q762
H J654
D 3
C 9876

S J105
H AQ93
D Q102
C J105

S AK9
H K
D A9875
C AQ43

The correct lead is the ace of hearts. Reasoning as follows, we know West's lead of the two of spades suggests a four card-suit. As he has only one diamond he must be 4-4-1-4. So South has a singleton heart which may be the king. Now a lead to the jack and a heart return defeats the contract.

The next example finds West defending against three no-trumps by South.

S K7
H 10
D QJ732
C Q8742

S Q83
H 97432
D K1084
C 5

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
			1C
no	1D	no	1H
no	3C	no	3NT
all pass			

With no obvious lead West led the three of spades on which the seven was played from the table and taken by East with the jack. East cashed the ace of spades felling the king, and returned the five to West's queen. What should West play next?

If you recall the bidding and try to reconstruct a picture of South you may come up with the right answer.

South appears to hold four clubs and four hearts; his spades are headed by the ten as East played the jack on the first round. Has he three spades or four? If he held three spades (10xx) he would surely have played the king of spades from dummy at trick one, being the only genuine chance of winning the trick. Therefore he probably held 109xx. That means he has only one diamond which may be the ace. West should therefore lead the four of diamonds to the fourth trick. The full deal:

S K7
H 10
D QJ732
C Q8742

S Q83
H 97432
D K1084
C 5

S AJ65
H A85
D 965
C J103

S 10942
H KQJ6
D A
C AK96

The defence take three spades, one heart and one diamond

Apart from counting declarer's distribution it is also important to count his high card points. This is easiest when he has made a limit bid such as one no-trump.

S AKJ5
H 96
D J87
C 10654

S Q103
H 10832
D AQ3
C Q93

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
no	1S	no	1C
no	2NT	no	1NT
			3NT

Playing a weak no-trump, South's rebid showed 15-16 high card points.

West led the four of hearts on which East played the ten and South ducked, playing the seven. East returned the two of hearts, taken by the king. South next crossed to dummy with the king of spades and finessed the jack of clubs successfully. He next returned a spade to the jack, East winning with the queen. East continued with hearts and the contract was made with three spades, four clubs and two hearts.

When in with the queen of spades East should switch to diamonds. South has shown up with H AK (7 points) C AKJ (8 points), totalling fifteen points. He cannot have the king of diamonds as he would then have eighteen points. The full deal:

S AKJ5
H 96
D J87
C 10654

S 762
H QJ54
D K652
C 72

S Q103
H 10832
D AQ3
C Q93

S 984
H AK7
D 1094
C AKJ8