

OUT FOR THE COUNT

Preliminary steps in learning to reconstruct the concealed hands at bridge

“I only had 5 points, partner, but I did hold seven spades. How many spades did you have, partner?” How often have you heard this kind of exchange at the bridge table, after the hand is over? It translates, of course, into “I don’t expect you to count the hand, partner, since I don’t do so myself”. Whether or not a survey on the subject has ever been carried out, we don’t know. But if one were to be undertaken, it’s a fair bet that it would go something like this.

The question would be put “Do you attempt to obtain a count of the concealed hands at bridge?” By this is meant not just counting trumps, say; but mentally attempting to reconstruct the unseen hands in terms of suit distributions, high card points and location of specific cards. Card reading therefore in its broadest sense. There are two types of count – mechanical and inferential. The first is available when a player shows out in a suit, or when all thirteen cards in a suit have been played. The second is a different matter entirely, and depends on a host of factors involving extensive bridge knowledge and experience. These include the auction; the lead; fall of the cards; probabilities, original and modified as the play progresses; defenders signals; necessary assumptions and many others. Unlike the mechanical count, it is by definition never certain, and its accuracy depends on a player’s skill in drawing appropriate inferences, and the human factor of their reliability.

The answers to the survey question would probably be along these lines: Beginners/less experienced players – never. Average club players – very rarely, if ever. Top club players – from time to time, usually with a reminder to themselves to make the effort. County players – only if the need to do so is obvious, since counting has not yet become second nature and therefore automatic. Experts/professionals – always, except perhaps when drunk or asleep or, when feeling lazy, they are playing on autopilot. Internationals - 100% always, since they are never lazy or drunk, and don’t sleep – just kidding!

Why should this subject be of interest to the club player? Well, it’s hard to be precise, since many subjective considerations are involved. But very broadly, although most declarer play problems can reasonably be tackled without explicit counting, nevertheless many cannot: perhaps the majority of the best defensive plays depend upon it. The exact statistics are irrelevant, though. The simple fact is that to play bridge to best advantage at the more advanced levels of the game, the ability to count and reconstruct the unseen hands is paramount. For any player who aspires to progress beyond average to good club standard, this is an incontrovertible and possibly annoying fact of life, in terms of the demands it places on anyone determined to master the necessary skills.

Unless you are gifted with unusual powers of perception, pattern recognition, visualisation and memory, counting the hand is no easy task, even at the mechanical level. Don’t let anyone persuade you otherwise with facetious remarks, such as “You can count up to thirteen surely. What’s so clever about that?”

So the question is – How do you best set about the daunting task, assuming that your bridge ambitions are such that you want to get to grips with the subject. One or two preliminary observations. You won’t learn to count at the bridge table in your club evening duplicate, unless you want to become a pariah, renowned for slow play. There is simply too much to do, on top of all the normal bridge decisions to be made. Of course this difficulty could be overcome, if you want to practise alone with your computer. But there is a better method, the first stages of which are described below; more systematic and therefore more likely to

produce results. Secondly you cannot run before you can walk; and in this context you need to be comfortable with obtaining a mechanical count easily and fluently before you attempt a reconstruction of the unseen holdings based on inference. This of course is a much more complex business, and will be the subject of later articles in this series.

Here we are going to cover just the first steps in the suggested programme, which aims to get you thinking along the right lines, oiling the counting machinery and winding it up.

- The high card point clusters. For speed in counting points.
- The template hand patterns. For familiarity and recognition of the basic distributions.
- The vocabulary of hand description. For economy, elegance, consistency and aid to memory
- Playing with an unsorted hand.
- The main daily exercise in the mechanical counting of a complete bridge deal.
- The secondary daily exercise in visualising and recalling single suit layouts.

High Card Points

Any player tolerably good at mental arithmetic will no doubt find this suggestion silly and suitable only for 5 year olds. Nevertheless it will help speed up those players who aren't quite so fluent in their sums. If you view the honours in a suit as a group, of which the point total is recognised automatically, you will be able to state the HCP total in a given hand, or the outstanding points held by the opposition more quickly.

Points	Honour Holding
1	J
2	Q
3	K, QJ
4	A, KJ
5	AJ, KQ
6	AQ, KQJ
7	AK, AQJ
8	AKJ
9	AKQ
10	AKQJ

You would think that all players thought in terms of these groups. Apparently they don't, so the suggestion is perhaps less infantile than it seems at first sight.

Hand Patterns

It is important to commit the possible hand patterns to memory. The following classification in groups is slightly different from the usual method, which collects hand types under the headings "Balanced, Two Suiters, One Suiter etc". Any classification is somewhat arbitrary but the method below should enable you to recognise the patterns more easily.

These are stated as a template or hand type and are best always referred to by their defining shape. If you start messing the numbers about to reflect the actual suit distributions in a

given hand, you will soon get into a fine old muddle. In other words a hand is always described as 5521 not 5125 for example, even though strictly it is the latter shape, in suit ranking order.

Pick a new group each day or half of one of the large groups, and run through them in your head. If you come to grief, work the distributions out for yourself. A few minutes a day for a week or two, and your recognition of hand patterns will be up to scratch, enabling you to be more fluent in your hand description. The purpose of all this will be clear later on.

4 card suits	4333
	4432
	4441

5 card suits	5332
	5422
	5431
	5440
	5521
	5530

6 card suits	6331
	6322
	6421
	6430
	6511
	6520
	6610

7 card suits	7222
	7321
	7330
	7411
	7420
	7510
	7600

8+ cards	too infrequent to bother about
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Note that in this whole discussion we have not allowed for suits of 8 cards or more, in order not to overload the memory. At a later stage, when you start to count at the table, adjustments can be made easily enough, when necessary.

Describing a bridge hand

The club bore stops you in your tracks. “So how would you bid this hand? You hold five spades headed by the Ace and King. Singleton Heart – no, small doubleton Heart. Four Diamonds, Ace King, Queen and another. No, sorry, the Hearts were actually King and

another. Where was I? Oh yes four Diamonds and a number of Clubs, three rags as I recall. What's that you said? Fourteen cards? Quite right, well spotted. It was a singleton heart after all. Yes, that's it, an Ace. Now we're there. Spades Ace King four times...." If you have ever endured this kind of mental torture, you will sympathise with the plea, never to try and describe a bridge hand verbally, unless you can do it quickly and accurately.

There are many terms available, some rather long winded and old fashioned, some sounding a bit like incomprehensible jargon, and some more logical and succinct as suggested in the table below. It is assumed throughout that the spot cards are ignored, unless they are critical. If it's a bidding discussion, this will not usually be the case, but with a play problem quite likely so. However most play problems other than single suit combinations and safety plays are normally written down for obvious reasons.

Holding	Simplest Description
Singleton (not an honour)	Stiff. OK, small singleton, if you find that term rather aggressive and ugly
Singleton honour	e.g King stiff. Likewise King single
Doubleton (no honour)	Two small. Avoid two rags. Very 1930s
Doubleton (one honour)	e.g Queen One. Avoid Queen Bit. Nasty jargon
Doubleton (two honours)	e.g Queen Jack bare. OK, Alone, if you are shy about the connotation. Avoid Queen Jack tight.
3 cards (no honour)	Three small
3 cards (with honour(s))	e.g King to three, Ace Jack to three. Avoid King third. American jargon. The natives won't know what you mean.
4 cards	e.g. Queen to four. Avoid Queen four times; again an old fashioned description. Four bagger? Ugh!
5 cards +	Similarly up to the smart alec's 13 small

So, our club bore's greeting, after a bit of trimming, becomes "You hold a 5431, 20 count. Ace King to five. Ace stiff. Ace King Queen to Four. Three small. Right?" That's more like it. What a relief!

Playing with an unsorted hand

In the exercise below, you will be asked to cope with your hand unsorted. You won't like this at all to begin with. In fact you'll probably loathe it. After a few weeks of practice however, you'll become a convert, and wonder why anyone goes to the trouble of all that fiddling about, when they pick their cards up.

But what on earth is the point? Quite simply to force you to visualise and hold bridge layouts in your head. If you are ever going to learn to count the concealed hands in a deal, this is a fundamental prerequisite. Playing with an unsorted hand is an effective way to start. Please don't attempt this, by the way, at the table in an actual game, unless or until you are completely confident. You will look like a complete ditherer, and will be liable to revoke frequently.

Here's the best way to tackle it. Scan Spades left to right, then back right to left. State holding to yourself e.g King to six. Then Hearts similarly, e.g Jack one, then Diamonds, e.g King Queen bare and then clubs, e.g King Jack to three. Only the honours need be explicit. You can get to the spot cards much later, if ever you feel up to it. Once again no point in trying to run before walking, and the challenge is tough enough as it is. Then state the hand pattern. Then High Card Point total. Now you've got it. The full description, without looking – 6322, 13 count, King to six, Jack one, King Queen bare, King Jack to three.

Notice that you state the template pattern (in this case 6322) rather than actual pattern (6223). The template pattern can be recognised instantly, if you've done your homework, whereas the actual pattern, though strictly more informative, will tend to be confusing and fail to make an immediate impression. The implicit adjustment of the template to the actual pattern will become self evident, since the suits are stated in order of rank.

The Main Exercise

This section describes your daily workout. Call it card callisthenics, if you like. Initially it should take about 15 minutes, maybe more, depending on your natural card sense and memory. But this time will come down dramatically as you get into practice. Perhaps five minutes after a month or so to achieve a first time 90% success.

These are the steps you take.

1. Deal four hands. Pick up one, and if it has a fair number of picture cards, hang onto it as South. Otherwise change it for another one.
2. Don't sort, but commit the hand to memory, along the lines described above, so that you have a full mental description – pattern, count, actual holdings in suit rank order.
3. Choose another hand and lay it out correctly sorted as North, like a dummy, with suits alternating by colour. Describe the hand to yourself in the standard way.
4. State to yourself the combined high card points in your hand and North, and count of outstanding points with West and East.
5. State the possible distributions of each suit in the unseen hands. Starting with the most probable to the least probable. We are not concerned with percentages here; just the principle that an odd number of cards outstanding will more likely divide as evenly as possible and an even number unevenly. Ignore 8+ holdings. For example suppose your spade holding is 7 cards, with South and North. The adverse distribution in order of probability will be 4/2, 3/3, 5/1, 6/0. If your combined holding is 4 cards, say, then similarly 5/4, 6/3, 7/2 for East/West. This all sounds a bit tedious and repetitious. Don't skip it. You need to drum into your subconscious these patterns of distribution. Also state the missing honours in each suit.
6. Lay out the West hand sorted like a dummy, and go through the same mental description.

7. Now you can work out East of course. State East to yourself, then turn over the cards and lay them out to check you've got it right.
8. Take a minute's break, away from the cards. Now try and state all four hands to yourself without looking.

Just to illustrate clearly what should be going on in your head, here is a live example.

1. You pick up ♠5, ♦7, ♦Q, ♣J, ♣9, ♥A, ♥8, ♣2, ♠3, ♦3, ♣K, ♥6, ♥K
2. "4432; 13 count, 2 small; AK to 4; Q to 3: KJ to 4"
3. North goes down. ♠K87642; ♥3; ♣Q8, ♦K1062
"6421 8 count; K to 6, stiff, K10 to 4; Q one"
4. "21 HCP with N/S. 19 with E/W"
5. "Spades 3/2; 4/1; 5/0 : AQJ10
Hearts 5/3; 4/4; 6/2; 7/1: QJ10
Diamonds 4/2; 3/3; 5/1; 6/0: AJ
Clubs 4/3; 5/2; 6/1; 7/0 : A10"
6. West goes down. ♠Q9; ♥Q72; ♣A10763; ♦A84
"5332; 12 count; Q one, Q to 3; A to 3: A10 to 5"
7. "East 5332; 7 count; AJ10bare, J to 5, J to 3, 2 small". East goes down. Check.
8. All four hands as described above.

The secondary exercise

Strictly speaking, this is only relevant to counting the concealed hands at bridge, if you are ambitious enough to extend your count to the spot cards – a feat perhaps best left to conjurers and music-hall memory wizards. Nevertheless it is well worth doing anyway, in order to familiarise yourself with single suit layouts including the spots – relating what you can see to what you can't. On this of course depends the solution to all single suit problems in bridge – card combinations, safety plays etc. Compared with the main exercise, it's a walk in the park. But unless you have a very natural aptitude, you'll find it still takes a bit of practice.

1. Take a single suit and deal face down a holding for two hands, a South and North. Left to right with any random number you choose in each hand e.g 4/3, 7/2, 6/1, 2/2, 5/4 etc. It is important to change the number of cards in each hand every day.
2. Turn over the cards. Don't sort, but memorise the layout sorted. (Descending order, as customary). It helps to think in 3 groups – the honours AKQJ10, the middle cards 987, then the rest. This is an arbitrary division of the suit of course, but you will find it is the best aid to memory.
3. State to yourself the missing cards in sorted order.
4. Deal the remaining cards to East/West face down, random number in each hand.
5. Turn over West cards
6. State the East cards in sorted order. Turn over and check.
7. Take a minute off. State all four holdings without looking.
8. Again without looking, run through the suit first in descending, then ascending order; drawing mental lines connecting each card to its position in the relevant hand. This can have the rather unexpected effect of helping to imprint the layout in your memory. You might even find you can recall the layout the following day without special effort.
9. If you go wrong or get stuck at any point, turn the East/West cards back facedown and start again.

This exercise again may be seen childish and not worth wasting your time on. Not so!. A few (very few) players have a natural sight of the cards – one of the ingredients of what is often referred to as Card Sense. Admittedly such players will not be interested in any of this, but they are unlikely to be reading this article in the first place. The average player, however, is not so fortunate, and needs to work at developing the ability to visualise a layout and remember it. You'd be surprised how many club players of quite decent standard, struggle slightly with even the second exercise.

The two exercises should be undertaken daily, the first taking up to 15 minutes, the second a couple of minutes only. If you find yourself taking much longer, be patient. Provided you persevere, you will get up to speed in a week or two.

Obviously to spare this time each day demands a high degree of commitment and enthusiasm, since a half hearted approach is pointless. Strangely enough, what may seem a rather tedious chore at first, quickly becomes fascinating in its own right. As your skill improves, you may even look forward to the mental workout each day.

Here is a guarantee. If you stick at these exercises for 3 months, your ability in perception, visualisation, short and long term memory, overall sight of the cards, will be so colossally different from what it was before you started, that you will not believe the handicap you laboured under originally.

Counting the hand is a necessary but obviously not sufficient condition of bridge expertise. If you aim to become a first class player, you will at least have laid one of the basic foundations required to achieve that goal. The second article in this series will cover the subject of putting your new found counting skills into practice at the table; we shall also be looking at some of the more obvious ways to obtain an inferential count before the mechanical count is confirmed.