

Counting (Visualizing the Hands)

Counting Suits and Distributions

Here, “counting” is a misnomer. Counting would better be described as **pattern recognition** - trying to determine what the hands around the table look like. It means forming a mental picture of each hand’s distribution. It means thinking in patterns. Why is this important? When you “know” the distribution, you will often find the correct line of defense (or declarer play), a line you may not have found had you failed to count. This is extremely rewarding!

There are only so many ways (39, to be exact) that thirteen cards can be distributed. The most frequent distributions of suits and hands are:

Distribution <u>Pattern*</u>	Percentage <u>of Hands</u>
4-4-3-2	21.6
5-3-3-2	15.5
5-4-3-1	12.9
5-4-2-2	10.6
4-3-3-3	10.5
6-3-2-2	5.6
6-4-2-1	4.7
6-3-3-1	3.5
5-5-2-1	3.2
4-4-4-1	3.0

A hand will fall into one of these
5 patterns **70%** of the time

The top 10 patterns account for
90% of all hands

*The patterns are not suit specific. When you are developing a picture of the hands however, you should get used to naming the pattern in rank order: spades; hearts; diamonds; clubs.

Note that the first five patterns make up **70%** of all hands and the top ten are **90%**! Simply knowing the ten *most probable* distributions will improve your ability to determine the best line of play or defense.

Remembering all these numbers seems daunting. We don’t need to do that. Learn to think about each pattern as a word, not a string of numbers – the word is “5431.” The word is “4333.” We don’t think of the word “home” as 4 distinct letters – “h” “o” “m” “e” – but as a representation of something. By themselves, the letters have no meaning, but taken together, they form a word which does have meaning. A word is one thing to remember, not four. It is nearly impossible for our brains to remember 39 different combinations of four numbers and 39 percentages for each, and challenging even for just the top ten. But remembering ten words? Pretty easy.

The Play of the Hand

When dummy comes down:

- We know the distribution of two hands
- We have clues about declarer’s distribution from the auction
- We don’t know how many spades, hearts, diamonds and clubs are in the two unseen hands
- That means *eight* pieces of information are missing (4 suits x 2 hands)

As the play progresses:

- When we learn how many cards declarer has in one suit, we *automatically* know how many cards partner has in the suit AND
- Once we have determined the layout of the third suit, we *automatically* know how the fourth suit divides
THUS
- We have a complete “count” on the hands as soon as we know only *three pieces of information* of the eight that were missing – the number of cards in three of the four suits in either declarer’s or partner’s hand.

Et Voila! Our picture is complete. This is why visualizing distributions is not as hard as you might think.

For those of you who like Sudoku, here's a visual way to think about the problem.

	North	East	South	West	Total
Spades					
Hearts					
Diamonds					
Clubs					
Total					

We start out by knowing our hand, and the auction. Then we can add in dummy, the opening lead and partner's signal. Pretty soon we'll have all of these boxes filled out!

Learning to Visualize

Practice, practice, practice! And hard work!

- Learn the most common patterns so that naming them becomes second nature. Use flash cards or the Counting Game by Fred Gitelman (<http://bridgewinners.com/pages/counting-game/>)
- **Start thinking in patterns:**
 - Start with your own hand. *Before* you count your HCP, look at your distribution. Say the pattern in your head. Repeat!
 - Don't merely count how many cards in a suit are outstanding; think about how they might divide between the two unseen hands. If there are three cards outstanding, think about it not just as “3” but as “3-0 or 2-1”.
- Think in narratives, not numbers. Tell yourself a story. Stories are easier to remember. For example: “Declarer opened 1S and rebid 2H, so has at least 5 spades and at least 4 hearts, and at most 4 cards in the minors.”
- Always review the bidding before playing to the first trick. The auction reveals many clues to the distribution, both in what was bid and what wasn't.
- Start visualizing distributions before making the opening lead.
- In the beginning, focus on visualizing one hand. The hand that bid most is usually the easiest one to visualize.
- Determine early on which suit(s) are most critical to count. Start with the suit led. Once partner gives you a count signal, you know the distribution of that suit around the table. Give accurate count!
- Take time, when you have it, to think about what you know. When a suit has been determined, say to yourself, “spades are 5431,” for example.
- When something surprising happens, stop to take stock and assess how the information changes the picture you had developed of the hands.
- Be an active dummy! Pay attention to leads and signals and then try to develop a picture of each hand.