

Marti Ronemus
For Novices Only

When I say “Count,” I don’t mean Dracula!

Many years ago, my partner and I (who were then rank beginners) found ourselves, entirely by accident, in the semi-finals of unbracketed Swiss (no brackets back then) against a fabulous team who actually deserved to be there.

While they were just as kind as can be, by the end of the first half we were behind enough points to equal the national debt. We didn’t know what hit us. They suggested that perhaps we might like to just skip the second half. We knew we had no chance of a rebound, so we gratefully agreed. The woman we were playing against made a comment as we were staggering off to find first aid at the bar: “Once you learn to count, you will be formidable at this game.”

I’ve given a lot of thought about that comment over the years. Of course, she was spot-on. You can’t be a serious winner at bridge until you can count. Here’s what needs to be counted (and remembered throughout the hand!):

1. Trump
2. How many cards in each suit each person has, based on the bidding
3. How many points each player has, based on the bidding
4. How many cards have been played in each suit at each trick
5. How many points each person has left after each trick
6. How many cards in each suit each person has left after each trick

And that’s just the beginning.

Fortunately, as a less-experienced player, you don’t need to count all that stuff to do well. BUT you do need to determine what one thing you need to count for that particular hand (besides trump). Here’s what I mean. You have found yourself in a nifty little 3NT contract, and West has led the ♥2.

Dummy

♠ K 9 5
♥ 7 3
♦ K 8 7 5 3
♣ Q 8 4

You

♠ A Q 6
♥ A 8 7
♦ A J 10 4 2
♣ J 2

Step 1 in your planning: Count winners and you find you have six off the top.

Step 2, Read the Lead. Should be bottom of a 4-card suit, right? It can’t possibly be a 5-card suit.

Step 3, Figure out where your other tricks will come from. No question but that you will get the rest of them from your diamonds, right? Nothing tricky there.

Step 4 (and this is a step many players ignore), figure out what can go wrong. On this hand, losing the lead will be a disaster. The opponents are sitting there with their hearts and their clubs, ready to pounce.

Step 5 decide how to play your hand.

Now is when you have to start counting. The one thing that can go wrong is if either defender is void in diamonds or you guess the ♦Q wrong. The “count” comes from the opening lead. You know West has no 5-card suit, or he would have led from it. That means West cannot be void in diamonds. If he were, he’d have a 5-carder, and his lead would have reflected that. If either defender is void in diamonds, it will be East. So now you know... Your plan is to lead the ♦A from your hand. If East shows out, you can now capture all the diamond tricks. If East doesn’t show out, you can drop the ♦Q and still reap the harvest. You won’t have to take a finesse.

This is a simple hand to count, but you must take a little time to think. Once you realize that all that can hurt you is losing the lead, you can count the diamonds. You can do that, can’t you? Sure you can!!

Now, off this subject for a minute. Many times in the ACBL Bulletin we read letters from people saying how wonderful it is to have an opportunity to play against the top people in the game, whether we are trounced or not. Usually these are letters that are talking about the devaluation of Masterpoints. This doesn’t reflect what I hear from you, and from other novices all over the country. Most novices prefer to play among their peers at their own level until they become a little more competent. I’ve heard dozens talk about how expensive it is to go to a National or Regional, only to be beaten badly by people way out of their league.

There is much to be said on each side of this question, and I am most eager to hear from you concerning what you think about this issue. Actually I like to hear from you no matter how strange your email is (if you’ve read my columns, you’ve seen hints of what my daily email is like!), so let me hear from you.

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