

HAND OF THE MONTH FOR NEWER PLAYERS

January, 2016

Bridge writers -- myself included -- can be criticized for focusing too often on hands involving game or slam contracts. In fact, part score hands arise more frequently than do games or slams, and the ability to handle them is a critical determinant of success over time, at any form of scoring.

Continuing our series on counting, here is a part score hand from a team game in which some basic counting would have improved the quality of declarer's guesswork.

	NORTH	
	S 852	
WEST	H Q1032	EAST
S J	D 1072	S A107643
H J964	C J87	H 87
D J86		D KQ9
C AKQ43	SOUTH	C 65
	S KQ9	
Vulnerable: all	H AK5	
Dealer: South	D A543	
Opening lead: Club ace	C 1092	

Bidding

South	West	North	East
1 notrump (15-17 HCP)		all pass	

The bidding requires little explanation. With only three HCP, North knows the partnership has a maximum of 20, and that therefore, there is no game; Stayman to explore for a 4-4 heart fit is not even considered given 1) the lack of high cards, Stayman generally promises at least invitational values, and 2) the 4-3-3-3 distribution; such flat hands typically play just as well in notrump as in a suit. Cautious because of the vulnerability, West and East both passed, thus missing their part score in either clubs or spades.

West began the defense by cashing five clubs, declarer discarding a spade and a diamond from dummy and two diamonds from hand, East discarding three spades, a high one first to request a spade shift. The jack of spades now went to East's ace and a shift to the diamond king was won by South's ace.

Declarer now needed the rest of the tricks to make the contract, and bringing in the heart suit was essential. When there is a suit in which a key decision is needed, it is usually right to delay that decision as long as possible while gathering all available data. South thus cashed the two good spades discarding dummy's last diamond, and NOTED THE TWO DIAMOND DISCARDS FROM WEST, THE SECOND BEING THE JACK.

Finally it was time to play hearts; South cashed the ace and king and led low toward dummy's Q-10; when West followed with the nine, she gazed skyward for a time, then played the queen hoping for a 3-3 break. When East showed out, the last trick had to be conceded to the heart jack, down one for minus 100 rather than making one for plus 90. Such things add up over time.

All of my readers have already spotted the winning course for South. Counting the West hand -- the one with the fewest number of unknown cards once East shows out on the third round of clubs. West started with five clubs (known), one spade (known), and three diamonds (inferred from the play of that suit); ERGO, HE BEGAN WITH FOUR HEARTS AND THE FINESSE OF THE TEN IS THUS MARKED.

If it turns out East's shift to the king of diamonds was done without the queen, and that West had begun with four diamonds including the missing queen, South should congratulate his opponents on some excellent deceptive carding – note the active ethics – and go on to the next hand.

Alert readers will note that had West shifted to a diamond after cashing his clubs, the contract would have to fail. But defense is not always perfect; here the actual defense provided the opportunity for success.

MORAL: Counting will improve your guesswork. Develop the counting habit and mindset and watch your results improve.