

HAND OF THE MONTH FOR NEWER PLAYERS

November, 2015

This month we begin a series on the important topic of counting, a subject new players often wrongly presume to be strictly for the experts. The role of counting in bridge has been likened to that of an actor learning his lines, i.e. learning the lines does not ensure acting success, but not learning lines ensures failure. Whether as declarer or defender, developing the habit of counting both distribution and points is essential.

The math is actually quite simple, requiring only the capacity to count to thirteen when counting distribution, or to forty when counting points. More challenging, but also more satisfying, is developing the counting habit and mindset.

On this hand, declarer made a losing "guess" at trick eleven when a simple counting of opponent's distribution could have eliminated the guesswork.

	NORTH	
	S A62	
WEST	H K1072	EAST
S KJ10843	D 2	S Q97
H 9543	C Q10864	H Q6
D A9		D QJ1053
C 3	SOUTH	C 975
	S 5	
Dealer: South	H AJ8	
Vulnerable: All	D K8764	
Opening lead: Spade jackr	C AKJ2	

The bidding:

South	West	North	East
1 diamond	1 spade	double (negative)	2 spades
3 clubs	3 spades	5 clubs	all pass

Once South showed clubs, North re-valued adding points for the long clubs and diamond singleton and put partner in to a sound but aggressive game contract.

In the play, declarer won the opening spade lead in dummy and led the singleton diamond to the king and ace; West returned heart three to the ten, queen and ace (not

the best defense but that is a story for another day); now diamond ruff in dummy, spade ruff in hand, another diamond ruff in dummy with WEST SHOWING OUT; dummy's last spade ruffed in hand, EVERYONE FOLLOWING; ace and king of trumps, WEST SHOWING OUT ON THE SECOND TRUMP LEAD. The good heart jack cashed, EVERYONE FOLLOWING, leaving this three card end position with declarer needing two of the last three tricks:

	NORTH	
WEST	S -	EAST
S K	H K7	S -
H 95	D -	H -
D -	C Q	D QJ
C -	SOUTH	C 9
	S -	
	H 8	
	D 87	
	C -	

The heart eight was led and when West smoothly played low, declarer "guessed" to play the king hoping East held the last heart. Instead, East ruffed and led a diamond, dummy ruffed but had to concede the last heart to West for down one; had declarer let the heart eight ride, East could ruff but dummy would now win the last two tricks. Before reading further, do you see how declarer could have eliminated the need to guess the ending heart position?

When West showed out on the third round of diamonds, East was marked with five. Since it is easier to count one opponent's hand than two, declarer turns attention to East, the hand with the fewer number of unknown cards. When West shows out on the second round of clubs, East – the hand being counted – is marked with three, so eight of his original thirteen cards are now known. When East follows to the third round of spades, eleven cards are now known, VOILA, there was only room in his hand for two hearts; with two rounds of the suit already played, there is no need to guess, EAST CANNOT HAVE ANOTHER HEART.

I trust all readers will agree, the math required here is simple; the challenge is to develop the habit of concentrating on the count as the hand unfolds.

MORAL: Counting is not just for the experts, anyone can do it. Learning to count can improve your guesswork, or sometimes -- as in today's hand -- eliminate it altogether.