Counting Points

Anyone with the determination to count will soon find he is leaving behind him a trail of unhappy declarers.
--Hugh Kelsey, <u>Killing Defense at Bridge</u>

Wouldn't things be handier if good defense were just a matter of *knowledge?* Then we could all just read about it, study it a bit, memorize it perhaps, and there we would be. But things aren't quite like that. You've read about the lines of defense, you've probably studied them, and maybe you've even memorized them. That took some effort, and important it was. But now you find that knowledge, although necessary, is not entirely sufficient. Good defense also requires an *action.* And that action is counting.

Think about it. The opponents are bidding, and as they do, they are telling you things about their hand. Doesn't it just make sense to listen? If one of them tells you he has five hearts, four clubs, and about 16 points or so, is there any reason you should immediately put that information out of your mind? Of course not. So now, if you just combine what you heard with what you see in your hand and in dummy…guess what? You're counting! You listen, you look, you combine your observations. The basic process is just straightforward common sense.

Here's an interesting question. When the opponents are bidding, if you're not counting, what *are* you thinking about? When the dummy hits, and you're looking at it and at your own hand, if you're not counting, then what are you doing? As the hand unfolds, as the players place one card after another on the table, slowly exposing more and more of their hand, if you're not counting, then what are you doing? What do you think about while playing a hand of bridge? Try to answer that question. The next time you play, pause to observe what your own mental activity actually is. It could be surprising to find out maybe, couldn't it?

Counting shape consisted of finding the count of a particular suit in one unseen hand. Then, by adding that number with the known number in our own hand and in dummy's, we could then subtract from 13 to count that suit in the other unseen hand. Counting points is very similar. We count the points in our hand and in the dummy, seek the number of points in one unseen hand, subtract from 40, and the answer is the number of points in the other unseen hand. Usually we can count the points in declarer's hand most easily, since it was he who did all the bidding. Then, we can form some idea of what to expect from partner.

But there is another upshot from counting points that can be even more valuable. If, for instance, we determine that partner can have only six points, and then if we see six points worth of cards fall from his hand, then we can place all of the remaining high cards in declarer's hand. We will know exactly what declarer holds, especially if you have been able to count his shape as well as his points. All of a sudden, it's as if all four hands are exposed. There are no more secrets.

The basic work occurs mostly in the auction. This is when the declarer tells you about his points.

EAST

S	W	N	E
1NT	P	2♣	P
2♠	P	6♠	P
P	P		

♠ J 5 4
♥ 3
♦ A 7 5 3
♣ Q J 10 9 8

Counting points is always easier if declarer makes some sort of a notrump bid. In this case he opened one notrump, but even other notrump bids of all kinds place a point restriction on declarer's hand. But remember that different partnerships may have different point levels for their notrump bids. If you're playing someone you don't know, you can and should check out their convention card or else ask them what their point range is for any notrump bid they make. Presume in our hand above that

1NT shows 15 – 17. You also know that slam typically requires 33 points. This time, because of your own high cards, you know that the opponents are trying to make this with, at most, 32 points. How many points do you expect from partner?

NORTH
♠ K Q 9 3
♥ 4 2
♦ K Q J 10
♣ K 5 2

```
        N
   W         E
        S
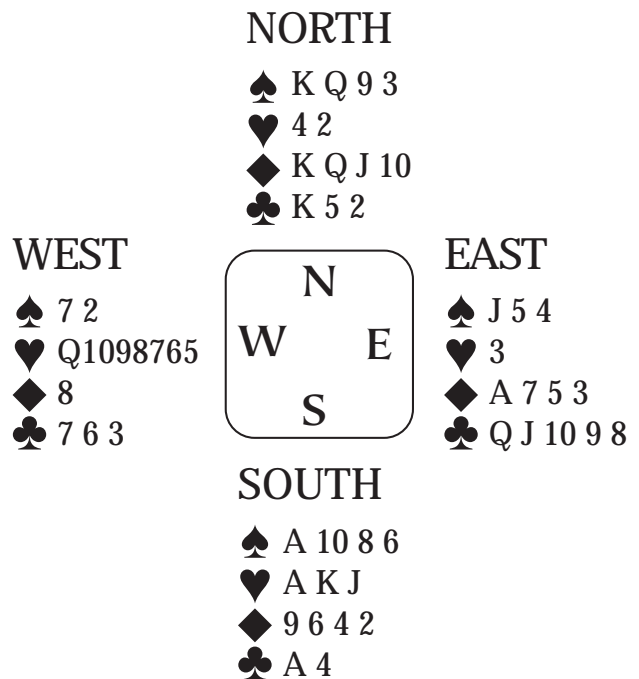```
EAST
♠ J 5 4
♥ 3
♦ A 7 5 3
♣ Q J 10 9 8
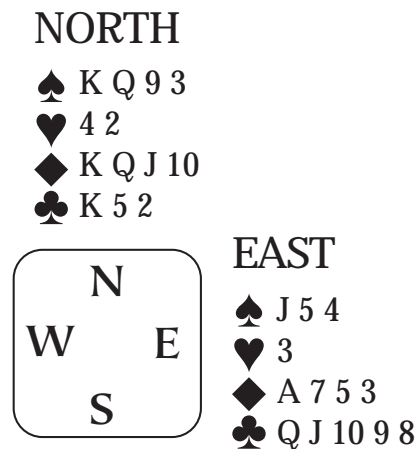
Partner leads the 8 of diamonds, and North tables the dummy. What do you think about North's bidding? Not too hot, was it? He has only 14 points, which means, if partner bid 1NT on 15 HCP, they are in slam with only 29. Moreover, for all North knows, North-South could be off two aces. Your opponents have overbid, but they may have got lucky and overbid something that makes. Wouldn't that be aggravating!

 At any rate, this information does not alter our estimate of partner's hand by too very much. You see 22 HCP in your hand and in dummy. Declarer has 15 to 17, so partner has from 1 to 3. How do you think you should defend?

 Two ideas present themselves immediately. You could try returning your singleton 3 of hearts, or you could return the queen of clubs. Do either of these ideas have merit? Well, we know that your partner does not have an ace because he has at most 3 HCP, and probably less. So he can't win the lead of your heart singleton, and he can't stop declarer from pulling your trump. Therefore a ruff is out of the question. What's more, since partner is a longshot even to have a king, declarer's heart suit is not likely a problem to him. The club lead seems equally fruitless for similar reasons; declarer must have the ace of clubs, so that clubs cannot amount to anything. Neither hearts, nor clubs, nor trump offer any promise. Hmm. Why did partner lead a diamond, anyway? You can't be sure, of course, but could it have been short? The

eight spot looks like it might be a doubleton. If it is, there is no way to set this overbid slam. The best you can do is take the ace and return a diamond, hoping partner started with a singleton.

NORTH
♠ K Q 9 3
♥ 4 2
♦ K Q J 10
♣ K 5 2

WEST
♠ 7 2
♥ Q1098765
♦ 8
♣ 7 6 3

```
        N
   W         E
        S
```

EAST
♠ J 5 4
♥ 3
♦ A 7 5 3
♣ Q J 10 9 8

SOUTH
♠ A 10 8 6
♥ A K J
♦ 9 6 4 2
♣ A 4

The only defenders who will set this slam are those who count points.

Let's try another:

NORTH
♠ K J 9 8 7
♥ A K J
♦ 9 8
♣ Q 10 9

WEST
♠ A 10 5
♥ Q 9 8
♦ J 10 7 6 5
♣ K 5

```
   N
 W   E
   S
```

S	W	N	E
		1 ♠	P
1NT	P	P	P

You lead 4th best from your 5-card suit, the 6 of diamonds, and North tables the dummy. You and dummy hold 24 HCP, South will have 6 to 9, so partner has 7 to 10. On the lead, your partner plays the king of diamonds, and declarer wins the ace. If partner held the KQ of diamonds, his proper play was the queen, lower of touching honors by third hand. So declarer has the queen of diamonds. Declarer next leads the queen of spades. What do you do?

First of all, consider what happens if you win and return a diamond. Declarer will win the queen, his second trick, and then he'll cash four spade tricks and the AK of hearts for six more tricks. That will give him his contract and an overtrick. Next, consider what you've learned. South started with the AQ of diamonds and the Q of spades, a total of 8 points. This means that partner holds the ace of clubs, and the location of the club jack is uncertain. If it is partner who has the jack, he will be able to win however many clubs he has in his hand. So you should rise with the ace of spades, and, in full confidence, lead the king of clubs and then continue with your remaining club.

NORTH
♠ K J 9 8 7
♥ A K J
♦ 9 8
♣ Q 10 9

WEST
♠ A 10 5
♥ Q 9 8
♦ J 10 7 6 5
♣ K 5

```
   N
 W   E
   S
```

EAST
♠ 4 3 2
♥ 10 7 6
♦ K
♣ A J 6 4 3 2

SOUTH
♠ Q 6
♥ 5 4 3 2
♦ A Q 4 3 2
♣ 8 7

The defense we just saw is inconceivable unless you count points. But when you count, you can find this play. To an observer who doesn't count, you will look like a genius. To an observer who does count, you'll look like a partner he would like to play with.

We were able to count declarer's 6 points in diamonds because East's play of the king of diamonds denied the queen in his hand. One play showed two of declarer's high cards. This theme is not uncommon:

NORTH
♠ 4 3
♥ A K J 2
♦ A Q J 10
♣ Q 9 8

```
   N
 W   E
   S
```

EAST
♠ 9 8 6 2
♥ Q 6 3
♦ K 7 5
♣ K J 6

S	W	N	E
		1 ♦	P
1 ♥	P	4 ♥	P

Partner leads the queen of spades. What do you think about dummy's bidding? It's a very good hand, bid on the aggressive side. Ideally North should be closer to 20 points. But how about South. What do you expect from South? He would need about 12 support points to try for slam. So his pass shows a maximum of 11 support points, and he could have as few as 6 HCP.

Now what about West's lead? The queen of spades promises the jack, and it denies the AK. So declarer has those. The only other honor card that you cannot account for is the ace of clubs. Do you think declarer has it? He possibly could, but with the AK of spades and the ace of clubs, South would very likely be inclined to try for slam. Circumstances favor that your partner holds the ace of clubs. Does that suggest any particular line of defense to you?

Of course it does. You will soon be getting in, either with the queen of hearts or the king of diamonds.. When you do get in, you will lead the 6 of clubs without hesitation, and partner should return your lead. If you can win just two club tricks you can set the contract. To anyone who was not counting points, leading from KJ6 into the queen would look like madness. But to you, West's unseen ace was beckoning. Here was the whole hand:

NORTH
♠ 4 3
♥ A K J 2
♦ A Q J 10
♣ Q 9 8

WEST
♠ Q J 10 7
♥ 5
♦ 9 8 6
♣ A 10 4 3 2

EAST
♠ 9 8 6 2
♥ Q 6 3
♦ K 7 5
♣ K J 6

SOUTH
♠ A K 5
♥ 10 9 8 7 4
♦ 4 3 2
♣ 7 5

Are you waiting for a hard and complicated hand? You can fulfill your own wish on the next example just by not counting points. You would never get it. But if you do count points, this one might not turn out very hard either. Funny how that works.

NORTH
♠ Q 6
♥ J 8 5 4
♦ Q J 4 2
♣ A K J

WEST
♠ 10 9 8 7
♥ K 9 2
♦ K 5
♣ 10 8 5 4

S	W	N	E
		1 ♦	P
1 ♥	P	2 ♥	P
4 ♥	P	P	P

North's two heart bid limits his point count to 12 to 14. South's leap to game shows about the same range, perhaps as high as 15 or 16. No slam try was made, so the combined North-South point count is not likely to exceed 28 or 29, if that many. Your partner should show up with 5 to 8 points.
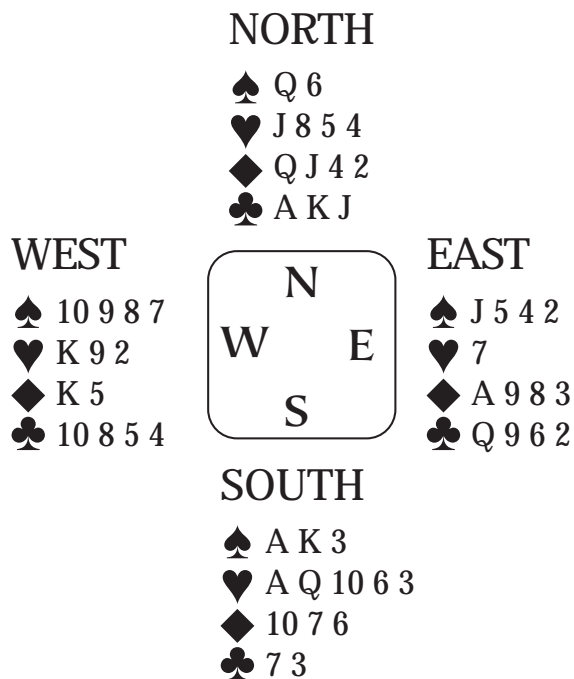
You lead the ten of spades, and North tables the dummy. Declarer should be please with North's maximum values.

Declarer calls for dummy's queen, which wins the trick, partner playing the 2. Declarer then calls for the jack of hearts, ducking it to your king. Now what?

I bet you've been counting points. South must hold the ace and king of spades, because even without the signal, East would have played either honor on trick one. Moreover, South must also have the ace and queen of hearts because partner would have covered dummies jack. Add up the point count of South's cards. In just two tricks, you have determined 13 of South's high card points. How are you going to set this contract?

You can now account for every high card except two of them, the ace of diamonds and the queen of clubs. South could perhaps hold the queen of clubs, but there just isn't "room" for him to have the ace of diamonds on this bidding. That would give him seventeen HCP plus any distribution points, and he would have made a slam try.

So would you have the courage to lead the king of diamonds at trick 3?

NORTH
♠ Q 6
♥ J 8 5 4
♦ Q J 4 2
♣ A K J

WEST
♠ 10 9 8 7
♥ K 9 2
♦ K 5
♣ 10 8 5 4

```
    N
 W     E
    S
```

EAST
♠ J 5 4 2
♥ 7
♦ A 9 8 3
♣ Q 9 6 2

SOUTH
♠ A K 3
♥ A Q 10 6 3
♦ 10 7 6
♣ 7 3

If you do have the courage, you will hold the trick. Next you will play to partner's ace, and he will give you a ruff. If you don't have the courage and make a "safe" return, declarer will finish drawing trump and make his contract.

So what is courage and what is safe? Most players would never even have dreamed of leading the king of diamonds. Some, especially those new to counting, will find the possibility. They will feel a flood of excitement anticipating such a play. But then, they may back down. Many's the time, even for very experienced players, when a gnawing doubt, usually without firm foundation, suddenly dissuades you from the winning play.

Part of counting is to act on the logical inferences you are drawing. If you are not going to

act on them, you might as well relieve yourself of the entire effort of counting. You are counting to draw inferences that put you ahead of the field. Act.

Sometimes you'll be wrong because you made some sort of error in counting or reasoning. Sometimes you'll be wrong because partner played the wrong card. Sometimes you'll be wrong because declarer's bidding was illogical. Nonetheless, act. If the problem was a counting or a logical error, just chalk it up to experience and keep trying. If partner played the wrong card, remind him that proper carding is necessary to draw proper inferences. If you're playing against a bad bidder...beware. There are probably other ways to defeat bad bidders.

The value of counting, however, should be beyond all doubt. You can do it. Remember Kelsey's quote at the top of this lesson?

Anyone with the determination to count will soon find he is leaving behind him a trail of unhappy declarers.

Anyone can leave such a trail. Wouldn't you like it to be you?