

Counting Shape

Problems in play and defense tend to melt away like snow on a summer's day when you make an effort to count. Quite simply, counting makes the difference between winning and losing.

--Hugh Kelsey, Killing Defense at Bridge

Can you add six and two and one and subtract from thirteen and get the right answer? If the answer is yes, then two conclusions follow: you are probably older than seven, and you can successfully count shape. The term "counting shape" simply means that you work out the distribution of each suit in the unseen hands. Think about it. You can see the distribution of your own hand, and you can see the distribution of dummy. If you can learn the distribution of just one suit in either of the other two unseen hands, then you also know the distribution of that suit in the remaining hand. What's more, once you've worked out three suits, then you know them all. Counting shape isn't rocket science. It's just adding and subtracting and remembering.

Most people encounter some sort of mental resistance when they first start to count shape. They know that it requires nothing more than attention and arithmetic, but for some reason or another, the hand has progressed and counting has not taken place. Quite often you have simply been distracted by all of the other factors you're encountering in the hand, so that you simply "forget" to count.

Some players note that they're not counting the hand as they know they should, and they conclude from their failure that counting must be hard. That is not a logical conclusion. Counting is not hard if you are over seven. The proper conclusion from the fact that you are not counting is simply that you have not yet trained your mind to include counting among the other mental activities you engage in at the bridge table. It's not a matter of what is hard. It's a matter of what you have trained your mind to do.

So how do you train your mind to engage in counting? The main part of the method is just plain effort and persistence. Make the effort and persist in making the effort. If you lose your way, if you

suddenly discover that you have "forgotten" once again to count, then forgive yourself and just bring your mind back to it. Form the intent to count, make the effort, and just keep coming back to it. Bit by bit you will develop the habit. Before long you will be engaging in habitual counting activity. Believe me, when you are doing it, you'll see a big improvement in your bridge game!

But let's back up. You are going to form the intent to count, and you are going to keep bringing your mind back to it until you have trained your mind to count as a habit. But what are the steps involved in counting? What information is at your disposal, and how do you go through the process of counting? More can be said about this. Here are the five main tools you have at your disposal to help you count shape:

- **the bidding**
- **partner's leads**
- **signals**
- **the fall of the cards**
- **common sense**

It begins with the bidding. The opponents are telling you what they have. Even an auction as uninformative as 1NT - 3NT tells you that dummy does not have a five-card major and that he probably doesn't have a four-card major either. And usually auctions are far more informative:

1 spade	1NT
2 hearts	pass

Opener has at least 5 spades and at least 4 hearts. Start with that as your initial estimate of his shape. Expect to see a dummy with a singleton spade, or if not, then definitely with four hearts. Back to opener, if he has 5-4 in the majors, he can have no more than four total cards in the minors, and possibly he has less, if he has 5 hearts or 6 spades. So you start with these preliminary observations to make your lead, and then refine them when dummy comes

down, and then you keep on refining them as the hand is played.

Your partner has been going through a similar process. Like you, he is starting to form defensive ideas based on his estimate of preliminary shape. After you lead, he is going to acquire even more information. The big part of his information will be the dummy itself. The second part of the information will be your lead. In fact, if partner can read your lead, he will know your count in the suit you have lead. Since he can see dummy and his own hand, he will know the count in three of the four hands. And that means he also knows what is in the fourth hand, because he can add three numbers, subtract from 13, and get the right answer. What's more, as he plays to the first trick, he may be able to convey to you the count of his own suit, and then you too would know the distribution of one suit right at the first trick.

Sometimes the fall of the cards allow you to see right into declarer's hand. Your right hand opponent (RHO) has bid one spade and your left hand opponent (LHO) has raised to two, and the bidding ended with three passes. Declarer wins your lead in his hand and lays down the ace of trump. There are three trumps in dummy. Everyone follows suit. Then declarer lays down the king of trump. You play your last trump, and your partner plays the queen on it. Now declarer leads something else. How many spades did declarer start with? That's right, he started with 6. Your partner would not have played the queen of spades if he didn't have to. Watch the fall of the cards.

Let's practice one more time.

NORTH

♠ XXX
♥ XXX
♦ XXXX
♣ XXX

WEST

♠ XX
♥ XXXX
♦ XX
♣ XXXXX

The auction has been

S	W	N	E
1 ♠	P	1NT	P
2 ♥	P	3 ♠	P
4 ♠	P	P	P

Your initial estimate of declarer's hand is 5 spades, 4 hearts, and 4 minor suit cards, perhaps 2-2. Play begins and declarer ruffs the second club. The fall of the cards have shown declarer's singleton club. How many clubs does partner have?

Declarer next cashes the spade ace followed by the spade king. Your partner plays the queen of spades on the king. How many spades does declarer have? If he also has just 4 hearts, how many diamonds will he have? If, in fact, declarer's shape is 6-4-2-1, then what is your partner's shape? So far only four tricks have been played, the two initial club tricks and the two rounds of trump. And yet, in all likelihood, you have already counted the entire hand! If declarer plays hearts next, you may get a count signal from partner to confirm your probable count or else to alter it.

Not all hands can be counted by the first four or five tricks, but some can be counted even sooner. Just remember to start making your count estimate during the auction, then add to it and revise it as you see the lead, the signals, and the fall of the cards.

- **estimate count during auction**
- **revise count when dummy hits**
- **refine count based on lead**
- **refine count based on signals**
- **refine count based on fall of the cards**
- **apply common sense**
- **envision the fourth hand when you've solved three.**

When you get insight into one of the hands, take the time to think about the fourth hand. Once you see the shapes of the hands, your problems will be much easier to solve. You'll be looking at the hidden hands, and it isn't even cheating.

Here is our first full practice hand:

West	S	W	N	E
♠ 10 7 6 3	1♠	P	2♦	P
♥ 10 2	2♥	P	3NT	P
♦ A 9 8 5	4♥	P	P	P
♣ K 6 3				

NORTH

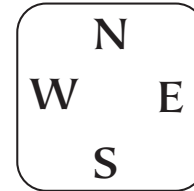
♠ A J
♥ J 7 5
♦ K J 6 2
♣ Q J 9 4

WEST

♠ 10 7 6 3
♥ 10 2
♦ A 9 8 5
♣ K 6 3

EAST

♠ 8 4
♥ Q 9 3
♦ Q 10 9 4
♣ A 8 5 2



SOUTH

♠ K Q 9 5 2
♥ A K 8 6 4
♦ 3
♣ 10 7

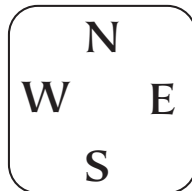
What is the minimum number of hearts South must have to bid this way? How many spades do you think he has? How many minor suit cards do you expect to find in South's hand? What major suit holding do you think you'll see in dummy? What line of defense should be played when declarer has a two-suiter? What is your lead?

NORTH

♠ A J
♥ J 7 5
♦ K J 6 2
♣ Q J 9 4

WEST

♠ 10 7 6 3
♥ 10 2
♦ A 9 8 5
♣ K 6 3



Declarer must have a minimum of 5 hearts to bid as he did, and his spades must be at least as long. So declarer will have a maximum of 3 cards in the minor suits. Responder's notrump bid suggests he has no singleton, and yet he liked hearts better than spades. Expect to see 2 spades and 3 hearts in dummy. When declarer has a two-suiter, try to attack the trumps in declarer's hand by playing a forcing defense. Our defensive plan is to lead the minor suit that will force declarer to ruff. But which minor suit should we select to set our forcing defense in motion? We don't know. So let's lead the ace of diamonds to take a look at dummy, elicit a signal from partner, and see a card fall from declarer's hand. If you selected the 3 of clubs instead, you didn't do too bad.

East can listen to bidding just like West can, so East knows that South has no more than 3 minor suit cards, and East knows that the defense should be a forcing defense. When he sees the king of diamonds in dummy, he doesn't want to signal for a diamond continuation when it appears that clubs might be a better direction. So East plays the four of diamonds on West's ace. Since both defenders know they want to take their minor suit tricks and force declarer if they can, West knows that East has invited a club switch, and so he returns the three of clubs, East winning the ace. West's lead of the three promised a club honor, so East returns a club, and you win the king. Get out safely, which means that you should lead a minor suit. South sees that his contract hinges on not losing a trump trick. But since no finesse is possible, he simply cashes the ace and king, hoping to catch a doubleton queen. But he doesn't catch one today, and the contract goes down one.

Note that the forcing defense never got off the ground. Nonetheless, the attempt to put it in motion resulted in the success of the defense in capturing all of their minor suit winners. In fact, only two things could have gone wrong for the defense this time. They would have gone wrong if West did

not shift to clubs after cashing the ace of diamonds, because declarer could have pitched a losing club on the king of diamonds. Or, the defense could have gone wrong if the opening lead had been a trump; if declarer calls for a low heart from dummy, East will have to play the nine of hearts, and not the queen.

Let's try another hand:

West				
♠ 10 4 3 2	S	W	N	E
♥ J 6	1 ♠	P	2	♦ P
♦ K 5 3	2 ♥	P	4	♥ P
♣ J 8 5 3	P	P		

What is your first estimate of South's shape? What is your first estimate of North's shape? What line of defense has the bidding suggested? What is your opening lead?

	NORTH			
	♠ Q 7			
	♥ K 4 3 2			
	♦ Q 8 7 6			
	♣ A Q 7			
WEST	<table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px;"> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S
N				
W E				
S				
♠ 10 4 3 2				
♥ J 6				
♦ K 5 3				
♣ J 8 5 3				

We don't know for sure yet what shape declarer may have, but our initial estimate is 5 spades, 4 hearts, and perhaps 2 of each minor. Our first estimate of North will be 4 hearts for the jump raise, 5 diamonds for the two over one response, and perhaps two of each of the other two suits. The opponents have shown strength, so an active defense should be applied. The unbid suit suggests itself. Lead the 3 of clubs.

	NORTH				
	♠ Q 7				
	♥ K 4 3 2				
	♦ Q 8 7 6				
	♣ A Q 7				
WEST	<table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px;"> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	EAST
N					
W E					
S					
♠ 10 4 3 2		♠ 6 5			
♥ J 6		♥ Q 7 5			
♦ K 5 3		♦ A J 9 2			
♣ J 8 5 3		♣ K 9 4 2			
	SOUTH				
	♠ A K J 9 8				
	♥ A 10 9 8				
	♦ 10 4				
	♣ 10 6				

South's prospects are fair. He seems to have two diamond losers and he probably has exactly one trump loser. The club lead represents a threat though. He cannot afford a club loser. He will have to hope that West led from the king, and so he will play dummy's queen. East gets his king, but clearly he must switch. He, too, knows South's approximate shape, including the 5 spades. If West has the ace or king of spades, then, the defense will always win that, so that switch is not necessary. That leaves diamonds, so East cashes the ace and looks for West's signal. What he sees is the five, while declarer played the four. The three is missing. West probably has it, so the five was encouraging, and East continues diamonds. West sees they have cashed all of their available minor suit tricks. If the defense can win any more tricks, it will have to be in hearts or spades. These are suits declarer will have to play by himself, so the time has come to go passive, and let declarer find for himself whatever key cards the defenders may yet hold. So West should return either a club or a diamond. South is unlikely to profit from dummy's good minor suit cards. As it turns out, the defense eventually gathers in a trump trick. Note, however, that if East switches to a trump instead of getting out with a minor suit, he will still allow South to make the hand.

NORTH

♠ Q 9 4
 ♥ A 9 6
 ♦ 3
 ♣ K Q J 8 7 2



EAST

♠ 7 5 2
 ♥ K 8
 ♦ Q 9 6 5
 ♣ A 9 5 4

S	W	N	E
1♥ P	P	2♣ P	P
2NT P	P	3♥ P	P
4♥ P	P	P	P

West has led the 3 of clubs. East reads this lead as a singleton. He expects to find five hearts in the South hand, three or four diamonds and two or three spades. So partner will have four or five spades, three hearts, four or five diamonds, and just the one club. How should East plan the defense?

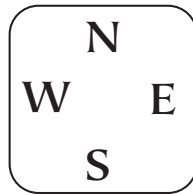
East can see three tricks. He can win the ace of clubs, partner can win a ruffing trump trick, and East will eventually win his king of hearts. But where will the setting trick come from? If it exists, it will have to be either the ace of diamonds or a spade trick.. If partner has the ace of diamonds or the ace of spades, there will be no problem. But what if partner has the king of spades? Let's think. If East wins the club ace and returns a club for a ruff, West will probably come back a diamond, which puts declarer in. Declarer will lose the king of hearts, and East will return a spade, but now declarer needs only to go up with the ace of spades, pull trump, and claim the rest of the tricks based on his long club suit. To set up the spade king, East will have to lead back a spade at trick two. East does not need to be in a hurry to give West his club ruff. West will have three trumps, which cannot be exhausted before East can get back in with the king of trump. So East's defensive plan is to win the ace of clubs, return the seven of spades, get back in with the king of hearts, and finally lead a club to West for a ruff. Then, if West has the king of spades, he can cash it. This nice defense is possible because of counting shape.

NORTH

♠ Q 9 4
 ♥ A 9 6
 ♦ 3
 ♣ K Q J 8 7 2

WEST

♠ K 10 6 3
 ♥ 5 4 2
 ♦ J 10 8 7 4
 ♣ 3



EAST

♠ 7 5 2
 ♥ K 8
 ♦ Q 9 6 5
 ♣ A 9 5 4

SOUTH

♠ A J 8
 ♥ Q J 10 7 3
 ♦ A K 2
 ♣ 10 6

Many nice defenses are possible when you count shape:

NORTH

♠ J 10 7 4 3
♥ 8 3
♦ K 9 5 2
♣ Q 7

EAST

♠ 9 6 5
♥ A 10 6
♦ J 8 4
♣ K J 6 2

W N E S

S	W	N	E
1 ♠ P	P	2 ♠ P	P
3NT P	P	4 ♠ P	P
P	P		

Partner leads the five of hearts. This bidding is out of the ordinary. South, having found a fit in spades, would not ordinarily suggest 3NT as an alternate. He must have a balanced hand with 18 or 19 points, with stoppers in all the suits. Partner appears to be void in spades. When you win the ace of hearts, you notice that no one played the deuce. Very likely partner has the deuce; the five was his fourth down, so he has a five-card suit, meaning that South has 3 hearts. So finally it would seem that South must have two cards in one minor and three in the other. Such is your preliminary count. You return the 10 of hearts to partner, which brings declarer's queen and partner's king. Partner now leads the 9 of clubs, dummy plays the seven, you the jack, and South the ace. When declarer now cashes the ace of spades, you are surprised to see partner play a spade! Since you've been counting shape, you now know that declarer started with only four spades. He still must have 3 hearts, but now you have learned South must have 6 cards in the minors, not 5. In any case, declarer pulls 3 rounds of trump, leads a small heart to dummy, ruffing, and now he returns the queen of clubs., which you win with the king, and declarer puts on the 10. What should you do now?

South's play of the club 10 on your king suggests he is out of clubs. So, he started with four diamonds along with his four spades, three hearts, and two clubs. What's more, declarer has compelled you either to lead a diamond or else give him a ruff and sluff. He has deliberately stripped your hand of spades and hearts while denuding dummy and his own hand of clubs. You shouldn't want to lead a diamond if he is so eager for you to do so, but that would mean giving a ruff and a sluff! Maybe that wouldn't be bad. In this case, declarer has four diamonds in both hands, so he can't sluff enough of them to hurt you.. Go ahead and lead another club, giving up the ruff and sluff. Here is the whole hand:

NORTH

♠ J 10 7 4 3
♥ 8 3
♦ K 9 5 2
♣ Q 7

WEST

♠ 8
♥ K J 9 5 2
♦ Q 7
♣ 9 8 5 4 3

EAST

♠ 9 6 5
♥ A 10 6
♦ J 8 4
♣ K J 6 2

W N E S

SOUTH

♠ A K Q 2
♥ Q 7 4
♦ A 10 6 3
♣ A 10

If you had lead a diamond instead of giving the ruff and sluff, West would have had to play the diamond queen to force dummy's king. Then declarer would lead a diamond toward his hand and finesse you out of your jack. There's a pitfall you avoided by counting shape!

Count shape! Make the effort! Train your mind! And when you lose track or forget - and you will - don't give up. Just come back and count the next one. This is the most important step you can take to improve your bridge.

