

Counting Tricks

Another profitable form of counting that is sadly neglected by many players is the counting of declarer's tricks. When it is clear that declarer will make enough tricks for his contract as soon as he gets in, the defenders must hasten to cash their quick winners.

--Hugh Kelsey, Killing Defense at Bridge

The bottom line at defense is to take your tricks. Sometimes we can get such insight into a hand that we know when declarer has all his winners lined up and he is ready to take them. On those occasions, it would only make sense that we collect all of our own tricks, before they disappear. Such a circumstance is a variation of the Active Defense, and so it will entail taking some calculated risks. We play the Active Defense when the opponents have bid vigorously and especially when we are threatened by a running suit or suits. But even when we do not start out playing the Active Defense, whenever we can count declarer's winning tricks, and we can see he is ready to cash them in, it will be time to mount a direct attack wherever that attack may be successful, accepting all necessary risks.

So how do we count declarer's tricks in order to know that it's time to attack? Alas, it involves those tiresome activities of paying attention and thinking. Some of the tricks we will just see laying on the table. Others can be inferred from our partner's lead or from his signal. Yet others we may be able to know about from the bidding. But wait! These are just the usual sources of information at bridge: the auction, the visible cards, leads, signals, and the behavior of the declarer. Oh yes, and counting points and shape.

Let's develop our understanding of the skill of counting tricks with some practice hands. Here's the first:

NORTH

♠ 6 5 3
♥ A K Q 9 2
♦ Q J 10
♣ 7 6

WEST

♠ K 4 2
♥ J 10
♦ A 6 4
♣ J 9 4 3 2

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

You have led the 3 of clubs against South's contract of 3NT. Partner has played the 10, and declarer has won with the king. Now declarer has led the 3 of diamonds. Let's work on this one together.

Declarer's play of the king of clubs is an attempt to obscure his holding. Partner may get fooled by it, but we aren't. Partner would have played the ace or queen of clubs if he had either one. His ten was his highest club. Declarer started with the AKQ.

Say, did you happen to notice that heart suit in dummy? If declarer wants to set up tricks, why isn't he trying to set up those hearts? Could it be that he thinks they already are set up? Rest assured, when declarers don't start developing their best suits first, it almost always means that those suits don't need setting up. What's more, you can see that the hearts are set up; your J & 10 will fall early,

establishing dummy's nine spot with no further effort needed by declarer. So does that add up to anything? Yes, by golly, it does. Five heart tricks plus three club tricks is eight. If you duck the ace of diamonds, declarer will likely make his 9th winner right here at trick two.

Don't just hand it to him. Take the ace of diamonds and lead back...that's right, a spade. You can lead back either the king or the two.

	NORTH											
	♠ 6 5 3 ♥ A K Q 9 2 ♦ Q J 10 ♣ 7 6											
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	N											
W		E										
	S											
♠ K 4 2 ♥ J 10 ♦ A 6 4 ♣ J 9 4 3 2		♠ A Q 9 7 ♥ 8 7 6 ♦ 9 7 5 ♣ 10 8 5										
	SOUTH											
	♠ J 10 8 ♥ 5 4 3 ♦ K 8 3 2 ♣ A K Q											

Your sharp play set the contract. More accurately, your sharp play prevented the declarer from STEALING the contract. He merely had to get just one diamond past you in order to win nine tricks. This is not an uncommon theme in declarer play: if you need just one trick and you will have to steal it, make your attempted theft as early as possible, before the defenders can figure the hand out. As a defender, be wary of such a play when declarer isn't developing the obvious suit. Be especially wary if you can already count that declarer has all of the rest of the tricks he needs.

When you switched to spades, the lead of the king was feasible because partner must have spades if you are going to set the contract. Or you could have led the two spot instead. Let's say you did, and then partner wins his ace. Partner will now have to lead a small spade back to you. How should partner know to lead a spade back instead of returning your original suit, which was clubs? There is a definite principal, which all defenders need to know. When the original

leader switches suits, he has one of two concepts in mind. On the one hand, he may need you to lead his original suit through declarer, and he has switched in an attempt to reach your hand. Or, he may have discovered no future in the suit of his original lead, and now he is suggesting an alternative line of attack.

If you are the partner receiving these leads, how can you tell if partner wants his first suit back or his second suit? You can tell from the spot card that the leader is leading to you. If he is abandoning his first suit, he will lead a small card from his second suit. Low states interest in the second suit. If he only wants to reach your hand so that you can return his original suit, he will not lead a low card to you, but will lead a middle card:

**When partner leads a card that's low,
With this suit surely go;
If what he's led looks from the middle,
His earlier suit answers the riddle.**

When you led the two of spades, you indicated to partner that you wanted a spade, not a diamond. All told, leading the king would have been best, because it helps partner by eliminating a decision.

Let's try another practice hand:

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

Partner leads the three of spades, and your ten loses to declarer's queen. Declarer leads a low club to your partner's ace, and partner returns the nine of diamonds. How should you continue?

Declarer's clubs are ominous, and your lack of heart honors shows that declarer can win heart tricks. Declarer has all the tricks he needs to take nine winners. Time to attack. Does partner want you to switch to diamonds?

**When partner leads a card that's low,
With this suit surely go;
If what he's led looks from the middle,
His earlier suit answers the riddle.**

Partner wants his earlier suit, the spade. Return the eight of spades. Can you work out what partner's spades probably are?

	NORTH					
	♠ 6 5 ♥ A K 10 ♦ 8 4 ♣ K Q J 9 8 7					
WEST	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; height: 100px; border-collapse: collapse; margin: auto;"> <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						
♠ A J 9 3 2 ♥ 9 6 3 ♦ Q 9 5 2 ♣ A		♠ 10 8 7 ♥ 8 7 4 ♦ A 10 3 ♣ 5 4 3 2				
	SOUTH					
	♠ K Q 4 ♥ Q J 5 2 ♦ K J 7 6 ♣ 10 6					

Notice partner's diamond suit. He knew he had to reach your hand immediately, and that the only way he could do so was if you hold the ace of diamonds. Even then, he had to take care not to carelessly put the two of diamonds on the table. That would have indicated he wanted a diamond switch. In fact, partner didn't bother with the five of diamonds either. He didn't want to create any confusion for you in interpreting his intentions. That's a good partner. He was thinking about your point of view.

Here comes a new one:

	NORTH			
	♠ 3 2 ♥ 4 3 2 ♦ A Q 10 7 6 ♣ Q 6 4			
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N				
W E				
S				
	EAST			
	♠ A 7 6 ♥ J 7 6 ♦ 9 8 4 ♣ 7 5 3 2			

S	W	N	E
1 ♣ P	P	1 ♦ P	P
2NT P	P	3NT P	P
P	P		

West leads the jack of spades. Although you will probably want to win the ace of spades right away, there is nothing automatic about this play. Just as declarer stops to think about his plan before calling for even an obvious card from dummy, so do you also need to think about your defensive plan. You may be able to do all the thinking you need to do while declarer is doing his planning. But if declarer calls for a card and you are still thinking, then you should say:

Excuse me, but I need a minute to think about the entire hand.

You do this because a long pause by you may be looked upon as conveying unauthorized information, and it may result in a complicated director's call. But by the simple expedient of stating that you are thinking about the hand in a broad manner, you avoid the complication. However, never hesitate when holding a singleton, or you'll get a director at your table anyway.

So have you had sufficient time to figure this hand out? Declarer certainly has the king and queen of spades, for two tricks, and so that suit has no future for the defense. If declarer does not have the missing diamond honors, then partner does, and all the finesses

needed will work, so there are five more tricks for declarer. Declarer himself has bid clubs and dummy has a fitting card. The only suit left is hearts. So you should win the ace of spades and switch to the jack of hearts. Does the jack surprise you? After all, you don't have the 10. But you also have no other entry. The biggest help you can be to partner is to put the maximum pressure on declarer's heart holding. In fact, to set the hand, partner will need to have the 10 of hearts himself.

	NORTH					
	♠ 3 2 ♥ 4 3 2 ♦ A Q 10 7 6 ♣ Q 6 4					
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N						
W E						
S						
♠ J 10 9 8 4 ♥ A Q 10 8 ♦ J 5 2 ♣ 10		♠ A 7 6 ♥ J 7 6 ♦ 9 8 4 ♣ 7 5 3 2				
	SOUTH					
	♠ K Q 5 ♥ K 9 5 ♦ K 3 ♣ A K J 9 8					

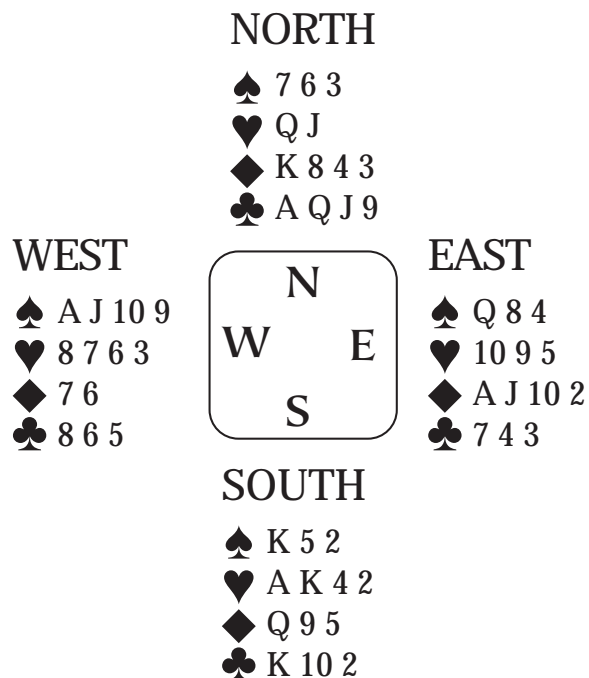
If you had not led the jack, declarer could have played the nine, forcing partner to win. Then declarer's king would have stood up as a stopper. Looking at partner's hand, you can imagine that, even as he led the jack of spades, he was hoping you could somehow find a heart switch. It's great to remember rules of thumb such as, "return your partner's suit," but never allow them to overrule the evidence or your own thought. By the way, a really clever declarer would have dropped the queen of spades under your ace at trick one, pretending to hold only KQ of spades. Would that bit of temptation have caused you to return partner's suit?

I'll leave the last question unanswered. Let's turn to a new situation:

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

Partner leads the eight of hearts and dummy's jack wins. Declarer calls for a low diamond. What is your view of the hand?

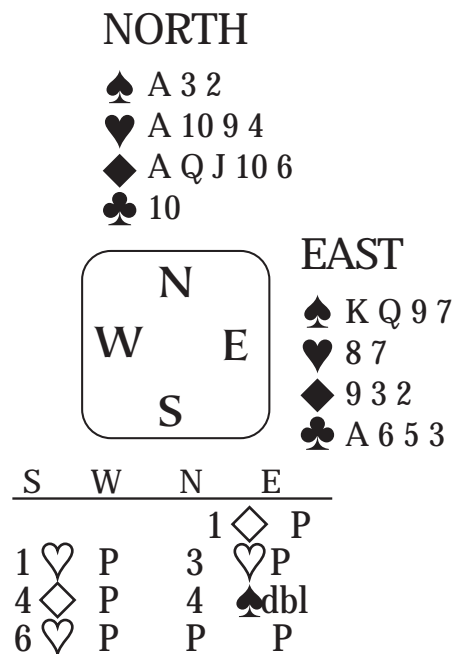
First let's examine partner's lead. If you apply the rule of 11, you confirm your suspicion that the eight was not fourth down. In fact, it looks like top of nothing. This means that declarer has AK, and since dummy's hearts are doubleton, declarer likely has four hearts. That gives him four tricks in hearts. Dummy's club suit is not long, but it is hearty, making it easy to imagine that declarer can win 4 club tricks. Now he is leading toward his queen of diamonds, trying to make his ninth winner at trick two. Didn't that set off alarm bells for you once before in this lesson? Declarer may be trying to steal his contract right out from under your nose! Go up with the ace and switch to the queen of spades.



South did have a spade stopper, but only against the opening lead. Once the lead transferred to your side, and you deciphered the hand, declarer's spade stopper evaporated. But notice that it evaporated only because you led the queen. If you had led small, West would have been forced to win, and then South would have his spade stopper back. You have to make the presumption, when you believe that declarer is trying to steal a trick, that he is doing so precisely because he is in trouble in the fourth suit. If your play is going to work, partner will need to have a strong holding and declarer a weak one. The especial problem comes when declarer has the king, which he can often protect by ducking a lead put through him...but not when that lead is a pressuring honor.

By the way, what do you think of partner's opening lead? His thinking was that if you held a spade honor, he could pick up the entire suit. He could pick it up, that is, provided that you could figure out a spade switch. Partner was playing partnership bridge. He knew you were over there counting and thinking.

A person could get the impression from these lessons that defenders can set any hand at all. Of course we know they can't. But let's see if they can set the next one:



North's bid of 4 spades was a cue bid. East was well aware that North-South had no intention of playing in spades, so his double was not a penalty double, but a LEAD DIRECTING DOUBLE. West makes the very informative lead of the 4 of spades, which in this case must show the jack. South has no spade honors.

Declarer wins the lead with dummy's ace, draws trump in three rounds, and then cashes the king of diamonds from his hand followed by four more diamonds from dummy. Declarer shows that he started with just two diamonds, and so, when he cashes dummy's diamonds he discards two spades and 1 club. Finally he leads dummy's singleton club. You finally have something to do! But what should it be?

I'm sure you've been doing some counting. Declarer showed two diamonds and four hearts. After pitching two spades on diamonds he next followed with a club pitch, so he started with just three spades, and therefore he started with four clubs. Now let's count his tricks. He has captured

one spade, three hearts, five diamonds and he has a trump left in each hand which he can win singly. Totalling up those winning tricks, we count only eleven. Where is his 12th trick?

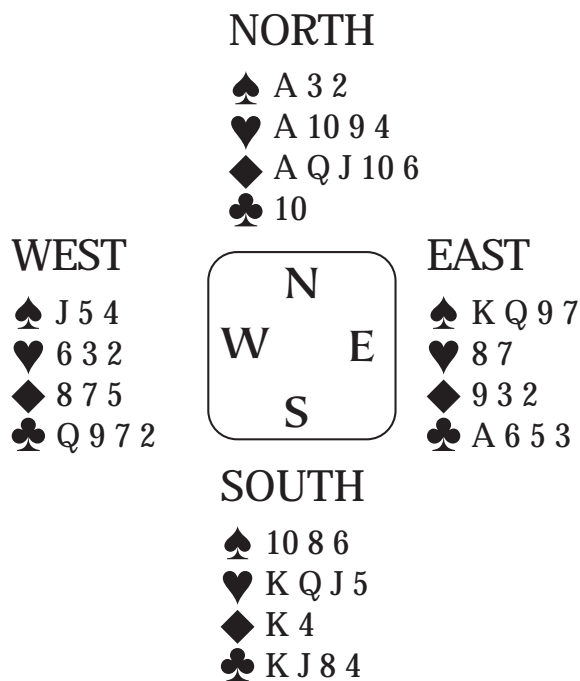
The twelfth trick cannot be anything but a club. The only club he can possibly have to be the 12th trick is the king. Since he will be set if he does not have the king, let's say he has it. If you fly up with your ace of clubs, desperate to win dummy's singleton ten, you will be handing declarer his 12th trick, because your play will immediately establish his king. But if you don't jump up with the ace, will he play his king anyway? He certainly might, especially if he holds KQx or Kxx. But what if poor declarer has the misfortune to hold KJx? Now when he plays a stiff club off the board and you smoothly play low (you will, of course, have to have figured this out while declarer was busy winning the first 11 tricks)...if you now smoothly play low, what declarer in his right mind would think you had the ace clubs when you fail to leap upon dummy's singleton? Declarer may choose to put in the jack of clubs, playing your partner for the ace of clubs.

he draws trump outright, taking the necessary three rounds to do so, then he can never win more than five trump tricks. Those five trumps tricks are the three winners off the top and one trump left in each hand to win singly. It is not difficult to count these five tricks when you are aware of this principal.

So when, on the preceding hand, declarer takes the ace of spades and draws trump in three rounds, you can immediately count 5 trump tricks, the five diamond tricks laying on the table in front of you, and the ace of spades taken at trick one. In other words, you can count declarer's eleven winners at trick 4. You don't have to make your tricky duck of the club until trick 12.

The issue is not will you have TIME to figure out that you must duck smo-o-o-o-thly. You have plenty of time. The key is just to see that the king of clubs is the only possible card in the entire deck that will give declarer his 12th trick. If he plays it, he will make it. If you trick him by ducking the ace, you may give him room to make a mistake.

In the present case, you'll be giving him quite a lot of room, actually. If declarer has K-Jack-x of clubs he will almost certainly go wrong. And it will be around about this time that he makes the startling observation that **you** know a thing or two about playing defense!



These things always sound more complicated when they're written down. So let's review a couple of points. When declarer has a four-four trump fit, if