

Danny's Musings and the Joy of Counting in Bridge

Introduction

Everyone agrees that counting in bridge which is determining distribution and the location of high cards --is hard work and improves your bridge game.

It also adds a different aspect to bridge, one that can be enjoyable. There are principles of card play that determine what cards you play and what suits you lead in the early play of the hand.

But, if you actively infer distribution and the location of the high cards, the principles go out the window, and you can instead play your cards "double-dummy", choosing the card to play that works the best. There is something inherently satisfying in counting out the hand and discovering the best play to make, especially when it is different from what you would have done had you not counted.

When your head is above the water you get a completely different view than when your head is in the water. Counting and inference give you a completely different view.

(from Counting in Bridge by)

Danny's Musings

I will give you some of my musings about counting and give you a strategy you may wish to try to help you improve your counting skills - even though I don't always practice what I preach 😊

Personally I am a very poor counter of hands. I lack the patience to go through the necessary steps to count every hand. Too often I rely on my intuition and years of bridge experience . But when I have to count I do.

This isn't the correct way to tackle this issue, you should get into the habit of counting **every** hand. Counting isn't easy, but it is very satisfying when your detective work gets you a top board which otherwise you would not have achieved.

Counting should be automatic and is for some Orillia Bridge Club players - ie: Sri, Jack, Gary E., Rob A., Bill K., George K. etc. Next time you're at their table; ask them if they have any tricks about counting they can share with you.

1. Listen to the bidding and get a rough idea of the points and distribution.
2. If you are declarer analyze the opening lead and fill in anything more you know about the hand.
3. Be careful with pre-empts - they tell the declarer a lot of information which will often help an astute declarer to follow a line of play they would not have adopted without the pre-empt. Pre-empts can be a successful to foil the opponents' bidding but there should be a good reason to use one. Unusual NT is the most overused and un-needed convention. If you do not intend to save at a very high level don't use this convention. The same applies for Michaels, Skewed Cue bids, Sandwich NT etc.
4. If you are a declarer false card as much as possible. False carding by defenders can be profitable but generally it is best to just play your natural carding. Declarer will think you are false carding anyway so when you make your normal play they won't believe you☺ It's important that you and your partner are on the same page.
5. Memorize distribution of suits 5-4-4, 5-4-3-1, 4-4-4-1, 6-3-2-2 etc.
6. If you have to find a Q and can't get a complete count on a hand play the opponent with the highest number of unknown cards to have it. For example if one of your opponents opens 3H and you need to find the Q of clubs it is most likely in his partner's hand as there are more "holes" for it to be in.
7. When the opponent opens 1NT it should be a fairly easy hand to count. At trick one decide the maximum number of points pard can have and **don't play him/her for cards they can not have** .
8. Concentrate on how the unseen cards may divide. If your hand and dummy have 8 cards in a suit try to focus on the possible division of the remaining 5. With practice it will become second nature for you to think 5-0, 4-1, and 3-2.
9. Memorize the original layout. Commit it to memory by repeating the pattern in your head. Do the same with your own hand.

10. Mentally review the bidding **before** you play to the first trick. If possible come up with a picture of each player's general strength and hand pattern. Consider not only what was bid; but **what was not bid**. For example declarer opens 1D his/her partner bids 1S and opener rebids 1NT. What is the minimum number of diamonds declarer holds?
11. Focus your count on just one unseen hand; usually the one who makes the most bids during the auction or the one who makes the opening lead.
12. Consider the skill of your opponents. The more experienced your opponents are the more reliable their bidding (and carding) will be.
13. Practice, practice, practice. Start by counting one suit even if it doesn't matter on the hand.
14. Don't overload your neurons. If declarer, start by counting your longer fits. If defender, start by counting the suit your partner has lead.
15. Count trump!!!
16. Beware of false cards that will confuse partner. You hold Q J x of a suit and play the low card on the first trick. Do not play the Q on the second trick. Partner will play you for Q x.

A Strategy to begin counting

1. Choose one suit to count; usually the longest one in dummy is a good one to begin with. Focus the distribution of this suit only for ten straight hands. Put a check mark inside your convention card if you have correctly counted this suit. Put a star in your card once you have counted 10 hands.
2. You can count up or down but an easy way to start is to count the total between dummy and your hand in the suit in question and remember the remainder from 13. For example you have 5S and dummy has 3. There are 5 left so remember 5 and work out the remainder of that suit. 5-3-1-4, 5-3-2-3 etc. When you have counted one suit perfectly for ten hands move on to 2 suits. You may not always get a complete count on

the suit as declarer may claim, the count won't be complete until 13 etc. but if you got as good a count as you could give yourself a check mark. Use the same strategy until you have counted all four suits.

3. Choose either of the unseen hands and count out the distribution. After 10 successful hands count the other hand.
4. Once you have mastered counting the distribution use the same strategy to count points.
5. With plenty of practice you will reach perfection, don't give up there may be a set back or two ☺

Example hand:

After West opens the bidding with 3♥, you as South end up in 6NT. How would you play the hand on the lead of ♥K (East follows suit to the first trick with a heart).

♠ K Q 10
♥ 8 2
♦ A 9 7
♣ A 10 9 x x

♠ A J 8
♥ A 9 3
♦ K Q J
♣ K J 8 7

Answer:

- 1) You have 3 spades, one Heart and 3 Diamond tricks for a total of 7 tricks off the top. If you can bring in the Club suit for 5 tricks you make the contract but where oh where is the ♣Q
- 2) You have nine Clubs so four are missing likely distributions 4-0, 3-1, 2-2
- 3) After the first trick you know seven of West's cards and only 1 of East's Cards.
- 4) Although the ♣Q is likely to be with East, before you commit yourself to that conclusion; it is best to get a complete count of the West hand by going on a little discovery trip by first playing spades and Diamonds.
- 5) By counting the number of spades and Diamonds that West plays, you will likely eliminate many of the available distributions and will be able to pinpoint exactly which way to play the Club suit.