The Subtle Joy of Counting

Everyone agrees that counting -- 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 water, you get one view of the ocean; when you put your head in the water, you get a completely different view. Counting and inference give you the completely different view.

In these problems, there is one right play. You can find the right play if you count the hand and take all of the available inferences.

The introduction is an introduction to counting, including the basic mechanisms of counting distribution. (Ironically, you should be neither adding or counting when you determine distribution.) The introductory hand runs through a hand for you to count.

Introduction

How to Count

Suppose you are defending. If you started the hand with 3 spades and the dummy started with 4 spades, and you find out the declarer had 1 spade, you can figure out how many spades your partner has. There are 13 spades. Subtract the three that you have, the four that dummy has, and the one that declarer has, and you get that your partner started the hand with 5 spades. Or you can add up the 3, 4, and 1 spades that you know about, getting 8, and subtract that from 13.

As you may have noticed, that is adding and subtracting, not counting. The technical term in bridge is counting, but for goodness sakes you should not actually be counting.

In fact, you should not be adding or subtracting either. There are only so many bridge distributions. One is the 5-4-3-1 distribution. The order of the numbers doesn't matter -- it might appear to you as the 5-4-1-3 distribution, the 3-4-1-5 distribution, or whatever. The point is, your brain should know that these four numbers go together, and when it hears three of these numbers, it should supply the fourth.

Developing this skill requires practice. That practice is not enjoyable. But counting out a hand is enough work as it is. To save yourself time and energy, you can't be also adding and subtracting.

So do it. Use flash cards. Practice in your head. Practice while standing in the grocery line. Give yourself three numbers, and practice knowing the fourth. This doesn't take forever to learn. Once you learn, you can use it and it will become a habit.

Of course, you just need to know the common distributions; if someone has an 8-card suit, you can make a special occasion for adding and subtracting. Start off with the most common distributions -- 4-3-3-3 and 4-4-3-2. Add in 5-3-3-2, 4-4-4-1, and 5-4-3-1. You are mostly there.

Not only do all the suits have 13 cards, but all the hands have 13 cards too. If you learn that declarer started with 1 spade, 5 hearts, and 4 diamonds, you can infer that declarer started with 3 clubs.

There is another point to notice about counting distribution. When you start out, you know your distribution and the dummy's. But -- again assuming your are defending -- you don't know declarer's spades, declarer's hearts, declarer's diamonds, declarer's clubs, partner's spades, partner's hearts, partner's

diamonds, and partner's clubs. In a sense you are missing eight pieces of information.

But if you learn declarer's spades, you know partner's spades; if you learn

But, if you learn declarer's spades, you know partner's spades; if you learn declarer's hearts, you know partner's hearts, and if you know declarer's diamonds, you know partner's diamonds. And once you know those three suits you can figure out the fourth suit.

So you start the hand missing only 3 pieces of information. Once you know three pieces of information, you can figure out the complete distribution of the hand. That is why you can count the distribution more often than you otherwise might expect, and that is why counting distribution is the foremost type of counting.

The Exercises

In these exercises on counting, I take you part way through the hand, then ask you to count. The classic thing to count is distribution. The second thing to count is high-card points (HCP). That is less likely to be successful than counting distribution, and not as easy as counting distribution, but sometimes it is useful. Finally, it sometimes helps to count winners.

Your goal is to count as much as you can. First, try to figure out the distribution. Second, try to count points and place the high cards. When relevant, try to count winners. It's practice; the more you do it, the easier it gets.

All of these hands are from real life. (If I alter the hand, I will let you know.) Sometimes you can count things out, and sometimes you can't. You usually will be defender, partially because declarer gives up a lot of information in the bidding.

Once you have counted everything you can, then the problem is what you should do. Frankly, counting is sometimes a waste of time, meaning that you end up doing what you would have done if you hadn't counted. But there is a different way of thinking about the hand once you have counted, and sometimes that leads to a different answer.

Enough. Try a hand.

Hand 1

You pick up

♠ KJ

♥ AKQ108

♦ QJ9

♣ KQ4

Nice hand. You are dealer, so you open 1♥. Lefty (the opponent on your left) passes, and your partner bids 4♥. Righty (the opponent on your right) now annoyingly bids 4♠. You are vulnerable, they are not. It is perhaps not so obvious what to do, but you bid 5♥, Lefty bids 5♠, which is passed around to you. You double.

Ace of hearts is the obvious open lead, and dummy comes down with

♠ 1042

♥ 3

♦ AK62

♣ J8632

Declarer ruffs the opening heart lead.

Time to count. If declarer started with zero hearts, how many hearts did your partner start with?

Declarer crosses to the ♦K and takes a trump finesse, playing the ♠Q. You win your ♠K and lead your ♦Q. Declarer wins this, and leads a trump to her ♠A, dropping your ♠J. That's unfortunate, you were hoping to win that too. Partner followed to both rounds of trumps.

Declarer now leads a diamond to your ♦J, your partner showing out in diamonds.

Okay, your partner started with two diamonds. How many did declarer start with?

That is useful to know. Declarer cannot pitch any clubs on diamond winners.

At this point, your return is a no-brainer, at least from head-above-water-no-counting point of view. You have

♠ --

♥ KQ108

♦ --

♣ KQ4

and dummy has

♠ 10

♥ ---

♦ 2

♣ J8632

Leading a heart gives declarer a sluff-and-a-ruff; one of the head-above-water principles is that you never give declarer a sluff-and-a-ruff (unless you are sure declarer has no more losers in the side suits). So you have to lead a club, and from KQx, the obvious lead is the king.

But let's count.

Counting the Distribution

I think you should figure out partner's hearts as soon as declarer showed up, and I think you should figure out declarer's diamonds as soon as she showed out. But you can usually put off counting until you have to make a decision. This is your decision time.

Can you count the spades? Declarer probably has finished drawing trump. First, declarer was trying to draw trumps. Why would she stop if one trump was still out? And how would she have known to drop your jack?

If trump are drawn, your partner started with two trump. If your partner started with two trump, how many did declarer start with?

That makes sense -- declarer would be more likely to come in at the four level holding six trump. No certainties here, but I think it's sensible to give declarer six trump. (If you have time to worry about the possibility of five, you can do that. But you won't have time on this hand.)

Eureka. The distribution in trump is the third piece of information. Even though clubs have never been played (or mentioned in the bidding), you can figure out the distribution in the club suit.

At this point, you can count declarer's hand to figure out how many clubs she has, or you can count partner's hand to figure out how many clubs he has. On this hand you will need both pieces of information.

Counting HCP and Winners

You can also try to count HCP. In one way, this is the perfect hand for counting HCP. You have seem all of the HCP in spades, hearts, and diamonds, and you can see the KQJ of clubs. The only missing honor is the ♣A. Almost always you can place an ace from the bidding.

This hand is the exception. If there is a point range for partner's 4♥ bid, I don't know what it is. And partner, having 7-card heart support, might feel entitled to bend the rules anyway. Declarer too never declared a point range.

So you can't know who has the ♣A.

The third domain of counting is counting tricks. Counting tricks is not important for this hand. But for the sake of exercise, if declarer has the ♣A, you can and

will get at least one club trick, which sets the contract one. You of course would like to try to get two club tricks. If partner has the ♣A, then you would like to get three more club tricks to set the contract three tricks. Whether you are playing IMPs, matchpoints, or rubber bridge, your current goal on this hand is simply to maximize your number of remaining tricks.

Using the Count

Okay, on to underwater bridge. When you have counted the hand, you can often run a "scenario". Running a scenario is simply considering what will happen when you make one lead or another. Your natural lead is the king of clubs. Always start with the most intuitive plausible lead.

If your partner has the ♣A, he will let your king win. You will then lead a small club to his ace.

Oh-oh. Your partner started with only two clubs. You know that from counting. Your partner will have to then lead a heart. Declarer will slough the losing club from her hand and trump on the board.

Now that you know that danger, you can see how to avoid the danger -- lead a small club to your partner's ♣A. Your partner will return a club, and you win three club tricks. That is to say, this defense is no problem, ONCE YOU REALIZE PARTNER HAS TWO CLUBS and will be forced to give declarer a rough-and-sluff.

Of course, you don't know if partner has the ♣A. So you need to run the same scenario when your partner does not have the ♣A. If you lead a small club (the current candidate for best lead), declarer can win with the ♣J on the board. Is that bad? Well, you have counted declarer's hand, you know that declarer has three clubs. So you still get one club trick. It would be completely silly to lead a small club if declarer had Ax; it would be equally silly to lead a small club if declarer had Axx and could pitch a club on a long diamond from the dummy. In other words, in both these situations, it is critical that you win one of the first two club tricks, and you guarantee that by leading the king of clubs.

But you know that declarer's third club is not going away. So you can lead a small club knowing that you will still get a club trick.

Can you do better than one trick my leading the king? Not really. Declarer wins your ♣K with the ♣A and leads a club towards the ♣J. You get your queen of clubs, but the jack wins the third round.

So, by the analysis so far, leading a small club is always safe -- if declarer has the ace of clubs, you get one club trick no matter what you do -- and it gains a trick if partner has the ace of clubs.

You probably don't have time to think about the ♣10, but if you do.... If declarer has the A10x of clubs, you get only one club trick no matter what you

declarer has the A10x of clubs, you get only one club trick no matter what you lead. If declarer has A9x of clubs, declarer will probably win your ♣K with your ace and lead to the ♣J. If declarer decides to finesse instead for the ♣10, declarer is playing you to have led the ♣K from K10x, which no one does. Anyway, even if declarer misguesses and finesses for the ♣10, losing to your partner, your partner is endplayed into giving declarer a sluff-and-a-ruff.

However, if declarer has A9x of clubs and you lead a small club, declarer might very well play you for K10x of clubs and finesse for the ♣10. Then you will get two club tricks. His alternative is to play you for the KQ of clubs, which makes sense on the bidding -- but very few people lead small from KQx of clubs. So leading small is actually the best chance for an extra trick even when declarer has the ace of clubs.

Summary/Review

Let me summarize what happened on this hand. When you were in with your diamond winner, you could count the hand. Because you could count partner for only two clubs, you could become aware of the danger of partner having to give declarer a sluff-and-a-ruff. Because you could count declarer for three clubs and not being able to pitch any of them, you didn't have to worry that if you led low you would not get any club tricks.

More generally, because you could work out the distribution, you could do a scenario analysis. That analysis led to a different answer than produced by the head-above-water never-counted principles of play -- without counting, it is practically unthinkable to lead anything but the king, but the scenario analysis clearly reveals the value of leading a small club.

Hand 2

You pick up

♠ AQ9

♥ 106

♦ K10975

♣ Q43

Matchpoints. You have 11 HCP. Not enough to open, and anyway Righty opens a 15-17 1NT. You pass resignedly, Lefty bids Stayman, Righty shows hearts, and Lefty jumps to game (showing by implication a 4-card spade suit).

Time to count points. The opponents bid game, so they probably have at least 25 HCP. You have 11, so you can reasonable hope for your partner have 4. So partner will be some help on this hand, but not a lot.

Because partner doesn't have much, you might not want to lead away from an honor. But a heart lead is liable to finesse partner (when declarer would naturally finesse you without your help). So you decide to lead a diamond -- either the 10 or 9, depending on how you play.

Dummy comes down with

♠ 10653

♥ KJ4

♦ Q4

♣ A965

Declarer plays the ♦Q and it wins, partner playing the ♦2. That could be the two from J2 of diamonds. Otherwise, partner doesn't have the jack of diamonds.

Declarer leads a club from his hand and thinks, presumably about finessing. He decides not to and plays the ♣K. This hand has been nothing but bad news -- your opening lead didn't work, dummy came down with a solid 10 HCP, and now declarer didn't finesse into your ♣Q, he is probably going to finesse into dummy.

Declarer changes tack (which now that I think about it, is a little strange). He cashes 4 rounds of hearts, playing the KJ of hearts from dummy, then the AQ from his hand. You have to find two discards and opt for two diamonds. Declarer pitches a club from the board, and partner follows to four rounds of hearts in informationless unconcern.

Declarer now leads the ♣J. There is some chance that declarer does not have the ♣10, and no chance that declarer will not finesse if declarer does have the ♣10, so you cover the ♣J with your ♣Q. Declarer now leads a diamond from the board

and finesses the ♦J.

What can you count?

Counting Distribution

No one has shown out of anything but hearts. You can know that declarer had at least 3 diamonds, at least two clubs, and 2-3 spades. That doesn't add up to much -- in fact, you have somehow muddled your way to trick 8 without knowing anything more about declarer's distribution than that declarer started with 4 hearts. And you knew that from the bidding.

Counting HCP

Declarer has shown the AQ of hearts, the AJ of diamonds, and the KJ of clubs. That's 15 HCP. You have hit the information jackpot! You have seen all of the high cards in every suit but spades. Declarer could have the ♠J, but declarer is unlikely to have the ♠K, because that would give declarer 18 HCP.

What now?

Without counting, your natural instinct might have been to exit in diamonds and wait for your two spade tricks. Now you know to attack spades.

♠A. Ignore what partner plays. ♠Q, declarer playing the jack. 9♠. Declarer thinks about it and does not play the ♠10 from dummy, so your partner cannot overtake with his ♠K. But you lead a club, and yes!, partner has the ♣10 and cashes the last two tricks. Down 2, which earns 12 of 12 matchpoints.

(Setting it just one would have been 11.5 out of 12. If you return a diamond, declarer scores two diamond tricks and makes the contract, but you still get 7.5 out of 12 match points.)

Hand 6

From actual play (March 28, 2007). Matchpoints, so try to take as many tricks as possible You pick up a nondescript:

♠ J10xxxx
♥ Kxxx
♦ 6
♣ xx

The auction is:

```
RHO   you   LHO   pd
1C    P     1NT   P
2NT   P     P     P
```

Yes, a bad hand, a boring contract, and you partner is on lead and will probably lead a diamond, ruining any chance of setting the contract.

Partner leads the ♦3, ruining any chance of setting the contract. You play fourth from long-strongest. Dummy comes down with

♠ Qx
♥ Jxx
♦ KQx
♣ AQJxx

Declarer plays small from the board, you play your six to signal partner he came off to a horrible lead, and declarer wins the trick with the ♦9. Let's stop here. What is the diamond situation?

Declarer leads a club to the queen, leads a spade to the king in her hand, then leads a second club playing the jack. On the third round of clubs, partner's king of clubs drops.

Declarer runs clubs. This is the part of defense no one likes to talk about -- discarding on dummy's long suit. But it happens and you have to deal with it. So what do you discard? And what is your plan? And most importantly, what do you know about the hidden cards?

Placing the High Cards

The most difficult hands to defend are when declarer has 20+ HCP, because there are so many possibilities. This is easier. Declarer bid 1NT, which has a conventional range of 6-9, though you might have to worry about 5-10. Declarer

then turned down an invitation to game, suggest the lower range of 5-7.

If you think about it, declarer probably has the jack of diamonds to play the
diamonds that way. Without the jack, most people would play the Q of diamonds

diamonds that way. Without the jack, most people would play the Q of diamonds on the first trick.

Declarer has shown the king of spades, and declarer almost certainly has the ace of spades. If your partner is good enough to duck with the ace of spades, he is also good enough not to duck -- he wants to keep declarer out of her hand because he doesn't want to be finessed again in spades.

That puts declarer up to 8 HCP. Your partner almost certainly has the AQ of hearts and the A of diamonds.

Declarer could have made it more difficult for you by playing the ace of spades. Then you would have had to make a middle-game inference -- would declarer play to the ace, leaving the spade suit wide open, with an attractive choice of switching to diamonds? No.

Counting Tricks

Declarer has blocked the spade suit. So declarer has 5 club tricks, two spades, and at least 1 diamond. You are not going to set this contract.

On the bright side, declarer does not have 4 hearts, because of the bidding, so you have 1 diamond trick and 4 heart tricks to cash when you get in. Of course, it will be partner who gets in, so it will be up to partner to lead the ace and then the queen from AQx of hearts (if partner has three hearts).

Counting Distribution

The 1NT response to 1C is a somewhat revealing bid. The 1NT responder doesn't have a 4-card major, either doesn't have a diamond suit or doesn't want to mention it, yet probably doesn't have enough clubs to support those. So a flat hand.

In this case, declarer has only 3 clubs. If declarer would have shown a 5-card diamond suit, declarer has to be 3-3-4-3. That leaves partner with 2-3-5-3, from which partner would have logically led a diamond. If declarer has 5 diamonds, then declarer would have probably attacked diamonds rather than clubs.

What now?

We have this as the current situation after the second winning club finesse.

```
                    Q
                    Jxx
                    KQ
                    Axx
    x                           J10xxx
    AQx                         Kxxx
    Axxx                        —
    K                           —
                    Ax
```

```
AA
xxx
Jxx
x
```

At this point, the correct defense is obvious. You need to save two spades, so that declarer cannot overtake the queen of spades and win a small spade. Otherwise, you save your hearts so that you can cash your long heart and hold declarer to making 2NT.

You might have done this anyway. (It eluded the defender, however). What about partner? At the table, declarer cashed the queen of spades to unblock the suit before leading diamonds. So partner could know the high cards. Otherwise, all you can do is pitch low spades to hopefully signal disinterest in the suit. Actually, you can also afford to pitch the jack of spades, if that will help.

Hand 5

From actual play (matchpoints, opponents not vulnerable): You pick up a nondescript:

♠ 876
♥ K42
♦ KJ84
♣ Q98

The auction is:

```
RHO    you   LHO   pd
P      P     1S    P
1NT    P     2D    P
P      P
```

The 1NT was forcing. A 2S rebid by opener would show six spades. The 2D bid promises at least 3 diamonds, and almost always more diamonds than clubs.

Partner leads the ♥Q, and dummy comes down with

♠ Q5
♥ 965
♦ Q7653
♣ AJ6

You play the ♥4, trying to be encouraging. Declarer wins with the ace and plays ♦A, all following.

This is one of those bidding sequences that strongly limit the possible distributions declarer might have. So at this point, you should know declarer's distribution.

Declarer then leads the ♦10, playing small from dummy.. Your partner shows out, as you should have expected, pitching an uninformative club. You win with your ♦ jack.

You play your ♥ king, winning, then a small heart. You partner wins with the ♥ jack.

Partner then leads the ♣ 10. Declarer wins the ace and leads the ♠queen. Partner wins with the king and leads a small club. Your 8 of clubs wins.

Now what?

Counting Distribution

The first round of trumps revealed that declarer had 2 diamonds. D...

The first round of trumps revealed that declarer had 3 diamonds. Declarer probably would have bid 2C with 3 clubs (that is the system bid), and declarer would have bid 2H with four hearts, and declarer would have bid 2S with 6 spades (and only 3 diamonds). That makes declarer 5-3-3-2, and partner is 3-4-1-5.

Placing the High Cards

Obviously, declarer started with two small clubs, 3 diamonds to the ace, and 3 hearts to the ace. Declarer has to have the ace of spades to open the bidding, and probably has the jack of spades to be playing spades in that way.

Now it is a double-dummy problem, albeit a relatively difficult one for the bridge table:

```
                    x
                    --
                    Q76
                    J
xx                              xx
10                              --
--                              K8
Kx                              Q
                    AJxx
                    --
                    10
                    --
```

If you return a spade, you might get only your ◆king and declarer is down 1.

If you lead a club, declarer has to ruff with the ◆10. Now you have the K8 in diamonds sitting over dummy's Q76, and you make two diamond tricks, for +100.

But, if you cash your king of diamonds, you can now cash a club trick. That is also down 2. And if your partner overtakes your queen (as he should -- he can count the hand too), he can lead his last heart. Then you make your ◆8 en passant. Down 3 and +150.

A Defensive Problem

From actual play, Jan 7, 2009. Matchpoints, club game. You pick up

```
Axxx
Axxx
x
KQ10x
```

This is the auction

```
LHO   Pd   RHO    You
1D    P    1S     X
2C    P    2H(1)  P
2NT   P    P      P
(1)fourth-suit forcing
```

Partner leads the J of hearts and this dummy comes down. An unpromising lead.

```
QJ109x
Q9xx
Ax
xx
```

You let partner's jack ride around to declarer's king. Declarer plays a diamond to the ace and then a diamonds back to the 9, partner winning the king. Partner now leads a small heart, which rides around to declarer's 10 and declarer leads another heart to the 9 on the board. You might as well win. What now?

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A Defensive Problem

The current situation

```
QJ109x
Q
--
xx
```
```
            Axx
            x
            --
            KQ10x
```

Answer:

Declarer can be placed with a 1-3-5-4 distribution. (Or possibly 0-3-5-5.) Declarer probably would have attacked spades if he had the king. (Or, with a singleton king, declarer would have at least to lead to the king at trick two.) So partner has the king of spades. (Partner has also signaled liking spades when he discarded on the third round of hearts.)

Every other spot card has to go to declarer for him to have just 11 HCP. Anyway, there is no danger if declarer does not have the jack of clubs. (And the play in clubs strongly suggests that declarer has solid diamonds.

So you are pretty close to double dummy. Assuming a spade in declarer's hand,

```
        QJ109x
        Q
        --
        xx

Kx                  Axx
--                  x
xxx                  --
xxx                 KQ10x
        x
        --
        QJ10
        AJxx
```

The danger is this. If you play the king of clubs, declarer can win the ace, cash his diamonds, and then exit in spades. You will cash two spades and end up giving declarer his eighth trick with the king of clubs.

To prevent this, you have to cash the ace of spades. (If declarer shows out, this was unnecessary but did not hurt.) Then you lead the king of clubs. Declarer wins the ace, wins his diamonds, but then must lead a club, giving you two clubs tricks

to set the contract.

If declarer lets your club king win, it gets trickier. What do you do now?

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Squeeze-Trim-Endplay Hands

Squeeze-Trim-Endplay: Trump as a Control

Hand 7

From actual play (June 10, 2009). Matchpoints. Your opponents are not adept.
Your Hand:

♠ QJx
♥ J10xx
♦ Ax
♣ 98xx

The auction is:

```
pd    RHO   you   LHO
1C    1D    1H    2D
X(1)  3D    P     P
P
(1) support double, showing exactly 3 hearts.
```

You lead the ♥J and dummy comes down with

♠ xxxx
♥ Q9xx
♦ J109
♣ Qx

This looks at first like a disasterous lead, but declarer plays the ♥Q and
partner plays the ♥K, which holds. Partner shifts to a small trump. Perhaps he is
trying to get the trump off the board. When declarer plays low, you win the ace.
Lacking any other attractive options, you return a trump. Maybe partner knows
what he is doing.

Declarer draws partner's last trump. You play a heart. Declarer now rattles off
three club tricks -- Q, A, and K -- on which your partner drops the ten and the
jack. (Your partner would play the Jack and 9 from J109.) Good thing you saved
a club.

Declarer now plays a small heart. The situation looks like this.

```
        xxx
        9xx
        --
        --
QJx
10x
--
9
```

Count the hand, then click here

Declarer has to have 5 diamonds. Declarer almost certainly has 4 clubs, and can have only 2 hearts, because partner has to have 3. That gives declarer 2 spades. If they are AK, or Ax, it doesn't matter what you do. If it is Kx, you would like declarer to have to lead from her hand.

So you might as well play for declarer to have Kx. But in fact, partner has shown 8 HCP so far. He almost certainly has 12 HCP for his bidding, placing him with the ace of hearts; he almost certainly doesn't have 15 HCP, giving declarer the king.

So the situation is this

```
             xxx
             9xx
             --
             --
QJx                      Axxx
10x                      Ax
--                       --
9                        --
             Kx
             x
             KQ
             7
```

Now you have to figure out what to do when declarer leads a heart from hand. Plan out the defense, then click here

If you allow partner to win this, partner might lead a spade. If he doesn't, the declarer has to ruff the heart. The problem is, declarer can now lead a club to endplay you into leading spades.

So now the correct defense appears. It is not particularly counterintuitive, so full credit only if you knew what you were doing and why. You have to rise with the 10 of hearts and cash your winning club, so that declarer cannot endplay you. Then you exit in hearts and declarer will have to lead away from the Kx of spades.

Hand 8

From actual play (June 10, 2009). Matchpoints. You would probably come to this declarer play anyway, but it is an interesting exercise in counting. Your Hand:

♠ Kx
♥ xx
♦ KQxxx
♣ AK7x

The auction is:

```
RHO   you  LHO  pd
1C    1D   1H   2D
X(1)  3D   P    P
P
(1) support double, showing exactly 3 hearts.
```

The lead is the ♥J and dummy comes down with

♠ xxxx
♥ Q9xx
♦ J109
♣ Qx

RHO plays the king of hearts. It looks like RHO has the ace, and if you bother to ask, you will find out that your opponents lead the 10 from AJ10(x).

RHO leads back a trump. LHO wins the ace and plays another round of trump, leaving you with this situation:

```
xxxx
9xx
10
Qx

Kx
x
KQx
AK7x
```

Now what? Should you play two rounds of clubs and ruff the third? That ruff is safe, but then you have to get back to your hand to draw the last trump before your last club winner is ruffed. If clubs are 4-3, you can play three rounds and then safely ruff the fourth. But if clubs are 5-2, then your club winner might be ruffed.

Can you count the hand well enough to resolve the club situation? And while you are counting, can you be sure the ace of spades is onside? If it isn't, maybe you can get the opponents to lead spades. When you are done, click here

The hearts are easy to count -- RHO said he has three, so LHO has four. Oddly enough, you could have placed the spades at trick 1. Neither defender can have 5, or else they would have bid spades. If LHO was 4-4 in the majors, he would have made a negative double. So RHO has four spades. Depending on who has the last diamond, RHO is either 4-3-3-3 or 4-3-2-4. In either case, you can safely play three rounds of clubs and ruff the fourth round.

That pesky ace of spades? RHO has 7 HCP in hearts, none in diamonds, and at most 1 in clubs. Given his flat hand, he probably has the ace of spades to give him 12 HCP for his opening bid in first seat.