



Adventures in Bridge

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This Week in Bridge

(260) Counting and Putting it All Together

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Level: 2

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General

Although learning to count one suit effectively and efficiently is extremely important, learning how to make use of the information that we keep track of is even more important. We want to take the information we collect about the layout of a specific suit and combine it with other information we have about the hand from both the auction and the play to help us better picture what is happening on a hand. This can be a lot of work and a difficult skill to perfect, but one we improve on with time and experience. Let's see how this can work for us.

Counting Shape in Detail

Let's look at an example of how we count an opponent's shape and then how to make use of shape information about our opponents' hand in order to help us become a better declarer.

Example

Here is our hand and the dummy for a 4♠ contract by South. See the auction below.

♠ Kxx
♥ xxx
♦ Ajx
♣ AKxx

♠ AQJxx
♥ xx
♦ KT8x
♣ xx

West	North	East	South
2♥	X	3♥	3♠
P	4♠	All Pass	

Opening Lead: ♥6

Now imagine we are playing this hand at matchpoints, where our goal is to take as many tricks as possible. What can you determine about the hand?

LHO leads the ♥6 (appearing to be a 4th best lead) and the opponents take two ♥ tricks and then play a third ♥, which is ruffed with ♠T. We overruff and draw trump, finding (somewhat surprisingly) that the suit splits 3-2 with the preemptor having the 3-card holding. Now there are some good inferences to use that will help us play the hand well.

We want to try to visualize the opponents' holdings as a way to help us better determine how to play the hand. First, we use the auction to help us visualize that the ♥ suit is likely 6-2 (and this was confirmed to us in the play). Now we know 6 of LHO's cards. We use the information from the play that LHO had 3 trump to picture that their Major suit shape was 3-6.

Now we think about what actions the opponents have taken so far and see what this implies about their hands. LHO lead a low ♥, presumably 4th best. This means they likely did not have the Ace, nor did they have touching honors (actually, RHO won the ♥A at trick 1 and returned the ♥Q, which was overtaken by LHO with the ♥K, who continued with the ♥J). A 4th best lead is a reasonable lead for the preemptor to make, but not a great one like AK, KQ, or a singleton. Thus, we can infer that LHO did not have a singleton ♦ or ♣, because if they did they likely would have led it on opening lead. Their mostly likely shape is then 3-6-2-2.

We make use of this information in the play of the hand by applying it to the ♦ suit. We expect the ♦ suit to be 2-4. It is more likely that our RHO has the ♦Q since they are known to hold more ♦ cards. Thus, we take the 2-way finesse of the ♦Q into the preemptor. (This may also be reinforced by the expectation that the preemptor is not as likely as their partner to have extra outside honors).

So, we first play the ♦A and then lead the ♦J. Now imagine that this Jack is covered by RHO's ♦Q. We win the ♦K and now we have a singleton ♦ in the dummy opposite our ♦T8. It appears that we now have the guess of whether to play to drop the ♦9 or finesse it, but if we make use of our visualization of the preemptor's shape as 3-6-2-2, then we expect West (LHO) to be out of ♦. Thus, we return to the dummy and finesse by leading a ♦ to our ♦8, strongly expecting this to win the trick. With this play and lie of the cards we take 11 tricks, an excellent result.

Note: We could confirm our suspicion by cashing both ♣ in the dummy. When LHO follows to both of these, we know that LHO is exactly 3-6-2-2 and we can finesse the ♦8 with completely confidence!

The Entire Deal

	North	
	♠ Kxx	
	♥ xxx	
	♦ AJx	
	♣ AKxx	
West		East
♠ 9xx		♠ Tx
♥ KJxxxx		♥ AQ
♦ xx		♦ Q9xx
♣ Qx		♣ Jxxxx
	South	
	♠ AQJxx	
	♥ xx	
	♦ KT8x	
	♣ xx	

Conclusion

Collecting all of the information that is available to you at the bridge table is a challenge. We start by focusing on counting one important suit, but we must take counting far beyond that. In terms of counting shape (not yet diving too deeply into counting high-card points, etc.), we next expand from counting one suit to trying to visualize the shape of the entire hand. We can then think about the possible layout of the suits and the most likely location of the honors. From there we can decide which line of play is likely to be best. This certainly is not a simple process, but it is one that if you continue to work on it, you will find it greatly improving your declarer play.