

# Counting at Bridge

the easy way to improve your game



**Dianne Aves**

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# Acknowledgements

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# Introduction

Beginning and intermediate players may think of counting as simply counting their high-card points (HCP) or maybe counting how many trumps are still out there. And perhaps, as newer players, this is all the counting they need to be doing. After all, they've got their hands full trying to remember when and what to bid, following suit and remembering the few conventions they have tackled. However, at some point in time, everyone needs to learn about counting if their goal is to become a competent or excellent bridge player.

What is there to count? Well, there's a lengthy list. Here are some of the many items on that list: counting the number of sure winners in notrump contracts, counting the number of losers in suit contracts, counting HCP, figuring out hand and suit distributions, counting the number of tricks for declarer, counting the number of tricks for the defense, counting the number of HCP your partner and declarer have — and more. The length of the list may seem daunting, but not all of these things have to be learned at once. Start with some of the easier types of counting and progress from there. Most of all, be patient with yourself. Counting is one of the most difficult skill sets to learn in bridge. At first you have to force yourself to count. Over time (maybe a long time!), it will become second nature to you — like breathing or walking.

You're right to ask, 'Why do I need to learn counting?' The answer is that once you are counting, you will be gaining valuable information, which will help you to choose the correct line of play as declarer and to avoid having to guess so often, both as declarer and as a defender. Some of this information you may need early in the play, while sometimes the fork in the road comes later on in the hand. The goal is to have the information at your fingertips at the point in time where you need to make a critical decision.

So what should you be counting, as a priority? Certainly, you must be counting HCP, as you already do. On defense, you can at least get an idea from the auction about how many HCP the declaring side has and therefore how many HCP the defenders have. If both sides bid during the auction, then as declarer you know something about how the HCP

and one or more suits are distributed in the defenders' hands. Often, the opening lead reveals some information too. It will tell declarer something about the distribution of the suit led, and it may give an idea of which cards are in which defender's hand. If a defender leads the ace from an ace-king combination, for example, declarer already knows about 7 of that defender's HCP.

Declarer also wants to know the distribution of suits in the defenders' hands. If one defender opens a weak two-spade bid, declarer knows that defender has six spades. As the play continues, declarer can probably figure out the distribution of that defender's seven other cards. Once declarer has found out the distribution of that hand, he will know the distribution of the other defender's hand too. Counting may help declarer in deciding which way to play a two-way finesse. It might also give declarer an idea about whether to finesse for a queen or play for the drop.

Certainly, in a suit contract, declarer must focus on counting the trump suit. The biggest mistake beginners make is miscounting the trump suit. Usually this is because somebody ruffed in. Declarer may end up drawing one too many rounds of trumps as a result and this might contribute to a poor score.

In a notrump contract, declarer can sometimes set up an extra winner in a hidden four-card side suit where the declaring side has a 4-3 fit. Declarer needs to keep track of all cards played in that suit because one defender might discard incorrectly from his own four-card holding and inadvertently set up an extra winner for declarer.

Defenders have reasons to count too. The first counting they do results from bids made during the auction. For example, they may already know declarer has a 5-3 fit in the trump suit or that declarer has a six-card minor. In a notrump contract, defenders will know if the declaring side has just the minimum number of HCP required for a 3NT contract when the auction has gone 1NT – 2NT; 3NT. Contrast this with the auction 1NT – 4NT; 6NT. In the first auction, the opponents have gone through an invitational sequence where opener has accepted the invitation to game. The declaring side probably has just enough for game. The defenders probably have around 14 or 15 HCP. In the second auction, responder is looking for slam with his 4NT quantitative bid. Declarer accepts the invitation, so he has at least 16 and maybe 17 HCP, or else he has more than a minimum

plus a long suit that is a source of tricks. In this auction, the defenders are likely to have very few HCP.

If one defender has opened with a preemptive 3♦ bid, showing seven diamonds, when his partner counts dummy's diamonds and his own, immediately that defender knows how many diamonds declarer has. If the partner of the preemptor leads what appears to be a high diamond, this could be from a doubleton or it could even be a singleton. During the play, if everyone follows to two rounds of diamonds, everyone knows that only one player, the preemptor, has any diamonds left.

As you proceed through each chapter of this book, you will be introduced to the various types of counting, how they work and why they are likely to help you. You will begin to recognize, as the play of a hand continues, that you should always be asking yourself, 'What have I learned so far?' After you've answered that question, what you do next might be less of a guess and more of an informed decision, and so more likely to help you to achieve a better score.

Finally, let me add this simple thought. You can't count everything on every deal. That would be exhausting. Get in the habit of asking yourself, 'What is my problem?' and then using your counting skills, whatever they are at the time, to help you solve that problem. In the long run, use counting to try to get a picture of all four hands — without peeking! Consider how much easier declaring and defending would be if you could 'see' all four hands. By the end of this book, you'll be well on the way to being able to do that!





# Chapter One

## Your First Opportunity to Start Counting

What is ‘counting’ in bridge? Well, let me count the ways!

I choose a broad definition of counting. Anything that has to do with counting tricks, counting high-card points (HCP), counting distribution or showing count, I include in my definition. You can be counting as declarer or as a defender. You can even be counting during the auction. Ask any expert about the importance of counting and they will tell you that it is a skill you must learn if your goal is to become an accomplished bridge player.

Believe it or not, this book isn’t long enough to cover all the aspects of counting, but it’s a good start. As you learn, practice, practice and practice. At first it may seem tedious, but eventually it will all become second nature to you — if you’re patient with yourself. Counting is a full-time job that begins with the auction. In this chapter we’ll be listening to the auction and seeing how that helps us to count the hand.

Players who wish to become good counters must have a clear understanding of the language of bridge: the bidding. The ‘picture’ of the hand that you build from the auction evolves over time. It’s important for everyone to listen carefully to the auction and remember it. Once the play begins, you may revise your initial impressions, but you have to start counting somewhere. While listening to the auction, look for negative inferences as well as positive ones — they are just as significant. Of course, judgment is also important. Contested auctions provide even more information to both sides. Again, look for both what is said and what is not said.

Many clues about HCP and distribution are embedded in the auction. It’s your job as a player, either a defender or declarer, to extract these clues from the auction. Remember, however, that while very useful, your infor-

mation may not be exact, and as the play progresses you may have to adjust some of your initial assumptions.

Before I start talking about specific auctions and examples in the chapters that follow, I want to add a few general statements about counting HCP and points for distribution when evaluating your hand. Once you and partner have found a fit, you may count extra points for shortness in a side suit. At any time, you may also count an extra point or two for extra length in the trump suit or in a side suit. Of course, this affects your total points, which are different than your HCP. In notrump auctions, we usually consider HCP only when opening 1NT or 2NT. Responder in these auctions may count points for distribution if a fit in a trump suit has been found. The main point is that sometimes your HCP and your total points may differ.

For the examples in this book where I speak of HCP, keep in mind that the partnership may indeed have more total points than the number of HCP mentioned. Since this is not a book specifically about hand evaluation, for the most part I have dealt with HCP, not total points. As a result, your estimates for partner's or the opponents' HCP may be correct or they may vary a bit because of extra points allotted for distribution.

Here are a few examples to illustrate what I mean.

In notrump auctions, HCP counts are usually pretty easy to estimate. That's especially the case when the auction goes 1NT – 3NT or 1NT – 2NT – 3NT. It looks like both hands here are balanced since there has been no transfer bid made, nor has Stayman been used. Your estimates for HCP in both hands are probably correct within a point or two.

If an auction goes:

<b>Opener</b>	<b>Responder</b>
1♠	4♠

Responder probably has five spades and less than an opener. The partnership may not have the 25 HCP or so usually required for game. In fact, the game may be bid and the contract made with considerably fewer than 25 HCP. Take this into account when, as a defender, you estimate your partner's HCP. If responder had a better hand with more HCP, he could,

for example, use Jacoby 2NT instead of an immediate raise to 4♠. The auction would then go something like this:

Opener	Responder
1♠	2NT
3♣	4♠

In this case, responder should have an opener (counting HCP and any points for shortness) with four-card spade support. In addition, opener has shown a singleton or void in clubs. With extras or a good side suit, opener may bid on after the 4♠ bid. As you already know, slams can be bid and made even if the partnership has only enough HCP for game, when extra distribution (like a singleton or void) makes the slam possible.

Consider this auction:

Opener	Responder
1♠	2♣
2♥	2NT
3♥	4♥

Here opener is at least 5-5 in spades and hearts. With a singleton or void, he might have opened with fewer than 12 HCP. Some would open such a hand with as few as 10 HCP, with the majority of the honors in their long suits. Responder has 10+ HCP for his 2♣ response. The partnership has found a 5-3 fit in hearts. The total HCP for the partnership could be as low as 20, but game is still possible because of extra points allotted for distribution. Keep this in mind when you are estimating HCP for the declaring side and therefore for your partner as well.

You can see from the above examples that estimating HCP for either side can be a bit tricky, but it's definitely still worth doing. Remember that you are attempting to get a picture of the other three hands at the table. Your initial estimates for HCP may be off a bit but once the auction is over, the opening lead is made, the dummy comes down and declarer follows a certain line of play, you will know more, and you may revise your initial estimates.

## POINTS TO REMEMBER

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- Learning to count requires determination and patience, but it produces great rewards. Tackle one type of counting at a time and become comfortable with it before moving along to the next one.
- Knowing as much as possible about high-card points and distribution helps you to declare and defend better. You will be guessing less.
- Your first opportunity to count occurs during the auction. There you can estimate the number of HCP each player has and get a pretty good idea of the distribution of at least some suits.
- Remember the auction during the play. Positive and negative inferences from the bids are significant.
- In a contested auction you will get more information about HCP and distribution.
- As the play of the hand progresses, you may have to alter somewhat your initial ideas about HCP and/or distribution.

# practice

For each auction, draw conclusions about opener's and responder's HCP and shape.

<b>1.</b>	<b>West</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>East</b>	<b>South</b>
		pass	pass	1 ♠
	pass	2 ♠	pass	4 ♠
	all pass			

<b>2.</b>	<b>West</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>East</b>	<b>South</b>
				2NT
	pass	3NT	all pass	

<b>3.</b>	<b>West</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>East</b>	<b>South</b>
		1 ♣	pass	1 ♥
	pass	3 ♣	pass	3NT
	all pass			

<b>4.</b>	<b>West</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>East</b>	<b>South</b>
			1 ♥	1NT
	pass	3NT	all pass	

<b>5.</b>	<b>West</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>East</b>	<b>South</b>
		1 ♦	1 ♥	1NT
	all pass			

## Answers

1. The opening bid of 1 ♠ shows five or more spades and at least 12 HCP. North should have 6-9 HCP and three or more spades for a raise to 2 ♠. When South bids game following the 2 ♠ bid, he must have 18 or 19 HCP. We know this because North could have had as few as 6 HCP. To bid game, the partnership should hold about 25 HCP. With fewer than 18 or 19 HCP South would either have passed 2 ♠ or bid 3 ♠ to invite game.
2. South's opening bid of 2NT shows 20-21 HCP with a balanced hand. When responder bids 3NT, he must have at least 5 HCP and not more than 12. With more than 12, North would bid 4NT, quantitative, asking partner to bid 6NT with the maximum 21 HCP.

Responder has not bid Stayman nor made a transfer bid, so he has a balanced hand, probably with no four- or five-card major. It's possible he could have four hearts or four spades if his hand is 4-3-3-3, but that's too flat to warrant playing in a suit contract.
3. North opens 1 ♣, likely with four or more clubs. South's 1 ♥ response shows four or more hearts and a minimum of 6 HCP. North's rebid of 3 ♣ shows a six-plus-card suit and a hand in the 16-18 HCP range. With 8-9 HCP and stoppers in the other suits, South bids the 3NT game. He may have club support but has decided that there's no point being in 5 ♣ when 3NT is a possibility. Nine tricks are easier than eleven, and more overtricks are available in 3NT.
4. East opens 1 ♥ — 12 or more HCP and at least five hearts. South's 1NT overcall shows 15-18 HCP and at least one stopper in hearts. It does not guarantee stoppers in all the other suits. North's rebid of 3NT must mean that he has 10-14 HCP, a balanced hand and no five-card spade suit. With five spades he would have made a transfer bid. (Negative inference again.) Poor West is broke!
5. North opens the bidding with 1 ♦, showing a minimum of 12 HCP and almost certainly four or more diamonds. East's overcall of 1 ♥ indicates at least five hearts and a minimum of 6 HCP. South's 1NT bid after the overcall must show at least one heart stopper and 6-9 HCP. When the opening bidder passes 1NT, he must have a minimum opener and a balanced hand. With more than a minimum, he might not have passed.

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# Everything Counts

Bridge teachers emphasize to their students the importance of counting — points, distribution, tricks, and so on. But it's hard to teach and even harder to learn, let alone assimilate to the point where counting becomes automatic as one is playing. This book introduces the concept of counting for newer players, and helps them to begin acquiring a skill that is critical to their becoming better players.



**DIANNE AVES** (Canada) is a retired math teacher who is now a professional bridge teacher. This is her first book.

