

LARRY COHEN SEMINARS #6 COUNTING

1

KJ

AQ10964

AQ2

98

Here is a nice bridge hand. I'd like you to study it for about 30 seconds. The point of this will be revealed shortly. Keep looking at this hand. Try to remember it.

Time's up.

I'll come back to this hand shortly. It's important.

Today's primary topic is

COUNTING

Along with an introduction to

WHAT IS PARTNER DOING?

COUNTING is one of the scariest words in bridge. Many are afraid to talk about it.

"I can't do that stuff."

No one really knows what it means.

Is it something you do when you pick up your cards and calculate how many high-card points you have?

Could be.

Is it something you do in the play when you are wondering how the high-card points are divided between your opponents' hands?

Could be.

Is it something you do on defense when you are wondering whether your partner can possibly have a certain ace or king?

Could be.

Or might you be looking for a distributional clue?

Could be.

Counting can be all of these things and more.

Counting is bridge's darkest secret.

Love it. Hate it. It's everywhere. Good bridge demands you make it your friend.

It can be your best friend, but you have to conquer your fear of it. There's no solution at your friendly drug store. You have to do some work yourself. The trick is learning how to do that.

IN A NUTSHELL, counting means paying attention to available information. Here is the kind of information that may interest you.

High Cards that have been played and who played them.

Little cards.

Did a defender discard a seven and then a two in the same suit? Or did he discard a two and then a seven?

What was the lead? Do you know precisely what it was? If it was the six of hearts, then the lead was the six of hearts. It wasn't a 'little' heart.

All of the bidding, including the final three passes.

Distribution. Did someone show out in a suit? How did that suit divide?

And more.

Here's the first example of using counting. Today's hands will be declarer-play hands. Later, I will look at counting in defense hands.

BOTH SIDES VULNERABLE

Hand One

W	N	E	S
1D	P	P	1H
P	3H	P	4H
P	P	P	

653

QJ97

KQ53

K5

J98

A10853

A72

A7

West leads the queen of clubs.

How do you play?

Many players do this.

They win the club lead in dummy and lead the queen of hearts. East plays the four and declarer, knowing that with nine trumps the odds favor the finesse, does so. It loses. It turns out that the defense can take their three spade winners now or later. Diamonds don't divide so you end up losing three spades.

Down one.

Here's the layout:

653

QJ97

KQ53

K5

AQ10

K742

K

642

J10964

8

QJ104

98632

J98

A10853

A72

A7

East says that a diamond lead would set 4H three tricks. West would win his king of hearts and would give East two diamond ruffs. That would lead to down three.

Finally someone, perhaps West, perhaps your partner, observes that West had the singleton king of hearts. You could have made 4H if you played the ace instead of finessing.

Postmortem observations aren't always worth much. Is there any merit to this one? Should South have dropped the king of hearts?

Here's where counting and a little bit of something else comes into being.

You can see West's hand. He dare not lead a spade. That might blow a spade trick or two. His lead of the queen of clubs is logical.

Here's a question for you. Say West had this hand to lead from. Instead of the AQ10 of spades, he has the AK10 of spades.

AK10

K

J10964

QJ109

Would he lead a club from the QJ109 or would he lead the ace of spades (ace from AKx)?

Almost everyone leads a spade with this hand. West didn't lead a spade. West is almost certain not to have the AKx of spades. That means East has the ace or king of spades.

Declarer's line of play indicated he thought East could have the king of hearts. But if East had the king of hearts and the king of spades, giving him this hand, would he have passed 1D?

K742

K42

8

98632

He would not pass. This is a good enough hand to bid 1S in response to 1D. Given that East is sure to have a high spade, the heart finesse will not win. Play the ace of hearts, your only hope. On this layout, you get a lucky 620.

Declarer, by 'counting' the high-card points, was able to spot the winning line as soon as the opening lead was made.

Sometimes, counting won't enter into play until later in the hand. It may be that more information is needed to solve a decision.

Here's one more example of counting being the solution.

A NEW PROBLEM – Another thing for declarer to count.

13

Hand Two

You are in 3NT with the following layout. The opponents did not bid. It's a common hand that everyone sees sooner or later.

W N E S
1NT
P 2C P 2D
P 3NTP P
P

A1042

KQ4

QJ6

543

3

Q9876

972

10865

87532

109

KQJ9

A2

KJ5

AJ3

AK4

10876

West leads the king of clubs. East makes a good play by taking his ace and returning the suit. West takes three more club tricks.

(East had been hoping for five club tricks.) East discarded two hearts. He knew from the bidding that South did not have four hearts. When the clubs were gone, West led the nine of hearts, looking like a defender who did not want to make a dangerous lead.

South saw 3NT was cold if he could tell which opponent had the queen of spades.

Looking for information, South took all of his red suit winners, hoping to discover a guide to the spade suit.

He got one.

After taking three hearts, South saw that East had started with four of them.

After taking three diamonds, South saw that East had started with two of them.

South had already seen that West had four clubs and East two.

This tells South for sure that East started with exactly four hearts, exactly two diamonds, exactly two clubs, and perforce, five spades.

Well, if East started with five spades, West could only have one. Lead to dummy's ace of spades and finesse the jack at trick twelve, knowing it will win. Nine tricks.

Here's the full layout:

Hand Two

A1042

KQ4

QJ6

543

3

Q9876

972

10865

87532

109

KQJ9

A2

KJ5

AJ3

AK4

10876

A hint for everyone.

This has nothing to do with this hand. Here's the situation. Some players, when on lead against 3NT, may choose to lead a singleton in hopes that partner can benefit from this lead.

The opponents bid 1NT - P - 3NT.

You have this:

J873

3

Q654

Q843

Do not try your singleton heart. If you lead a singleton, hitting partner's five-card suit, almost surely you will be helping declarer. Remember this. Declarer has seven cards in this suit, meaning that he will likely turn to this suit in search of tricks. If you lead your singleton, you are doing declarer a big favor.

Anyone wondering why I showed you that hand at the start of this discussion? Here it is again.

KJ

AQ10964

AQ2

98

This is a serious question. Tell me. How much of this hand did you remember?

ONE Not much

TWO Got some of it right

THREE Got most of it right

FOUR Nailed it

Try again. You have another 30 seconds to study it. I'll give you a third look at it soon enough. Plus an explanation.

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Hand Three

South Deals

North-South Vulnerable

W	N	E	S
			1H

1S	2H	2S	4H
----	----	----	----

P	P	P	
---	---	---	--

KJ4

Q52

98653

93

75

AKJ843

A2

A64

West leads the six of spades.

Do you play the king or the jack from dummy?

Why?

The bidding suggests that West has the ace. But it isn't guaranteed. Most likely, the right play is the jack. The reason for this is that leading away from the ace of spades would be horrible bridge on West's part. Leading aces or underleading aces against a suit contract is going to cost a trick much of the time. Here's what might happen if you lead away from your ace.

Declarer might have a singleton king in dummy or in his hand

You might give declarer a trick with his king of spades that he could not get otherwise.

Your lead may cost you if another choice was better.

Could cost you two tricks if you give away a spade trick and if you lose the timing to set up a different trick.

It's possible that your partner has the king, but thinking that declarer has the ace, your partner might see a good reason not to play his king.

It could happen.

Underleading aces against a suit contract is a proven losing strategy.

South should conclude that West is making his normal lead.

Here's the layout:

	KJ4	
	Q52	
	98653	
	93	
Q10862		A93
76		109
KJ		Q1074
KJ102		Q875
	75	
	AKJ843	
	A2	
	A64	

West's hand isn't a good 1S bid but it's one that many make. West's lead is normal. He's hoping he can set up a spade trick or two for the defense. A routine lead by him.

Another example of counting principles:

Both Sides Vulnerable

Hand Four

W N E S

1D

2D 3D 4H 5D

P P P

K874

3

AJ63

8763

QJ1062

A9

KJ654

Q1082

2

75

KJ

109542

53

A97

KQ10984

AQ

Counting, in this hand, requires you take a good look at the bidding and the opening lead, and then come to a conclusion.

Sometimes you can come to a conclusion without playing a card.

After an eventful auction, West leads the queen of spades.

Consider what you know when dummy comes down.

West has five-five in the majors. His 2D bid was the Michaels cuebid showing both majors. Wish I had invented it. It was invented by a player named, appropriately, Mike Michaels.

West, vulnerable, needs something in his hand to justify a 2D bid.

If South had seen the dummy before seeing the lead, he would think that 6D might be cold if West has the ace of spades and East has the king of clubs.

But the contract is 5D. It will be cold if West has the ace of spades or if East has the king of clubs. All you need is for one of those cards to be onside.

How should South play?

Counting requires getting information. South just got some. The lead says that East has the ace of spades. This is a fact. West would not lead the queen of spades from a holding of AQJxx. He just would not do that.

Playing the king is likely to cost the contract. East will win, giving the defense two spade tricks, and the club finesse will be needed. Since West bid 2D, vulnerable, he is a favorite to have the king of clubs.

The solution?

Don't cover the queen of spades. If West continues spades, South ducks again. East, likely, will play his ace and that sets up the king, which you can use to discard the queen of clubs.

If West had led a heart instead of the queen of spades, 5D would probably have gone down. Fate plays a role.

A small aside. How much would 4H go down?

It would go down none. East's six high-card points provide a perfect fit for the West hand. 4H was not a wild overbid.

East-West Vulnerable

Hand Five

W	N	E	S
		P	1S
P	2NT 3H		4NT
P	5S	P	6S
P	P	P	

AQ53

97

A87

J1032

K1098742

AQ5

2

K4

North's 2NT was the Jacoby 2NT raise promising game values and four or more trumps. It was a little excessive

but reasonable. East came in with 3H and South took a sane gamble with 4NT. He found North had two keycards and the queen of trumps.

Slam is not cold but it's worth bidding. Note that North-South have only twenty-three high card points. South is counting on good distribution to make up for the lack of high cards.

West leads the eight of hearts. South sees immediately that his slam will depend on what's happening in the club suit. What is his plan?

South might think that East needs the ace of clubs for his bid, but it's an idea that can wait. South should look for information first.

South drew trump and started ruffing diamonds in his hand. His plan was to find out as much about the East-West high cards as possible.

Here's what he learned. It was a lot.

The spades divided 1-1.

East had at least three diamonds that included the KJ6.

When South later played the queen of hearts and a heart ruff, he found that:

West began with the singleton 8 of hearts.

East had the KJ106432 of hearts.

Here is what East has shown up with so far.

6

KJ106432

KJ6

(WITH TWO CARDS REMAINING)

South is in the dummy now and calls for the jack of clubs.
East plays the six.

South needs East to have a club honor and he needs to guess which one it is. Can you tell?

HAND A

6

KJ106432

KJ6

Q6

HAND B

6

KJ106432

KJ6

A6

Does East have hand A or hand B? Assume he has one or the other.

Here's the question that you need to answer in order to do the right thing, assuming there is a right thing to do.

Would East have passed as dealer with Hand A?

Perhaps.

Would East have passed as dealer with hand B?

No way. East does not have Hand B.

Play East for Hand A.

The result? Your jack of clubs forces out West's ace.

You make your twenty-three point slam. Nice.

This may have seemed like a lot of work. But it wasn't really hard work. What this hand required was that South note the cards as they were played and when decision time arrived, South had to look at the clues and see what they meant.

On the hand above, South had found that a passed hand had a nice eight points. If he had an ace more, he would have opened the bidding.

All South had to do was to anticipate needing to guess the clubs, and then to learn as much as he could before playing a club late in the hand.

Now, in order to get this information, South has to watch the cards played and remember them for a little while.

KJ

AQ10964

AQ2

98

Remember this hand?

It's back.

This is the third time you have seen it. If by now you can remember it, or almost remember it, then it suggests that remembering cards is not that hard to do as long as you practice doing it. Frankly, the need for this kind of play is not that common, but getting into the habit of noting things is a good one.

I hope all of you felt that remembering these cards was not that hard. Following are some hands where this skill is important.

WHAT IS PARTNER DOING?

This is a topic that I included in my newsletter from 1998 to 1999.

I don't intend to show you 250 examples of this. Just a few will do. The point is that you should know what your partner will do in various situations.

Whatever you do at the bridge table, you will often have to work out what partner has in the bidding or in defense.

Here are two situations where South needs to know what to expect from partner's bidding.

SITUATION ONE

North-South Vulnerable

W	N	E	S
			1S
P	P	2H	3S
P	?		

North's hand:

105

7632

K102

J1054

Should you bid?

Here's what North should realize.

South did not open with 2C. He can't have an enormous hand. North can pass 3S if he has a truly bad hand.

South has a very good suit. North's 105 of spades is fine support.

North's pass of 1S said he had a poor hand. North could have zero points. And South knew this when he bid 3S.

But North doesn't have zero points. The maximum high-card points North can have is five, so his range is zero to five.

North has four high-card points. Close to a maximum hand under these circumstances.

You should be happy that you have nothing in hearts. If you had the queen of hearts, it might be useless given West bid them.

Partner's message is that he heard your pass but he is still interested in game. North should raise to 4S.

Here's a possible layout from partner's point of view.

105

7632

K102

J1054

AQJ9743

J

A6

KQ2

The ten of spades guarantees that there are not two spade losers.

The king of diamonds is gold. It's a trick and it's an entry to dummy letting South lead the ten of spades for a finesse.

The jack of clubs turns out to be nice too.

All in all, North's little hand gives partner a certain play for game. And, it provides a good chance of making an overtrick.

South bid wisely. If North had a bad hand, game would not make.

South did well to invite only.

There's another side to this story.

What if partner had this hand instead of the one he had in the previous layout.

6

Q754

J7542

854

AQJ9743

J

A6

KQ2

South has one sure spade loser and two potential spade losers.

South has a sure heart loser.

South has a sure diamond loser.

South has two certain club losers.

That's a lot of losers.

3S rates to be down one at least.

SITUATION TWO

No One Vulnerable

You are North holding this hand:

Q73

Q94

Q102

K642

W	N	E	S
			1H
1S	2H	2S	P
P	?		

Do you let them play in 2S?

Let's figure this out.

How weak can your partner, South, be when he opens 1H?

If your partner will open most twelve-point hands and even a few eleven-point hands, you need to consider that he may have a weak hand.

If your partner is a LAWFUL person, he will bid 3H on any hand that has six hearts.

If he is an aggressive bidder, he may bid 3H on some of his decent-looking thirteen or more high-card point hands. When he passes, it is a message that many Norths ignore. Partner is saying, "I have a lousy hand." Listen to him.

If you conclude that partner won't pass 2S with any hand that lives and breathes, you should pass.

You have nine points but your hand includes three big minus features.

It has only three trumps.

It is balanced.

It has mostly boring high-card points. The queen of spades might be toast.

Here's what a 3H contract could look like:

Q73

Q94

Q102

K642

98

AJ853

K84

AJ9

In this layout, South has a goodish hand. He has a balanced hand but his honors are decent. Imagine if his jack of hearts was the jack of spades instead.

South will lose two spades.

South usually has a heart loser. If hearts are 4-1, he is likely to have two heart losers.

There is a loser in diamonds. Might be two.

And clubs have half a loser.

The odds of making 3H are dim. North's nine-point dummy is just not a good dummy.

If South had a sixth heart, things would be different. But since he passed over 2S, he does not have six hearts.

If North lets them play in 2S, it won't turn out to be a favorite to make.

Declarer will lose a spade trick half of the time.

Declarer will usually lose two hearts.

Declarer might lose two diamonds.

And declarer could have three club losers.

2S is actually a favorite to be down two.

Should North always pass 2S?

Probably. About the only reason for bidding 3H is that you hope the opponents will bid 3S. Sometimes they do. Sometimes they don't. And sometimes they double.

Here's a different kind of hand North might have.

NORTH

75

Q1076

A932

1083

This hand is entitled to compete to 3H. The big deal about this hand is that it has four trumps. Makes a big difference. Further, it does not have a wasted queen of spades. The opponents no longer have to worry about finding it.

Here's the new layout.

75

Q1076

A932

1083

98

AJ853

K84

AJ9

This six-point dummy offers a play for nine tricks in hearts.

The original nine-point dummy would not be enough to make 3H.

Having an extra trump in the North-South hands is a big deal.