Learn to Think in Patterns to make Counting Easier

by Chris Bosenberg

I believe that the most important word in bridge is 'visualization', without which you will struggle to improve. The main difference between bridge players at different levels is the ability to play not just the 26 cards that are seen, but the other 26 cards. To do this, good players are always trying to form a picture of the unseen hands and proceeding accordingly. On defence, they need their partner's cooperation.

Tim Cope wrote an excellent article on visualization which emphasises this and is worth re reading.

We need to

- listen to the auctions and getting rough distributions and points.
- give partner count when necessary (which is always until you know it is not necessary!) and show attitude to partner's lead and when you discard. It is crucial to agree on what is priority - Is it attitude, count, or suit preference? Without agreement here you will be lost.

Most players balk at the thought of ever being able to count – too much hard work, mathematics was never their strong point or interest and they play after all for the fun of 'pushing cards' and so just play by instinct. While I have sympathy for this view, you should try to increase the number of hands to which you apply your mind and count. Its easier on BBO as you can use a pen and paper.

Counting is not easy otherwise we would all be star players. This article attempts to make counting slightly easier by giving some tips.

To make counting easier there are a few tricks.

It is not best to keeping adding cards but rather **"think in patterns"**. Patterns are the DNA of Bridge. Bidding, opening leads, defence & declarer play evolve from patterns.

Did you know hands are distributed with combinations of the 4 suits either three odd and one even or alternatively three even and one odd.

Let us use this information from pattern thinking to avoid lots of counting. The two hands below were played in The Polish Championship this last month and the International stars we witnessed were unsuccessful!

You hold ♠ AJ8 ♥ K64 ♦ KJ42 ♣ J85

Partner opens 1C and you end the auction with a bid of 3NT.

Partner puts down	♠ K75 ♥ Q98 ♦ AQT ♣ Q732
Your hand	♠ AJ8 ♥ K64 ♦ KJ42 ♣ J85

We get the J♥ lead won in our hand and we count tricks 2♠ 2♥ assuming the lead has the T♥, and 4♦s totalling 8 tricks with the possibility of the ♠ finesse or favourable lie of ♣s producing the 9th trick

We cash the ♦AQ and LHO shows out, playing a ♠, so we think maybe RHO opponent with 5♦s may be short in ♣s (doubleton honour?) so we play a ♣ to our Jack. LHO wins and with K♣ and plays A♥ and 2♥ and RHO opponent discards a ♦ on third ♥ showing a doubleton. You win the ♥ and play 2 more ♦s LHO discards two ♠s on our ♦s and follows to a ♠ when you play K♣. You play another ♠. and RHO plays the Ten. Normally you would be forgiven for thinking LHO has thrown all their ♠s so cannot have Q and simply finesse.

But let us visualize and learn how to Think in patterns We know LHO has 1♦ and 5♥ (2 odd) so the remaining cards must be an odd and even either (a) 5♠ and 2♣ or (b) 4♠ and 3♣

Which distribution is more likely: (a) ♠ Qxxxx and ♣ AK or (b) ♠ xxxx and ♣ AKx

Clearly the last one is less likely as LHO would surely have discarded a ♣ with ♣AKx. Note LHO cannot protect Q♠ by discarding a ♥ as then we could simply play a ♣ and make 9 tricks So we rise with A♠ and drop the Q and partner beams with pride. You a genius partner and says how did you know to do that?

By the way we could have doubled checked. RHO showed 5♦ and 2♥ so remaining are either 2 even or 2 odd. When we played a ♣ from dummy RHO played the 2♣ (they play upside down count) suggesting 4♣ (no reason to false card) thus if RHO has 4♣ then RHO ♠ holding must also be even thus holding 2♠ and again the Q♠ will fall. The full hand was:

♠ K75 ♥ Q98 ♦ AQT ♣ Q732

♠ Q9642 ♥ AJT52 ♦ 8 ♣ AK   ♠ T3 ♥ 73 ♦ 97653 ♣

♠ AJ8 ♥ K64 ♦ KJ42 ♣ J85

Not hard work when you think in patterns. All we did was count our tricks and think in patterns at the 9th trick.