

Learning Points – Counting and Shape Inform Opening Leads

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Defense Level: Intermediate

How does counting HCP and shape inform our opening lead?

The auction goes 1N by RHO, pass by you and 3N by LHO all pass.

♠J109 ♥J8732 ♦98 ♣Q32

Count HCP – We have 4 HCP. They have 25-27 (maybe as many as 30). So **Partner has 9-11 HCP** (or perhaps as few as 6). *For now let's ignore when opponents hold 30 HCP and concentrate on the hands where our choice will have impact.*

Count Shape – Not much to go on. We assume LHO has no 4 or 5-card major (they would have used Stayman or Jacoby Transfers). Declarer could have one or both 4-card majors (or one 5-card major). Our ♥s are so weak that we need partner to hold a robust 3 card or better suit if we expect to score 4 or more tricks there. Something like ♥KQx or better. Even then, if declarer holds ♥Axx in hand or dummy, a hold up play will shut out our long ♥s. So we can conclude that when partner has great ♥s with us we will do well. When s/he doesn't we will not have an impact.

Count Entries – here entries are Aces (100%) and Kings (50%) and we have none. So even if we can set up our 5-card suit we will likely have no entry back to our hand.

Choice of leads – Leading a minor suit from this hand seems wrong. The minor suits are where opponents are likely to have length. A minor suit lead will either expose a finessable honor in partner's hand eliminating a choice declarer would otherwise puzzle over, or give declarer a free finesse for the ♣Q. So we will focus attention to the Major suits. Leading a ♥ requires partner to have a lot of help. This is unlikely. Leading a ♠ is an attempt to start developing a suit where partner might be 5-cards long. There is an extra benefit from leading a ♠ - if partner wins the 1st trick, s/he can always switch to ♥s when right! While we lead a ♠, we would not fault the lead of the ♥3.

♠A109 ♥KJ972 ♦98 ♣Q32

Count HCP – We have 10 so partner has 3-5 HCP.

Count Shape – Same as above

Count Entries – We have 2, possibly 3 entries to this hand. Leading from our long suit and hoping partner has a useful filler (10, Q, A) is probably right, even if we risk giving up a trick to Declarer's Q, a trick declarer would not otherwise win. Finding partner with the ♥10 is enough to establish 3 tricks in ♥s for us (Try it!), and we have the entries to make it work.

Choice of Leads - Lead the ♥7 and pay attention to the carding. If partner doesn't have a high card, they will give you a count signal. You will then know how many ♥s declarer holds!

♠A109 ♥KJ972 ♦98 ♣KQ2

Count HCP – We have 13 so partner has 0-1 HCP. Since we cannot expect help from partner we should choose the lead accordingly.

Count Shape – Same as above

Count Entries – We have 3 possibly 4 entries to this hand. Declarer will not expect such a concentration of all missing values in one hand. We should avoid doing anything that tips Declarer off.

Choice of Leads – Here we need to start the establishment of ♥s without tipping declarer off to our status as the DANGER hand. We led the ♥7 in the previous hand because partner will have some defense. Here it is right to lead the ♥2 making believe we have only 4 ♥s. This might cause declarer to view our hand as holding less danger – and finesse partner for an honor they don't hold. Since partner doesn't have a high card, they will give you a count signal. You will then know how many ♥s declarer holds!

♠A1092 ♥KJ9 ♦987 ♣KQ2

Count HCP – We have 13 so partner has 0-1 HCP. Partner has no high cards to contribute.

Count Shape – 4-3-3-3. No long suit to develop

Count Entries – We have 3 possibly 4 entries to this hand. Declarer will not expect such a concentration of all missing values in one hand. We should avoid doing anything that tips Declarer to where these honor cards are.

Choice of Leads – Here we need to choose between an attacking or passive lead. Attacking leads are not attractive when we know partner has no honors to contribute. Let's go passive. Lead a ♦ and let declarer do all the work for their contract. Every time we get in (and we expect to get in 2-3 more times) we will lead passively until we can cash the setting trick(s)!

...and you thought "4th from your longest and strongest" was all we need to know.