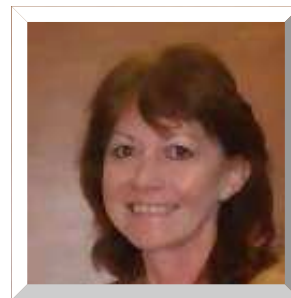




# Vacant Places

by Jill Courtney



## PART ONE

*Or, of all the things I've lost I miss my mind the most.*

No, actually. I'm not talking about those dreaded absent brain cells that we seem inevitably to discover as we go off in our cold contracts. In fact, it is quite the opposite – some informative tips about counting and therefore playing and defending better with your hands. This article is largely derived from the excellent book “Bridge Odds for Practical Players” by Kelsey and Glauert, in which, *inter alia*, they define and explain the concept of ‘Vacant Places’.

This term sounds rightfully obscure but it really is just a high-faluting way of talking about things which, at least at a basic level, we already know. We all know, for instance, that the odds can change substantially when there are long suits about. But is there a practical way to work out such odds and accordingly make decisions about your play and defence? The answer is yes.

Not only is the answer yes but it is also simple (collective sigh) based on normal counting technique. Take a standard example to start off with: the ubiquitous case of locating the queen with AJx opposite KTx. You would, of course, delay this decision as long as possible to get the maximum readout of the outstanding distribution. But let's say you can establish that West must have started with five spades and East with two. Assuming that there is no bidding to suggest otherwise then the odds is literal. That is, it is 5-2 likely that the queen will reside in West's hand. To put it as a principle – it is directly proportional to the number of cards in their respective holdings.

If the first thing you find out about a hand is, for example, that the spades are (W5-E2) then the probability of either defender holding a specific card outside that suit is again directly proportional to the number on non-spades they are holding. In other words, in this case, West is known to have five spades and East, two.

Therefore there are eight vacant places in West and eleven vacant places in East. That means, simply, that East is an eleven to eight shot at having any particular card you wish to locate. At least at this point.

### Principle

When the distribution of one (or more) suits is known the probability that an opponent holds a particular card in any other suit is directly proportional to the number of vacant spaces in their respective hands.

### Example

I have emphasised that this is, as is all counting, an evolutionary process. As you get more information things may change. Let's look at an a priori situation first. You bid to the excellent contract of 7H uninterrupted. Here is the layout:

♠	AKx	
♥	KJxxx	
♦	KTxx	
♣	x	
	N	
W		E
	S	
♠	Qx	
♥	AQxxx	
♦	AJxx	
♣	Ax	

A club is led and you play on trumps discovering you have to play three rounds as East shows out on the first round. S/he discards three clubs. Armed with your knowledge of the heart break you can now apply the principle of vacant places. East you know has 13 vacant places while West has only 10. (Their club leads and discards are not relevant at this point). Only the heart suit

matters for the moment. This means, based on our principle of direct proportionality, that the crucial missing card –♦Q is a 13-10 favourite to be in East's hand.

But let's make things a bit more complicated. On this hand there is no rush to test the diamond suit so we embark on a voyage of discovery. We ruff a club and all follow (so nothing has changed our



odds) and then we cash three rounds of spades. Imagine that on the third round of spades, West now discards a club. You now have a complete distribution on a second suit. West is known to have started with three hearts and now two spades and two clubs, leaving s/he with six vacant spaces. East is known to have five clubs and six spades leaving him/her with two vacant spaces. Suddenly the odds have radically shifted from 13-10 against West holding that queen to 6-2 in favour. This, above all, highlights the importance of discovery plays when you have the luxury of testing all the distributions. But do note that if you get no such clear-cut indication as the spade show out you should still go with the 13-10 odds in favour of finessing East.

### Example Two

This is a second example of our vacant places technique whereby not only can we make an informed guess but we can work out the exact odds (absent bidding considerations) based on these assumptions. You are in a freely bid 3NT and West leads the Jack of Spades on which you play low and the King appears. Here is the deal:

♠	Q73	
♥	QT5	
♦	A965	
♣	T62	
	N	
W		E
	S	
♠	A64	
♥	97	
♦	KJT83	
♣	AK5	

You obviously win the Ace and now play a low diamond to the Ace on which both defenders follow. You play another diamond and East follows low. Here we need to take stock. The play to trick one has indicated that West has six spades and now at least one diamond. East, on the other hand has shown one spade and two

diamonds to this point. West therefore has six vacant spaces while East has ten (one spade and two diamond are gone). Let's get our directly proportional manual again – the odds of the queen of diamonds being with East are precisely 10-6. In percentages (thanks Mr. Kelsey) that is 62.5%.

As I discovered on reading this chapter, there is much more to be gleaned from the application of the 'vacant places' principles. Some is a lot more complicated but still within everyone's grasp. I would emphasise that they are a priori, evolutionary statistics and they need to be tempered with an awareness of the bidding. In

other words if someone has opened and still only shown nine points by trick ten, don't forget to play them for the missing queen. Equally, as that seven heart hand ably demonstrated, if you have the cards to discover more information about likely distributions, this will change your analysis of the odds, possibly, quite significantly.

The next part of this article will focus on some more sophisticated aspect of this subject but in the meantime try applying these simple principles to your card judgment and remember, applying vacant places is a bit like playing musical chairs – someone has to sit somewhere – or else!

### Golden Moments Cont'd

John and I had the pleasure of playing Luke and Ed. After two boards it was very clear that as a partnership we (read me) were out-classed. Their system was very tight, well reasoned and aggressive – allowing them to "steal" many low level contracts. Confident in defence, they were fearless with doubles as they gave absolutely nothing away. As for their card play, I twice checked that I wasn't using transparent cards. It was like watching a magician at work.

As I lurched from crisis to crisis, in dread of deuces, fearing fours, and cowered by kings, it would have been all too easy for them to gloat. They could have smirked and sneered, and been arrogantly superior and "all knowing": attitudes that regrettably all too often abound at the bridge table. But No. These two fine young men were consummate gentlemen and true sportsmen.

Despite their competitiveness and total focus, at all times they remained gracious and friendly. They took no unfair advantage of my plight and even enjoyed my plea to partner, as he laid down Dummy, to "... please spread trumps a bit more so that it looks like there are more of them..." . Finding myself in a 4-3 fit at the 5 level against these two was definitely going to be a challenge! And it was. But it was one that I thoroughly enjoyed.

Even as they wracked up IMP after IMP after IMP, both John and I felt privileged to be pitted against players of this calibre. When we got back to our table, our team-mates had also enjoyed a similar experience against Fiona and John. So despite our drubbing, we were still a very happy team. It

