

COUNTING THE HANDS (2)

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To continue this theme from the last issue: to be a competent bridge player, you don't need to know a lot about exotic squeeze situations that turn up often in books but rarely at the table. But you do have to be able to count the hands i.e. be aware of the distribution of suits and HCP in the unseen hands, continually refining your assessment as the hand proceeds. There are some general principles that you as declarer may use. (Remember that there are no absolutes in bridge, and that 'always' means 'nearly always' and 'never' means 'hardly ever'.) You are South as declarer with West to make the opening lead.

If West has bid and he leads his own suit, he will lead from touching honours if he has them i.e. K from KQ, Q from QJ etc. In the absence of support from partner, if he doesn't lead his suit, then he probably does not have touching honours – he may have some sort of tenace combination e.g. AQxxx or KJ10xx.

If West has made a pre-emptive bid or a two-suited bid and doesn't lead his suit, he may be leading a singleton.

If West has not bid, but takes some time to decide his lead, then he has no obvious lead e.g. no singleton against a suit contract, no touching honours in a suit of his own.. You decide this at your own risk of course – perhaps West is just a ditherer. The corollary is that, if you don't hold the top Ace and King in a side suit and West doesn't lead one of them, then East has both or the two are divided between East and West. This may be useful info later.

Let's take this fairly simple example, quoted by Mike Lawrence in his excellent book *How to Read Your Opponents' Cards* (highly recommended). How would your analysis go in this situation? West deals and opens 1S.

W	N	E	S
1♠	P	2♠	3♥
P	4♥	All pass	

West leads the ♠5, East wins the ♠A and returns the ♣10.

♠J764

♥AK10

♦Q104

♣765

♠10

♥J98765

♦K85

♣AKJ

Your thoughts:

• East won with the ♠A. He doesn't hold the ♠K or he would have won with the ♠K, not the ♠A. So West holds the ♠K

• If West also held the ♠Q, he would have led the ♠K from his touching honours, instead of the ♠5. So he doesn't hold the ♠Q.

• So East holds the ♠A and the ♠Q, i.e. at least he has 6 HCP. I can see 22 HCP in our two hands, which leaves 12 HCP for West.

• For West's opening bid, he must have all the remaining HCP.

●Plan: the club finesse probably won't work, but the heart finesse will. Win the ♣A, finesse the ♥10 and draw trumps. Cash the ♣K, and if the ♣Q doesn't drop, then play diamonds by finessing the ♦10. The full hand:

	♠J764	
	♥AK10	
	♦Q104	
	♣765	
♠K9852		♠AQ3
♥Q42		♥3
♦AJ3		♦9762
♣Q4		♣109832
	♠10	
	♥J98765	
	♦K85	
	♣AKJ	

Note that, if the ♣Q hadn't dropped i.e. West held 3 clubs, then his diamond holding would have had to be Ace doubleton, so you play up to the ♦Q and duck back to the Ace. Or, if West had opened light and East held the ♣Q, then finessing the ♦10 will bring home the contract.

Another example:

♠A5
♥K109
♦AJ63
♣9742
♠K87
♥AQJ843
♦K109
♣J

You are in 6♥, with no opposition bidding. West leads the ♣6 to the ♣A with the ♣5 returned which you ruff. There are 11 tricks easily available. The twelfth will depend on the diamond finesse. You could just take an immediate finesse right now and hope. But perhaps you can find out more about the hand before making your decision.

So you play ♥3 to the ♥9, ruff a club, ♥4 to the ♥10 (East discards ♠3), ruff another club (with West's ♠K falling). Now you know that East has a singleton heart and 5 clubs to the Ace. But wait. EW are not fools. You have not yet claimed so they know you have some work to do, and they are not about to be helpful. Could they be false carding?

Could the club distribution in the two hands be ♣KQ106 - A853 with West false carding with ♣K on trick 3? No. To lead the ♣6 from the KQ106 against a slam would be crazy. So West was honest and held three clubs.

So you now play on spades: A, K, and ruff, with West's ♠Q falling on trick 3. Could West have started with QJ102? And false carding with the ♠Q at trick 3? Possible, but unlikely. Holding the ♠QJ102 an opening lead of the ♠Q would be much more attractive than the ♣6 lead against the slam. So West's ♠Q play was probably honest.

So we can safely assume that the suit distribution for East is 5-1-2-5 and West is 3-3-4-3. West holds four diamonds as against East's two, making him twice as likely to hold the ♦Q. So you ruff a club back to hand, draw the last trump, and successfully play West for the ♦Q.

If you had played on diamonds earlier, you may have thought that East, having a singleton heart, would be more likely to have diamond length and wrongly played him for the ♦Q. By seeking more information at no cost, you have much improved your chances of success. The full hand:

	♠ A5	
	♥ K109	
	♦ AJ63	
	♣ 9742	
♠ Q102		♠ J9643
♥ 762		♥ 5
♦ Q854		♦ 72
♣ K106		♣ AQ853
	♠ K87	
	♥ AQJ843	
	♦ K109	
	♣ J	