Learning Points – How does counting inform our choices as declarer? **December 13, 2012**

By Steve Moese *Declarer Play* Level: Basic/Intermediate

Consider the auction:

You	LHO	Partner	RHO
	1♣	Dbl	Pass
2♥	Pass	4♥	AP

Partner	You
♠AQ32	♠J94
♥KJ32	♥A1094
♦AQ98	♦J3
♣3	♣K98

What do we know?

Count HCP – We should have 25-26 HCP and LHO should have 12-14 HCP. That leaves RHO with 0-3 HCP. We also know that LHP has at least 3 cards in ♣s (unless they use the so-called short club showing at least 2-cards).

Count Length - Without seeing the hands, our jump to 2♥ shows 9-11 HCP and 4+ ♥s. We might hold 7 HCP if we have extra ♥ length and useful shortness in another suit (not ♣s). All 7-8 HCP must be working – that is be in suits where we have length and not in opponents' suits. Partner should have 4+ ♥s and 15-17 HCP. With more, partner would have made a Cue bid in ♣s.

When dummy hits we count some more: Dummy has 16 HCP and declarer has 9 so we total 15. LHO has 12 (opening bid) or more so RHO has at most 3 HCP.

LHO leads the ♠5.

Counting Shape – using the rule of 11 (4th best leads) 11-5 = 6. There are 6 cards higher than the ♠5 out. We can see 4 of them, so RHO has only2 cards higher than the ♠5. Do NOT put in dummy's ♠Q. Instead play low, and see what RHO does. If RHO goes up with the ♠ K, don't' worry – that's the only honor they can have. RHO has to have all the rest! Counting matters!

Consider the auction:

You	LHO	Partner	RHO
	1♣	Pass	Pass
2♠	Pass	4♠	AP

Dummy	Declarer
♠J87	♠KQ10942
♥KJ3	♥AQ9
♦9852	♦KJ3
♣AQ3	♣8

What do we know?

Count HCP & Shape – LHO has at least 12 HCP and 3♣s.
You have 15-17 HCP and a good 6-card ♠ suit (A jump in the balancing seat shows a good suit and a good hand – a hand difficult to be after a simple overcall or double). RHO has at most 4 HCP. Many respond with 5 HCP. Aggressive players strain to respond over a minor suit with an Ace or 2 Qs these days.

Partner must have 10-11 HCP, a good fit for ♠s and perhaps some values in the ♣ suit, and likely no biddable suit of their own. There has to be a reason partner did not overcall or double the opening bid.

LHO leads the ♥2, which indicates RHO has 3 higher ♥s. Winning and leading a small ♠ to the ♠7 won by RHO with the ♠A. RHO has no more High Cards. No matter what RHO returns we will lose not more than 2♦s and 1♠. We can finesse in ♣s with confidence.

Say RHO returns the ♦10. We cover with the ♦J and LHO can now win their ♦Q. If they continue ♦ our K sets up. If they switch we lead a ♥ to hand, finesse the ♣ K and drop a ♦ loser on the ♣ A. Voila! Counting makes iffy plays into sure plays.

Here is a classic.

You	LHO	Partner	RHO
	1♣	Pass	Pass
2♠	Pass	4♠	AP

Dummy	Declarer
♠J87	♠AQ10942
♥K103	♥QJ9
♦9852	♦AQ3
♣AQ3	♣8

We bid to a close game (close games always hone our declarer skill ☺). LHO leads the ♥2, and RHO wins the ♥A.

Count Winners & Losers - We have 3 winners & 4 losers and lots of work to do.

Count HCP – we have 25. RHO has at most 4. LHO has at least 11.

Dummy	Declarer
♠J	♠1094
♥-	♥-
♦9852	♦AQ
♣-	♣-

When RHO returns the ♠3, what do we play and why? RHO cannot have even one more J! Since LHO must have the ♠K, finessing here is wrong. The only play that makes sense is to win the ♠A. Either the ♠K falls singleton (it happens) or we will eliminate ♣s and ♥s before throwing LHO in with the ♠ K (a losing ♦ goes away on the ♣ A). If the trump are 2-2, LHO will have to give us a ♦ trick or a ruff/sluff. With LHO on lead → with the ♠ K, the ♦ loser goes away unless LHO has a 3rd trump. Either way we make our game. You play so nicely!

Ready for another example counting HCP?

You	LHO	Partner	RHO
1♥	1N[1]	3♥	Pass
4♥	All Pass		

1= 15-17 HCP

Dummy	Declarer
♠87	♠AQ10
♥K1074	♥Q9632
♦K1098	♦AJ32
♣AQ3	♣8

The opening lead is the ♣J.

Count HCP – Dummy has 12. Declarer has 13. LHO has 15. RHO has 0!!!

Armed with the knowledge that LHO has every remaining honor you can play double dummy (like an open book). Finesse the ♣Q. Play the ♣A pitching the ♠10. Ruff the remaining ♣ to eliminate the suit. ♥3 to dummy. If LHO ducks, play the ♥10 to finesse the ♥J. If LHO wins ♥A, finesse any return. If LHO mistakenly returns a ♣, ruff in dummy and pitch the ♠ Q from hand (eliminating your last ♠ loser). Say LHO wins the ♥ A and returns the ♥5. Finesse play small from dummy and win cheaply in hand. Draw the last trump if necessary and play the ♦8 to the ♦A. Finesse LHO for the ♦Q. In all you lose 1♥ and maybe 1♠. See what counting can do!! (You might object that Dummy should double the 1NT bid and try to gain a big plus. No argument – but this is an example for counting HCP, not doubling opponent's indiscretions, or bad defensive bidding).

One last HCP Counting example:

You	LHO	Partner	RHO
			1♦
1♠	Pass	2♦[1]	Pass
4♠	All Pass		

1= Limit Raise or better in ♠

Dummy	Declarer
♠J874	♠AQ1032
♥K872	♥J9
♦2	♦Q93
♣KJ32	♣A109

The opening lead is the ♦4

Count the Lead – Rule of 11 says RHO [the ♦ bidder] has 4 cards higher than the ♦ 4. RHO might have either a 4-card or 5-card ♦ suit.

Count our HCP – Dummy has 8 (plus 3 Support Points for the singleton ♦). Declarer has 13. What were we thinking?

Count RHO's HCP – RHO Cashes the ♦ AK and the ♥A (Thank you for the favor) in quick order, then switches to a trump. With 3 losers already, we need the ♠ K to be with RHO too. Duck the ♠ and win cheaply in dummy. Repeat the ♠ finesse until we capture the ♠ K. Now we have to figure out how to find the ♣ Q. Is it a 2-way guess?

NOT AT ALL!

Review LHO's HCP Count – RHO has shown up with the ♠K, ♥A, & ♦AK – that's 14 HCP. Quick – check their convention card! No fooling – what is their opening 1NT range? If 15-17 then RHO cannot hold the ♣ Q – RHO would have opened 1NT instead of 1♦. If it's 12-14, the RHO has to have the ♣ Q because they did NOT open 1NT! And you thought counting was boring! (Raising to 4♠ on overcaller's hand is aggressive. It's good to be kind when giving feedback!).