Counting Points & Reading Cards by Declarer

Need: A deck of cards, extract one suit sorted A down to 2

Bridge is a very complex game. There are many, many clues to where certain cards are. The challenge is knowing how to interpret bids and card play and then play or defend better as a result. Counting cards is a tough skill to develop, but it opens up a whole new world of information and allows the successful player to raise her game to the next level. When you have a two-way guess for a Queen, you currently probably flip a coin and finesse your friend. With proper counting and play, you will now often be able to determine the proper player to finesse, upgrading a 50% guess to say 75% or sometimes a 100% sure-thing.

Players can count two things, each being a topic in itself; 1) high card points and 2) shape. And both the declarer and the defenders can count high cards and shape. We will focus on counting High Cards by the declarer. We will also look at reading the opponents' cards.

Let's start with some fundamental card reading/inferences.

Opening Leads (examples) – always analyze the opening lead before playing to trick one

- Q is led (unbid suit),
    - They have the J, may have the ten, but definitely don't have the K (or Ace if a suit contract). Thus RHO has any of A or K that you don't have.
- A low card in an unbid suit is led
    - They have at least 3 cards in the suit containing at least one honour (T or higher, some play J or higher)　　　ie, from QT73, 3 is the lead (BOSTON)
    - They don't have a better lead = no AKxx, no high sequence, no singleton
- RHO bid spades and opening lead is SQ but you have the Jack
    - Lead is singleton Q, Qx; therefore RHO has other honours and length

Trick one

- RHO overcalls Hs, LHO does not bid, You have 3-small Hs, dummy has 3-small Hs
    a. Opening Lead is A Hs and then a small heart
        - RHO has 5Hs, specifically KQJTx = 6 HCPs
    b. Opening Lead is HK, RHO plays small
        - RHO would normally overtake and cash more hts, must want a shift to a new suit
    c. LHO has raised Hs, leads the 9
        - LHO has 3 Hs, has led top of nothing (w 3 to an honour would lead low)

- RHO overcalls Hs, LHO raises to 2-level, LHO leads H5, you have 3-small, dummy has 2-small
    a. If RHO plays A, who has what?
        - RHO does not have King, thus LHO has it
        - LHO does not have Q, or would have led K from KQ
        - Not clear who has the Jack; more likely to be with RHO (5:3 odds)
        - They had   K(J)5 =3 or 4 HCPs　　　　AQ(J)xx = 6 or 7 HCPs

b. If RHO plays K, who has what?
- LHO must have the Queen
- LHO would not lead away from A(Q), so RHO has A also
- Who has J? RHO as LHO would lead Q from QJ
- They had   Qxx = 2 HCPs   AKJxx = 8 HCPs (could be all they have for 1-level overcall)

- RHO overcalls Hs, LHO raises to 2-level
  a. LHO leads the HQ, meaning they also have the Jack (w 3 to the Q, lead lowest)
      - LHO has 3 HCPs counted so far

- RHO overcalls Hs, LHO does not bid
  a. LHO leads the 8 of another suit.
      - This should be a singleton. A singleton is a reasonable lead, comparable to partner's suit
  b. LHO leads a small spot of another suit
      - LHO has no hearts. 4th best is a weaker lead than
      partner's suit. Give all hearts and HCPs to RHO

Bidding Clues re HCPs

- Every bid the opponents make (and don't make) gives you information. Remember to include length points in your total points calculation
  o 1D 1S
     1N = LHO has 12-14 HCPs
  o 1D 1S
     2D = LHO has 13-15 total pts and hence 11-13 (14) HCPs (6 card suit=2 length pts)
  o 1H 2C
     2N = LHO has 12-14 HCPs
  o 1C 1S
     2H = LHO has 17+ total pts, HCPs depends on how much shape
           Note that with 6-5 distribution, you can have 14 HCPs and reverse

Rule of 40: The "rule of 40" should be used by declarer any time the opponents have bid, and is often helpful even when they did not bid. It is arguably the first and best counting tool.
- Add up the high card points of your side
- Subtract this number from 40, giving you the total High card points of your opponents.
- Consider any bids by your opponents, and assess approximate points for each defender
- Examples:
  o LHO opens 1N and you end up in 3NT with 24 HCPs
     - Opps have (40-24) = 16 HCPs
     - LHO has 15-17 HCPs, hence has all the missing pts with possibly one Jack w RHO
     - You now know where all the Aces, Kings, and Queens are. If RHO shows a Jack, any other Jacks are with LHO
     - NT bids by opps are the most informative as they indicate HCPs, not HC + length

- o LHO opens 1Y, you end up in 4S with 25 HCPs, therefore opponents have 15 HCPs
  - Give LHO 11+ HCPs, hence RHO has 4- HCPs
  - RHO shows up with an Ace, who has a missing Q ?
- o Three passes to you, you open 1S with 12 HCPs. Partner has 6 HCPs and you play 2S.
  - 40 – (12+6) = 22, but both passed so LHO and RhO both have 11+-1 pts.
    - Can either opp have 9 pts? 22-9 = 13 → No, they would have opened
  - LHO leads a Q, then A of same suit
    - Calculate LHO pts:
      - o A & K & Q = 9
      - o LHO has 9 HCPS already
  - In the 3rd side suit, you have xx in dummy opp KJ. Later in the hand you lead from xx towards the KJ, RHO plays low, which card do you play?
    - LHO has room for 12 minus (already 9) = 3- pts, therefore cannot have the A clubs. Or .. known 9HCP + 4(Ace)=13 so would have 100% opened the bidding.
    - Insert the K Clubs "knowing" LHO cannot have the Ace

Practice

- o Auction: N   E   S   W
  - 1H P   P   2D
  - AP
  - What do you know from bidding?
    - o S has <6 pts
    - o N leads a low club, S wins the Ace and returns a trump
      - South only has "room" for a Jack, with more he would have 4+2=6 HCPs and would not have passed partner's opening bid

- Auction: N   E   S   W
  - 1N P   2C P
  - 2H P   2N P
  -    P   P
  - What do you know?
    - o North
      - has 15-17 HCPs
      - Has 4 hearts, less than 4 spades
      - Has a minimum, hence 15 or a weak 16
    - South
      - o Has 4 spades, less than 4 hearts
      - o Has a non-flat 8 or any 9 HCPs

- Auction: N E S W
        1H P 2H 2S
        P 4S AP
  - What do you know? How do you play?
    - North
      - Has 12-15 total pts; why? Did not invite game
      - Has exactly 5 hearts; why? Would have competed w 3Hts (Law of total tricks)
    - South
      - Has 6-9 (or flat 10) total (dummy pts)
      - Has probably 3, maybe 4 hearts
    - North leads the HQ, which holds. then leads a low heart to South's K, which you ruff. Who has HA?
    - Consider the bidding for the following step. You later have to play clubs xx in your hand opposite KJ in dummy. You lead a low club from hand and N plays low, your play ?

Additional Techniques

You have to be a detective, searching out clues, as they are not always handed to you

- If you don't have enough HCPs info to make a decision, play the suits other than the "guess Q" suit to get more HCP information. In other words, delay the key decision.

- Sometimes you need a card to be in a certain location to have a chance to make your contract. So, put that card there, and continue counting, using that assumption.

- When you are sure of a card location, there are some play techniques that can take advantage of this knowledge

But how do I remember/keep track of all these cards?

- Stop before playing a card from dummy trick one and use the Rule of 40 to get you started, concluding with approximate HCPs in each defender hand, ie LHO has 14ish pts, RHO has 7ish
- Make a plan for your play, counting Winners or Losers. By making a plan, this will a) get you more engaged in the hand, making recalling pts and cards easier. Also a plan will force you to think about particular cards that you have in each suit and that the opponent has / may have. ie, I will pull trump and then lose 2 diamonds to see who has what honours. I will then recalculate the opponents' holdings based on my estimation of their HCPs (14ish and 7ish). Then I will hopefully be able to determine who has the missing Q or at least who is more likely to have it, and finesse it accordingly

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