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This Week in Bridge

(259) Counting a Suit Effectively

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Level: 2

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General

Learning to count is a significant part of improving your bridge. There are many important pieces of information that can be counted at the bridge table but learning how to keep track of a specific suit is most players' first step in learning to count. This is a fundamental skill and one worth spending time learning how to do and then more time improving the process so that it becomes easier to do. Here we look at the way we should count a specific suit - starting with the way most players learn to count and then work on finding even better ways to count these cards.

Counting Up to 13

One of the first suits that players learn to count is the trump suit, as failing to properly count the trump suit can be a costly mistake. The first way that most learn to count is up, from 1 to 13. When one round of the suit is played (and every player follows) then we count 1, 2, 3, 4,... When a second round is played (and again everyone follows) we count 5, 6, 7, 8. We now see what is remaining. For example, we may see that we have three trump left in our hand and one in the dummy (that is 9, 10, 11, and 12) and we can deduce that there is one trump left outstanding. Thus, we need to play one more round of trump to complete drawing the opponent's trump.

This process of counting a suit works, but it requires a lot of arithmetic and can lead to some mistakes. Let's look at a slightly better way to count a suit.

Counting the Outstanding Cards

Though counting from 1 to 13 is a reasonable way to start learning to count, this method is prone to miscounting. A better approach is to determine the number of outstanding cards (cards the opponents hold in this suit) and count these as they appear from the opponents' hands.

Example 1

If we have an 8-card ♠ fit, then the opponents have five cards in this suit. We then only need to keep track of the five cards as the opponents play them. If we play one round of ♠ and both opponents follow, then that is two of the five. If we do the same again (and both follow once more) then that is four. Thus, only one more trump remains to be drawn.

This method is superior to counting to 13 because it is less susceptible to arithmetic errors or adding mistakes or to losing track of a card. If we count the outstanding cards in the suit (say the trump suit) at trick 1, then we do not need to keep track of what happens to all of our trump any longer. For example, one common error when using the 1 to 13 method is to lose track of a trump that was used to ruff a trick early in the play (either by our side or the opponents). If we count the outstanding trump (assuming this is the suit that we are keeping track of) then all we must do is keep track of the opponents' cards as they play them.

Counting in Patterns

A further improvement from counting the outstanding cards in a suit as they appear 1, 2, 3 is to count the cards in patterns. Learning to do this is a big leap forward in constructing a mental image of the hands around the table.

Example 2

If we have an 8-card fit in our trump suit, then the opponents have five cards in the suit. We should immediately ask ourselves whether these cards are split 5/0, 4/1, or 3/2. (Sometimes we can eliminate certain layouts for the suit from the auction). Then as we play the suit, if everyone follows to the first round, we can eliminate 5/0 and we are down to either 4-1, 1-4, 3-2, or 2-3. If we play a second round of the suit and RHO shows out, then we know that this suit split 4-1, with LHO having four cards. We then need to draw four rounds of trump in order to pull all the trump.

This counting in patterns is an effective way to keep track of each suit and also begins the process of starting to keep track of the shape of the entire hand.

Conclusion

Counting is an important skill in bridge. It is something we should do on almost every hand (play or defense), so working to find ways to do so that are more efficient and effective is worthwhile. Most players start by counting an important suit by using the 1 to 13 counting method and then evolve to counting the outstanding cards. If you can continue your evolution and learn to visualize the



layout of the suit around the table, you will further improve your bridge. Work hard on counting and continue to do so in better and better ways.