

TO HELP YOU COUNT AT BRIDGE

By Maritha Pottenger

1. **Count the number of rounds that each opponent follows to a suit**—rather than working to remember all the spot cards. Count the number of cards the opponents have, and then count rounds.
 - A. **Setting up a 5-card suit opposite a singleton will work if the opponents' 7 cards break 4-3** (the most likely division). If both opponents follow to 3 rounds, you know that the suit is breaking 4-3. If one opponent shows out on the 3rd round of the suit, you know their cards are dividing 5-2 and you cannot develop your 5-card suit (unless you have a very fortunate circumstance such as AJxxx opposite x and one opponent having KQ doubleton). With Ace in long suit, need 3 other entries to develop & cash.
 - B. **Setting up a 5-card suit opposite a doubleton, with 6 cards held by the opponents, will be guaranteed if both opponents follow to 2 rounds.** After 2 rounds, you know that their 6 cards are dividing either 3-3 or 4-2 (more likely). If both opponents follow to the 3rd round, your remaining two cards are good. If one opponent follows to the 3rd round and the other opponent shows out, you must trump one more card (the 4th round) to develop the 5th card in your long suit.
 - C. **Setting up a 5-card suit opposite three cards, with 5 cards held by the opponents, will be guaranteed if both opponents follow to 1 round.** The opponents' cards are divided either 4-1 or 3-2 (the most likely division). If one opponent shows out on the 2nd round, you must play (and trump) a 4th round in order to develop the 5th card in the suit. If both opponents follow to 2 rounds, the 3rd round will exhaust your opponents of that suit. Your remaining two cards in the suit (regardless of their spots) will be good.
 - D. **When pulling trumps, count the number of cards the opponents have, and then count rounds.** If you are in an 8-card fit, the opponents have 5 cards. If they both follow to two rounds, only one trump remains in their hands. If one person shows out on the 2nd round, the other person has two more trumps. If you have a 9-card fit, the opponents have 4 cards. If they both follow to two rounds, trumps are gone. If they both follow to one round and one shows out on the 2nd round, the other has one more trump. Etc.
2. When you are developing several suits, **play the suits that do NOT matter first.** In other words, play the suits where you have no guesses to make before playing a suit in which you have a guess. If one suit either breaks 3-3 or does not, and the other suit might break 3-3 but you could also finesse for the jack in that suit, play the first suit first. If you get enough information from the suits that do not matter, you may be able to turn the “guess” in that 4th suit into a certainty.
3. As you work out the distribution of different suits, **you will be playing the odds** (unless the bidding indicates different information in regard to HCP). So, if six cards are missing and you have worked out that one opponent has 4 of them and the other opponent has 2 of them, the odds are that the opponent with 4 cards will have any given card in that suit (such as a queen or jack that you must finesse)—2/3 of the time.
4. **The auction often gives you important information about the suit distributions.** A few common principles: (a) One opponent opens a minor and the other bids 1 heart, but you win the contract. **You and dummy have only 5 spades** between you. The odds are high that the opponent's spades are divided 4-4. Opener does not have 5 spades. If responder had 5 spades, s/he might have bid spades before hearts. (b) **One opponent makes a 4th-best lead against a no trump contract and then shows up with a singleton** in a different suit. That individual might very well have led from a 5-card suit if s/he had one. Thus, his/her most likely suit pattern is 4-4-4-1. (c) **When an opponent preempts**, showing a 7 card suit, and you are missing 4 cards and your queen of trump, the **partner of the preemptor is more likely to have your Queen and 3 cards. If the preemptor leads a different suit, that is likely to be a singleton** (in which case preemptor can have 2 or 3 of your trumps). (d) Support doubles, negative doubles, Bergen raises, Jacoby 2NT, Michaels, Unusual 2NT, and many other conventions give you specific information about distributions.

5. It is **often easiest to count** if you count the **opponent's hand who has a long suit**. When someone preempts at the 3 level, assume 7 cards in that suit. That only leaves 6 cards to count in the other suits. When someone bids a Weak Two, assume 6 cards in that suit. That only leaves 7 cards in the other three suits. When someone opens a major, assume 5 cards in that suit. That leaves 8 cards in the other three suits.