

Counting Your Tricks as Declarer

By Maritha Pottenger

In order to be most successful at bridge, it is advisable to **count your tricks as soon as you see dummy**—before you play the first card from dummy. (Counting could change your play to the first trick!) Most people find it easier to count the tricks they expect to take in no trump (and often in a suit as well). Any Ace is a trick; king in same suit is another trick; queen in that same suit is a 3rd trick, etc. Example: xx Axx QJ10xx Kxx opposite AKQ KQx xxx Axxx. You can count 8 tricks: 3 spades, 3 hearts and 2 clubs. You must develop the diamond suit to make 3NT and should attack it at trick 2, driving out the Ace or King. Opponents will probably continue spades. Take the spade and knock out the 2nd diamond honor. Making 5.

At higher level contracts, some people prefer to **count potential losers** (rather than winners). If you hold KQJ10x xxx xx xxx opposite Axx AKx xxx KQJ10, you have 1 heart loser; 2 diamond losers, & one club loser. However, if you pull trump and attack clubs, one of your heart losers can go away on a good club trick.

Once you have counted, you will probably have to develop more tricks. (You seldom have enough tricks “off the top”). The following methods can be used:

- 1) **Force out high cards** (e.g., the suit KQJ10 can provide 3 tricks once you force out the Ace).
- 2) Take **finesses** (e.g., the suit AQJ10 can provide 4 tricks if the King is on-side—3 if it is offside.)
- 3) **Develop long suits**
 - a. **When you have top honors, cash them** and hope all the lower honors will fall, making your small cards good, e.g., AKQxx opposite xx: Play, AKQ and hope suit break 3-3. If it's 4-2, give up 4th card in suit in order to set up 5th card in suit. AK543 opposite J26. Play AK and hope Queen falls. If queen does not fall, but suit breaks 3-2, give up 3rd trick in suit in order to establish 4th and 5th tricks.
 - b. **When you *must* lose at least one trick to set up a long suit, losing it early will often be best** (and preserves transportation), e.g., AK543 opposite 267. Play the 2 from your hand and 3 from dummy as the first trick in this suit. When you regain the lead, play the AK. If suit breaks 3-2, you get 4 tricks.
 - c. **When you have a choice of two suits to develop in NT, and only one more stopper in the opponents' suit, play both suits from the top** (rather than giving up a trick) in case one breaks well, and the other does not. For example, AK xxx AKxxx xxx opposite xxx AK xxx AKxxx. Opponents lead a spade, knocking out one of your stoppers. Play the AK of diamonds. If they break 3-2, give up a diamond and you will make 10 tricks. If diamonds break 4-1, abandon them and try the AK of clubs. If those break 3-2, give up a club and you will still end up with 10 tricks—making 4.
 - d. **When you have a choice of two suits to develop in NT, it is usually better to go after the suit that will offer the most tricks.** For example, AK xxx KQJ109 xxx opposite xxx AKQ xxx KQJ10. The opponents lead spades. You can count 2 spades & 3 hearts. You can only knock out the ace in ONE minor suit before the opponents knock out your last spade stopper. Diamonds offers 4 tricks (allowing you to make 3NT); clubs offer only 3 tricks (leaving you one trick short).
 - e. Sometimes **finessing** can help you set up a suit, e.g., AQ1098 opposite 234. Finesse to the 8 (or 9 or 10 as they are equivalent) the first time you play the suit. If that loses to the King, you can continue finessing for the Jack over and over, getting 4 tricks. If 8 loses to Jack, get back to your hand and finesse to 9 next time. 75% of the time, you'll get 4 tricks. (25%, you'll get 5 tricks & 25% you'll get only 3.)

In a **suit contract**, you have a couple additional options for developing more tricks.

- 1) **Ruff out a suit** in order to set it up. For example, KQ xx AK6532 Axx opposite AJ109876 Ax x xxx with K of hearts lead. Play to Ace of diamonds and ruff a diamond. Play to King of Spades. Ruff another diamond. Play Ace of spades (unblocking queen in dummy) and pull trump. Assuming diamonds were no worse than 4-2, you can return to dummy with Ace of clubs and pitch one losing heart & two losing clubs on the good diamonds.

- 2) Take a **ruffing finesse**, e.g., KQx KQJ109x xx Kx opposite AJ10xxx VOID Ax Axxxx. King of diamonds lead. Pull trumps, ending in dummy and lead the King of hearts. If RHO plays Ace, trump, and return to dummy with King of clubs to pitch your losing diamond and 3 losing clubs on the good hearts. If RHO plays low, pitch your losing diamond. Even if LHO gets Ace of hearts, you can throw all your club losers on the hearts which are now established. Making either 6 or 7, depending on location of heart Ace.