

The Advancing Player

Counting High Card Points as Declarer



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The most common guess in bridge is when you have KJx(x) opposite xx. If there has been bidding by the opposition, paying attention will often allow you to make this “guess” with a high level of certainty. Here is a recent hand from a club game.

North holds:

♠876 ♥AQ753 ♦J4 ♣K104

South holds:

♠3 ♥K10864 ♦K1075 ♣Q93

The bidding proceeds: pass by South and 1♠ by West. Pass by North. [♠2 level overcalls should promise a full opening hand unless you have a different agreement with your partner.] 2♣ by East. 2♥ by South, Pass by West, 3♥ by North, 4♠ by East, Pass by South and West, and 5♥ (non-vulnerable versus vulnerable opponents) by North, doubled. All pass.

The lead is the ♣7 (looks like top of a doubleton). Declarer ducks in Dummy. East grimaces slightly and goes up with the ♣A. East knows there is no future in clubs. East also knows that South must have a singleton spade (based on the auction). Therefore, E/W need diamond tricks! So, East shifts to the ♦2 at trick 2.

Should South play low, hoping East has the ♦Q – or play the ♦K – hoping East has the ♦A? It is dangerous to lead from the ♦Q when the ♦J is in Dummy. If Declarer does not hold the ♦10, you are giving him an opportunity to make an extra diamond trick by this play. However, let us analyze the HCP in this auction.

Consider the opening lead. Even though East did bid clubs, West would normally lead a spade from either ♠AK or ♠KQ in the suit. Both of those are stronger leads than a doubleton in partner’s suit. Therefore, we should mentally “place” the ♠K in the East hand, and the ♠AQ (and probably ♠J) in the West hand. We already know that East holds the ♣A and ♣J. That is 8 HCP for East. If East owns the ♦A as well, that would be 12 HCP. However, the opponents only have 22 HCP between them (because North has 10 and South has 8). If East held 12 HCP, West would have opened a mediocre 10 HCP hand in the second seat.

So, it is much more likely that West owns the ♦A (along with ♠AQJ). We must hope that West also has the ♥J for his opening hand. If West has the ♦A and ♦Q, our cause is hopeless. So, duck the diamond (with ♦J in Dummy) and West will be forced to play the ♦A if he wants to take the trick. Down one – losing one spade, one diamond and one club – with opponents gin for taking 10 vulnerable tricks in spades (developing East’s club suit to discard diamond losers).

Next Hand

When an opponent opens 1NT (or a Big Club), it often helps you in assigning HCP when you are defending.

Hand #1

Dealer: North

Vulnerable: East/West

	♠A4	
	♥KQJ4	
	♦10987	
	♣KQ10	
♠K97		♠QJ65
♥852		♥973
♦AK52		♦Q6
♣J92		♣A543
	♠10832	
	♥A106	
	♦J43	
	♣876	

North opened 1NT (15-17) and everyone passed. I led a fourth-best spade. [Sequences must be three cards against notrump. Queen would be an incorrect lead in this case.] Declarer tried the ♠8 from Dummy (her best hope), but partner covered with the ♠9 – another correct play. I have led the ♠5 – presumably my fourth-best card. That means [Rule of 11] that there are six cards above my ♠5 in partner's hand, Dummy, and Declarer's hand. Partner can see three in his hand and two in Dummy. Ergo, Declarer has only one spade above the ♠5. It is highly likely to be the ♠A.

Declarer ducked the ♠9 and West continued with the ♠K to Declarer's ♠A. Declarer next played the ♥4 to the ♥10 in Dummy as I gave count with the ♥3 and partner (West) gave count with the ♥2. [Count is given when Declarer or Dummy initiates a suit, unless you are winning the trick.] Declarer then played a low club to her ♣Q and I won with the ♣A.

Counting HCP

Time to count High Card Points. I have seen the ♠A from Declarer's hand. Her play to the ♥10 in Dummy [and partner's count card] reveals that she started with ♥KQJ4. Her play of the clubs makes it very likely that she has both the ♣K and the ♣Q. That adds up to 15 HCP. She might also own the ♣J, but she cannot hold the ♦A or ♦K with what she has already shown (or inferred).

I cash two good spades and North is squeezed on the fourth round of spades. She can let go of the ♣10, but then must give up a diamond if she wants to keep all her heart winners. I play the ♦Q, which holds as expected, and a diamond to West's ♦A and ♦K (as the ♦J falls from Dummy). Since Declarer has discarded a diamond (from her original ♦10987 holding), Partner's ♦2 takes a trick as well.

Down two.

About half the field was down 1. About half the field was making 1NT (with two pairs making 2NT).

Hand #2

Dealer: North

Vulnerable: None

♠10983
♥KQ3
♦QJ3
♣A92

♠AJ6
♥J642
♦94
♣Q1076

♠KQ2
♥107
♦AK108
♣KJ85

♠754
♥A985
♦7652
♣43

North opened 1♣ and I overcalled 1NT (15-18 as an overcall) in the East seat. South passed. West invited with Stayman. [We would pass a 15-17 opening notrump with a mediocre 8 HCP at match points, only inviting when vulnerable at IMP scoring. However, I can have one more point here, so partner invited.]

I denied a major with 2♦, and West bid 2NT. Despite two 10s my hand was less than inspiring, with only one Ace and wide-open hearts. As I duly alerted the opponents, since we play 4-way transfers, my partner can only invite through Stayman, so his 2♣ bid did not guarantee any 4-card major.

The lead was a fourth-best heart, won by the ♥Q in the North. North continued hearts which is wrong. North can see that playing hearts will eventually set up a trick for the ♥J in Dummy. A general principle of defense is to try to get your other defensive tricks before you take tricks that will develop trick(s) for Declarer. North could shift to a spade knowing that I have no more than three spades, thanks to my denial of a major, so declarer has a theoretical chance to develop one spade trick by force.

North can actually tell that South does not own the ♠K or ♠Q. Dummy has 8 HCP; North has 12. That is 20 HCP. South is known to have the ♥A since East did not kill the ♥Q at trick #1. Therefore, the most South can have (in addition to the ♥A) is one Jack – or nothing.

So, East is known to hold the ♠KQ; ♦AK; and ♣K. The only unknown card is the ♣J. However, with the ♣10 in Dummy, Declarer will get three club tricks once the ♣A is gone, as she can finesse to Dummy's ♣10 if need be. North should expect East's most likely shape is: 3-2-4-4. That is the most common hand pattern in bridge, and East is known to have exactly two hearts from the lead, and probably three spades due to the Stayman denial. Declarer has three sure spade tricks, but only three since neither East nor West has that fourth spade. Two diamond tricks bring the total to only eight tricks.

So, North's best shot is to lead a low diamond at trick 2. Two good things could happen: (1) South could own the ♦10, in which case N/S will have their five tricks to hold the contract: 1 diamond; one club; and three hearts [taken after they get the other tricks].

(2) East could decline to finesse for both diamond honors the first time. If North feels the diamond is too dangerous, she can exit at trick #2 with a passive spade trick.

Ironically, the same math will make Declarer more likely to finesse North for both diamond honors – if she stops to count HCPs at trick #1.

That is one reason to play the diamond immediately – before Declarer might have stopped and thought things through. When North wins the ♥Q, she is likely to hold the ♥K as well. She would be unlikely to play the ♥Q from ♥AQx with ♥Jxxx in Dummy. Therefore, South has the ♥A. So, in order for North to get to 12 HCP, she need both the ♦Q and the ♦J. (Of course, some people open balanced 11 HCP hands, but it is not common.) If Declarer figures out the HCPs around the table, she will always come to nine tricks, but N/S should refrain from making it too easy for her.