

Do You Count Winners Or Loser?



By Kitty Cooper

kittymcooper@gmail.com

When you are first taught to play bridge you are told to count your tricks in notrump and count your losers in a suit contract, hopefully coming up with nine winners if you're in 3NT and no more than three losers if you're in four of a major.

However, there are problems with that approach. If you only count winners in notrump, you will find that sometimes the opponents get five or more tricks before your nine are ready. The problem with counting losers in a suit contract is that you might foolishly draw trumps when you need to take ruffs in the dummy. A better approach, therefore, is to count both winners and losers.

Here is a hand played in 3NT.

♠AQJ10

♥A

♦QJ1098

♣K32

♠765

♥K732

♦543

♣AQ6

The opponents lead a heart and you can count nine winners: one spade, two hearts, three diamonds (once you have knocked out the ace and king), and three clubs.

So what's the problem? Well, if the hearts are 5-3 or 6-2 and the hand with the long hearts has one of the diamond honors, the opponents will be able to get three or four hearts and two diamonds before you have your nine tricks. Are there any other options? Yes—if the spade finesse works you have nine tricks via four spades, two hearts, and three clubs. Notice that you cannot try both these lines of play; if you take the spade finesse and lose to the king when hearts are 4-4 you will lose five tricks (a spade, two hearts, and two diamonds), but if you start diamonds you will make your contract, losing only two hearts and two diamonds.

So how do you choose which way to play? You can actually postpone the choice by starting with a high diamond from dummy. Perhaps the enemy will err by ducking, in which case you shift to spades and now have nine tricks however hearts split—at least three spades, two hearts, one diamond, and three clubs. But if the enemy wins the diamond and clears hearts you will now have to choose between knocking out the other diamond (playing hearts to be 4-4) or taking the spade finesse; if you decide to do the latter you are conveniently in your hand to do so. Plus you have two club entries to your hand to repeat the spade finesse twice more so that you can take the four spade tricks you need. How to choose? Watch their heart spots carefully. They will usually tell which way they are breaking.

Here is a hand played in 4♠; there are no top losers (tricks the enemy can cash at once), but where do you find 10 tricks?

♠J98

♥3

♦AK43

♣A9675

♠AK1076

♥A65

♦8765

♣5

For losers you may have one in trump (spades), two in hearts, and one or two in diamonds, so four or five losers. Sure winners are only six - two spades (the ace and king of trump), one heart, two diamonds, and one club. But wait! If you score your four little trumps by ruffing and add those tricks to your six high card tricks you get to ten; but to score your little trumps separately you must not draw even one round of trump. Instead of drawing trump you should cash all of your side winners - the ace of hearts, the ace and king of diamonds, and the ace of clubs and then ruff your two little hearts in dummy and three of dummy's little clubs in hand.

Why are you advised to cash all of your side winners before starting to cross ruff? If you don't, an opponent may be able to discard one of the suits you have winners in while you are ruffing and thus stop you from scoring a high card when he ruffs it (likely diamonds on this hand).

Why not draw one round of trump since you only need two ruffs in dummy? Because if they over-ruff dummy and play a trump back there will be no more trumps in the dummy to get you to ten tricks. You have great spots in trumps so if you get over-ruffed and they play a trump back, you will still have enough trump tricks to make this contract. If dummy is overruffed, it can only be by the queen, so you will make all five trumps in your hand plus one in dummy (presuming they play a trump back). If your hand gets overruffed, you still make two trumps in dummy and four in your hand. Thus you will have six trump tricks and your four side winners.

This article was co-authored by Kitty's husband, the late Steve Cooper, and previously appeared in the District 17 newsletter. ♣