

TIM BOURKE & MARC SMITH

COUNTDOWN

TO

WINNING BRIDGE

FOREWORD BY DAVID BIRD





Countdown to Winning Bridge

Tim Bourke & Marc Smith

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Foreword

When it comes to card play and defense, what edge do the top players have? Card sense and flair, perhaps? Fortunately for the majority of players, the true answer is less romantic — they achieve their fine results mainly by hard work. To determine the best line of play or the best defense, the essential first step is to gather information on the closed hands. Only when you have a picture of all four hands will the right line of play become apparent.

In this excellent book, Tim Bourke and Marc Smith show how you can ‘count the hand’, discovering the shape of the closed hands and the location of the key high cards. They explain clearly the latest methods of signalling, which allow defenders to give each other an early count. There are also plenty of realistic examples, many from championship play, to demonstrate how you can take advantage of the information gained.

If you have been playing bridge without counting the hand, perhaps for many years, you are about to enter a new world! Plays and defenses that were previously out of reach will become part of your standard repertoire. You will have to put in some hard work along the way, it’s true, but the dramatic improvement in your play will make it all worthwhile.

DAVID BIRD

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The Basics

Experienced players might prefer to skim or even bypass this first section, in which we focus primarily on the actual mechanics of counting. From there on, they'll find all the challenge they can wish for. However, having said that, we suspect even those players might find some of the tips in the early chapters useful, and they probably shouldn't ignore them completely.



Why Count?

Do you remember sitting behind the wheel of a car for your first driving lesson? Like us, you probably wondered how you were supposed to watch the traffic while simultaneously making the car go where you wanted it to, let alone worrying about how you switched on the wipers or the turn signal. For many bridge players, the word ‘counting’ seems to evoke similar feelings of confusion and dread. This is particularly curious, since even small children can count to thirteen. The good news is that, with practice, counting at the bridge table can become as routine as driving a car or riding the proverbial bike. In this chapter, we’ll also show you how useful a skill it is to acquire.

When you first started playing bridge, you probably found that you often

seemed to freeze because there were so many things to think about that you did not know where to start. You had to count high card points and remember to add distributional points which, you were told, changed as the bidding progressed. You also had to work out how many points partner's bid showed and add them to your own. It is little wonder that, by the time dummy appeared, you had precious little energy left to count your winners and losers, let alone remember how many trumps were out. Fairly soon, though, you were able to keep a running total of the number of trumps played as a matter of habit. From there it was a small step to work out how many were outstanding — and your counting career had begun.

Counting during the play of the hand takes many forms. Keeping track of the number of trumps played is where we all start. As we gain experience, we learn to pay attention to the cards played in more than one suit, so that we know whether, for example, dummy's remaining low diamond is a winner. Having mastered these basic counting tasks, we learn to count the opponents' hands too. In this book, we start at the very beginning by looking at *how* you should count — by using patterns. As we progress, so the hands become progressively more difficult. Even players with very little experience should have no trouble with our first hand; however, it allows us to introduce some useful ideas:

N-S Vul. ♠ K Q 5 4
 Lead: ♣K ♥ K 8 3
 ♦ 8 6
 ♣ A 9 4 2



♠ A 7 2
 ♥ A Q 5 4
 ♦ A K Q J 2
 ♣ J

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
	1♣	pass	1♦
pass	1♠	pass	4NT
pass	5♦	pass	5NT
pass	6♥	pass	7NT
all pass			

You must train yourself to count your tricks, even in simple contracts. This is something we are all taught as novices, and it is a process that even the expert player performs on every hand. Here you have eleven top tricks — one club, four diamonds, three hearts and three spades, so you must find two more to bring your total to thirteen. Your twelfth trick, you hope, will come from the fifth diamond in hand and the thirteenth from a 3-3 break in one of the majors. (More experienced readers will have noticed squeeze chances, but we are ignoring them on this hand in the interest of emphasizing the mechanics of the counting process).

West leads the ♣K, so you win the ♣A and immediately test diamonds. The skill you have acquired in counting trumps will make keeping an eye on the diamond suit a breeze, but it is worth mentioning quickly exactly *how* you should count the defenders' diamonds.

Deducting your seven diamonds from thirteen tells you the defenders have six diamonds. Although counting to six may not seem overly arduous, it's still easier to think in terms of suit combinations. In this instance, the defenders' diamonds may break 3-3, 4-2, 5-1 or 6-0. Both defenders follow to the first diamond winner, so you can rule out the 6-0 breaks. When you cash the second top diamond, everyone follows again. As the suit must now break either 3-3 or 4-2, you don't care who has the remaining diamonds. Rather than counting to thirteen, or even to six, you only had to count to two!

Now that your long diamond is a winner, you have twelve tricks and just need to find one major breaking favorably. How should you proceed? Moderately experienced players would cash the diamond tricks, throwing clubs from dummy, while keeping track of any major-suit discards. Perhaps you note that the defenders have six cards in each major, and as each major-suit card is played you mentally reduce the number of outstanding cards.

Until it becomes a habit, keeping track of both suits may be too much — it is also unnecessary. Choose one of the majors to watch — let's say hearts. After cashing your diamonds, play off the top hearts. Because you have been counting the suit you will know whether the thirteenth heart is a winner. If it is, your problems are over. Otherwise, play four rounds of spades and hope for the best.

With practice, these basic counting processes become routine. After progressing beyond the beginner stage, most players carry them out without conscious thought. The next step in learning to count a bridge hand is to work out the distribution of an opponent's hand. To appreciate the advantages of doing so, try playing a few hands with the defenders' hands face-up on the table like extra dummies.

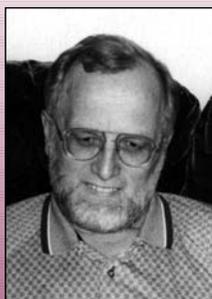
When you first try to count a defender's shape it seems like an impossible task, even though all the information is in your head. As with most things though, it is only a question of practice. Let's begin with a straightforward

Did you ever notice how the bridge experts always seem to know where every card is? How their finesses always seem to succeed? How their guesses are nearly always perfect? This book won't teach you to play quite that well, but it will introduce you to some very simple techniques that the experts use on play and defense.

As declarer or defender, counting the hand is the one thing that will help you the most. But how do you keep track of all those cards? This book will show you how — explaining the tricks of the trade, and helping anyone who can count to thirteen to become a much better player. Full of practical examples of how to apply the information you get from counting, this book is sure to improve your game.

**"IF YOU HAVE BEEN PLAYING BRIDGE WITHOUT
COUNTING THE HAND, PERHAPS FOR MANY YEARS,
YOU ARE ABOUT TO ENTER A NEW WORLD! "**

— *David Bird*



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