



Counting the Hand: High Card Points



1. So you want to know: How can I win at bridge more often? What do the bridge hotshots know that I don't know? What separates the champions from the rest of us?

The answer is quite simple: The champions count the hand. As a result, they play not only the cards they're looking at, but also the opponents' cards.

If you take the trouble to count the hand, that is, to work out the enemy holdings, you will always enjoy an advantage over the players who only see the cards in their own hands.

2. How can you acquire this magical skill? First, realize you will not pick it up overnight. It will require practice. Some days you may not feel like making the effort. But with practice, you can develop the winning skill of counting the hand.
3. Second, you'll have to sharpen your powers of observation. You first have to notice the cards that have been played before you can draw conclusions about who holds what.
4. There are three different things that we bridge players count:
 - High Card Points
 - Distribution
 - Tricks

This first segment focuses on High Card Points (HCP).

5. Listen to the bidding. Every enemy bid offer some amount of information. Certain bids define the point-count within narrow limits, and all bids give some indication of the values held. Remember this info during the play.

6. Tip for ease of remembering: If a bid show a 3-point range, assume the player has the middle of that range, plus or minus one point.
7. Tip for estimating the fourth hand: When you know the approximate strength of one opponent's hand, add that number to the point-count of dummy and your own point-count, subtract the sum from 40, and you'll know the strength of the fourth hand.
8. Take the inferences that are readily available from the bidding. If you draw these inferences, it can help you in the play or the defense of the hand.
- A passed hand cannot have 13 HCP. If a passed hand shows up with 11 HCP, he can't have a missing queen.
 - A responder who passes his partner's opening one bid cannot have 6 HCP. If he shows up with one king, he cannot have another king.
 - An opening bidder has a minimum of 11 HCP.
 - An opening No Trump bidder has 15 to 17 HCP.
 - A responder who has bid 1 NT holds 6 to 10 HCP.
 - A responder who has bid a suit at the one level has at least 5 HCP.
 - A responder who has bid a suit at the two level has at least 9 HCP.

9. Try this example. You arrive in a heart game after the following auction:

<u>West</u>	<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>
Pass	Pass	Pass	1 H
Pass	3 H	Pass	4 H
Pass	Pass	Pass	

Contract: 4 H

Opening lead: S Ace

North

- 973
- J842
- K103
- AQJ

South

- 86
- AQ1095
- AJ4
- K105

West cashes the ace and king of spades and continues with the jack of spades, which you ruff. You cross to dummy with a club to take the trump finesse, which loses to West's king. He returns a trump and you are faced with a diamond "guess" for your contract. Which way should you guess it? Answer: There's really no guesswork involved. West has shown up with 11 HCP (8 in spades and 3 in hearts), yet PASSED as dealer. If he held the diamond queen he'd have 13 HCP and would have opened the bidding. So you score your tenth trick by finessing against the diamond queen in East's hand. Your partner is so happy!

10. As a defender, it is usually productive to try to count the High Card Points in declarer's hand. In the following example, in fact, it is the key to success. Imagine that you are West. (To get the most out of this exercise, cover the East and South hands.)

	<u>North</u>		
	♠ AQJ94		
	♠ 863		
<u>West</u>	♠ Q7	<u>East</u>	
♠ 1074	♠ K103	♠ 865	
♠ K1052		♠ AJ7	
♠ J1098	<u>South</u>	♠ 632	
♠ A4	♠ K3	♠ J975	
	♠ Q94		
	♠ AK54		
	♠ Q862		
<u>West</u>	<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>
			1 D
Pass	1 S	Pass	1 NT
Pass	3 NT	All Pass	

As West, you lead the diamond jack. Dummy's queen wins. Who do you think holds the king and ace of diamonds? (Right, declarer has them.) Now declarer plays a club to his queen and your ace. You know that declarer has at most 14 HCP (with 15 points, he would have opened the bidding with 1 NT), and he already has shown 9—the diamond ace-king and club queen. Therefore, declarer's hearts cannot be as good as ace-queen (else he would have 15 HCP.) This means that your partner has at least one of these cards. So a heart lead ought to be safe and may even be damaging to declarer's best plans. You lead the heart two and your side now takes 4 heart tricks to go with your club ace. Down one. You are such a good player!