

73. Count me out

By Ron Klinger

East dealer : East-West vulnerable

North
♠ J6
♥ AK10
♦ 109864
♣ A108

West
♠ AK105
♥ 732
♦ J3
♣ J652

West	North	East	South
Pass	2♥ ⁽¹⁾	Pass	1♣
Pass	3NT	All Pass	2NT

(1) 11+ points, balanced hand, no 4-card major

West leads the ♠A: six – four – two. You play natural count at trick 1. What would you play at trick 2?

There are some who swear by count, i.e., showing partner how many cards you hold in the suit led. Natural count is playing the lowest card from an odd number and high – low with an even number. Reverse count is playing high-low with an odd number and bottom from an even number. Reverse count is superior. Playing bottom from a doubleton can work better, since you might not be able to afford playing the higher card from your doubleton. It takes extremely great skill to play count signals only and find the best defence regularly. I experience schadenfreude when a pair playing count comes a gutser.

Then there are those (count me in) who prefer to give attitude on partner's lead when that is appropriate, count when that is essential and suit-preference when it is clear that a continuation of the suit led is futile. This approach requires judgement. Giving count is automatic and does not tax the little grey cells.

This arose in Round 2 of the third Alt-Invitational:

East dealer : East-West vulnerable

North		
♠ J6		
♥ AK10		
♦ 109864		
♣ A108		
West		East
♠ AK105		♠ 984
♥ 732		♥ QJ54
♦ J3		♦ KQ5
♣ J652		♣ 943
South		
♠ Q732		
♥ 986		
♦ A72		
♣ KQ7		

After the auction above, West led the ♠A, followed by the ♠K: jack – nine – three and the ♠5: ♥10 – ♠8 – ♠Q. South played ♣A, ♦4: five – ace – three and another diamond for nine tricks, North-South +400.

	North	
	♠ J6	
	♥ AK10	
	♦ 109864	
	♣ A108	
West		East
♠ AK105		♠ 984
♥ 732		♥ QJ54
♦ J3		♦ KQ5
♣ J652		♣ 943
	South	
	♠ Q732	
	♥ 986	
	♦ A72	
	♣ KQ7	

I cannot be sure what went wrong with the defence. Perhaps West took East's ♠4 as showing an odd number of spades and played East to have ♠Q-x-x-x-x. On the other hand, if West thought that, West would play ♠A, ♠K, ♠10 to unblock the spades. Maybe West realized after trick 2, that East had only three spades. Still even then, there was time to switch to a heart. West is a very fine player. The error, whatever it was, was highly unusual.

Notice how easy it is if you play attitude signals. On the ♠A, East plays the ♠4 (low-discouraging) or the ♠9 (high-hate). A heart switch then will beat 3NT. West can even play ♠A, ♠K. East will give a suit-preference signal at trick 2: ♠4, then ♠9, or ♠9, then ♠8 to ask for a heart switch. On the play as it went, East's ♠9 at trick 2 might have been intended as suit-preference.

At the other table, it went:

West	North	East	South
		Pass	1♣
Pass	1♦	Pass	1NT
Pass	3NT	All Pass	

West led the ♠A: six – nine (high-hate) – three and switched to the ♥3: ace – four (low-like) – six. The ♦10 went to the ♦J and West continued with the ♥2: ten – queen – nine. East returned the ♥5, won by the ♥K. Declarer played ♦A and ♦7. East won, cashed the ♥Q and played a spade to West for two down and +11 Imps.

In another match, both sides went off in 3NT. In the other matches, 1NT or 2NT made, some with overtricks.

North dealer : North-South vulnerable

	North		
	♠ 1094		
	♥ Q43		
	♦ AQ4		
	♣ KQJ5		
West			
♠ Q3			
♥ AKJ85			
♦ 109			
♣ A1032			
West	North	East	South
	1♣	Pass	1♠
2♥	Dble ⁽¹⁾	Pass	4♠
Pass	Pass	Pass	

(1) Support double shows three spades

West leads the ♥A: three – two – nine. East's two is reverse count, showing an even number. What would you play at trick 2?

This deal arose in a teams' match on BBO:

North dealer : North-South vulnerable

	North	
	♠ 1094	
	♥ Q43	
	♦ AQ4	
	♣ KQJ5	
West		East
♠ Q3		♠ 65
♥ AKJ85		♥ 102
♦ 109		♦ J7652
♣ A1032		♣ 9764
	South	
	♠ AKJ872	
	♥ 976	
	♦ K83	
	♣ 8	

At one table it went:

West	North	East	South
	1♣	Pass	1♥ ⁽¹⁾
Dble ⁽²⁾	1♠	Pass	2♣ ⁽³⁾
Pass	2♦ ⁽⁴⁾	Pass	4♠
Pass	Pass	Pass	

- (1) 4+ spades
- (2) Shows hearts
- (3) Artificial, sign off in diamonds or 10-12 points
- (4) Forced, unless opener is very strong

East led the ♥10. West took the ♥K, ♥A, ♣A and played a third heart. East ruffed and South was one off, -100.

At the other table, after the problem auction (previous page), West led the ♥A. East played the ♥2, reverse count, showing two or four hearts. That is one of the serious problems, the ambiguity when giving count. If East had two hearts, it was imperative to give East a heart ruff. If East had four hearts, the ♥K next would be ruffed and the ♥Q would be set up.

There is a strong case to play East for two hearts. West has 14 HCP and South has bid game opposite a potentially minimum opening. It was highly likely that South had ♠A-K and the ♦K. If so, only a heart ruff would beat 4♠.

West thought otherwise and switched to the ♦10, taken by the ♦A. Declarer played ♠A, ♠K, ♣8: two – king – four. A club ruff, followed by a heart meant 11 tricks, +650 and +13 Imps.

How easy the defence is with simple attitude signals! West leads the ♥A. East plays the ♥10 (standard encouraging signal) or the ♥2 (low-like) and the rest is routine for four tricks for the defence. Why would you want to guess what to do with count signals when defence is straightforward with an attitude signal?

Of course, there are situations when count can be vital, but today's deals did not fall into those situations.

Problems for Tomorrow:

1. West dealer : East-West vulnerable

	North
	♠ 9
	♥ Q2
	♦ 87543
	♣ A7642
West	
♠ AK6532	
♥ KJ975	
♦ J	
♣ J	

West	North	East	South
1♠	2NT ⁽¹⁾	3♠	5♣
5♠	Pass	Pass	6♣
Dble	Pass	Pass	Pass

(1) Minors

West leads the ♠A: nine – ten – four. What do you play at trick 2?

2. East dealer : East-West vulnerable

West	North	East	South
		Pass	2♥ ⁽¹⁾
Pass	4♥	All Pass	

(1) Weak two

What would you lead as West from:

♠ AJ
♥ J83
♦ AQ9432
♣ 72

Why not phone or email your bridge partners and compare your answers and your reasoning?

Half of us are going to come out of this quarantine as amazing cooks. The other half will come out with a drinking problem.