Play Like an Expert

(Friday mini-lesson – 6 September 2019)

What's one of the primary reasons bridge experts play better than others?

They count high-card points! Everyone can do this, and if you are not currently doing so on *every single hand*, whether as declarer or defender, then you are playing with one hand tied behind your back, metaphorically speaking, and will *always* be a novice player.

Let's look at these problems. You and your partner have bid to a contract of 3NT after the following bidding:

West	*Partner*	*East*	*You*
		1♥	1NT
Pass	3NT	All Pass	

West leads the 2♥ and these are the hands you see in front of you:

> ♠ 7 6 2
> ♥ 5 4
> ♦ Q J T 9
> ♣ A Q J 9
>
> ♠ A K Q
> ♥ A T 9
> ♦ A 7 4 3
> ♣ T 6 5

What is your plan for making 9 tricks? First, count your sure winners: three ♠s, one ♥, one ♦, and one ♣. You can get the three extra tricks you need if just one of your minor suit finesses work. But which one should you take?

Next, while making your plan, **concentrate on high-card points**, which is especially beneficial when you buy the contract after an opponent opens the bidding. Here, dummy has 10 points, and you have 17. That leaves 13 points for both opponents, so you realise that the finesse for the K♣ has no chance, and the ♦ finesse is a *certainty*.

Therefore, after you take the first, second or third ♥ trick (it's good technique to duck twice here to see how the ♥ suit breaks), play a ♣ to dummy's ace, then run the Q♦. When that wins, repeat the ♦ finesse as many times as necessary. You rake in three ♠s, one ♥, four ♦s, and one ♣, to make your contract.

Now look at the following similar type of hand.

This time, your partnership has bid to a contract of 4♠ as follows:

West	Partner	East	You
		1♣	1♠
Pass	4♠	All Pass	

West leads the 10♣ and these are the hands you see in front of you:

♠ A T 9 6
♥ Q J
♦ A K 5
♣ 9 8 6 3

♠ K J 8 4 3
♥ A K
♦ Q T 6
♣ 7 5 4

What is your plan for making 10 tricks? First, count your losers: one ♠, zero ♥s, zero ♦s, and three ♣s. You can't avoid the three ♣ losers right off the top and you have to *guess* how to finesse in trumps.

However, you are *put to the test* very early on in the hand, since at trick one, East wins with the J♣, then plays the A♣ and K♣, with West pitching a small ♥ on the third round. East now plays the Q♣. You *know that East will overtrump you* if you play a low trump from your hand, but should you play the K♠ or the J♠ (or 8♠)? Who has the Q♠? Effectively, *right away* you need to decide on how to take your planned trump finesse.

When dummy first came down, *while* you were planning the play of the hand, **you again should have counted high-card points**. Dummy has 14 of them and you have 13. It's *highly likely* that West has the missing Q♠, otherwise she has opened the bidding on 11 points. That is certainly allowable with a distributional hand, but since East opened 1♣ and only has four of them, they couldn't possibly have any higher-ranking suit with five or more cards, otherwise they would have opened that suit. So, ruff with the 8♠ or J♠. When that wins, play a low ♠ to dummy's ace, and run the T♠ through East to pick up her queen and claim.

Thus, the **key point** here is that *as soon as dummy hits the table, whether you are declarer or one of the defenders, you should count the high-card points in dummy along with those in your own hand*. The difference is the number of points in the two hidden hands. Use this information in conjunction with the bidding. It won't always be as clear cut as the above examples, but you'll at least be able to get a range of points for those hands and make useful inferences in the play or defence. **Bonus: your finesses will work more often!**