ONE OF the essential strategies that declarer must adopt when dummy is displayed is to count his winners and losers. In practice, counting losers is only of use in a suit contract – in no-trumps declarer should concentrate on where his winners are coming from. So this article will focus on the play of the cards in trump contracts.

Counting (in its many different forms) is the bedrock of success at bridge. On the sight of dummy declarer should look to see where his tricks are coming from and where his opponents’ tricks might come from. Let’s look at a very simple example deal to start with:

**Hand 1**

*South plays in 4♠.*

West leads the ♦10.

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<td>Q 10 8 3</td>
<td>J 9 2</td>
<td>Q 14</td>
<td>K 9 3</td>
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<td>A K J 9 7</td>
<td>8 6 5</td>
<td>A K 3</td>
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If declarer counts his winners, South can see five spade tricks, three diamond tricks and two club tricks. That makes ten winners in all – that’s useful, in a contract of 4♠! If South counts his losers, then he should see no spade losers, two heart losers, no diamond losers and no club losers.

This is what you might expect – ten winners and three losers, making a total of thirteen. However, not all hands are so straightforward. Suppose we alter Hand 1 a small amount, giving North the ♦Q:

Now there are eleven winners (five spades, three diamonds and three clubs) but still three losers (all in hearts). Oddly, perhaps, the winners and losers don’t add up to thirteen. Where we have more winners than we need, that doesn’t matter (you can’t have too much of a good thing after all).

The effect on Hand 2 is that the ball is in the opponents’ court. If they were to lead a heart they could take the first three tricks. If, however, they fail to do so (and remember that the opponents have to make a blind opening lead), then one of your losers will disappear. In the case above West has led a diamond. Declarer can win that, draw trumps and play off the diamonds and clubs. On the third club South can discard one of his hearts, disposing of one of his losing cards.

The exercise of counting winners and losers is so important that it bears much repetition. The next deal is more subtle as it requires declarer to think about how trumps might split. South is again declarer in 4♠ and this time West leads a heart.

**Hand 2**

*South plays in 4♠.*

West leads the ♦10.

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Now the count of winners and losers depends on whether the spades break favourably or not. If spades are 3–2, then declarer has five spade winners, a heart winner, two diamond winners and two club winners (ten winners in all). If declarer looks at losers, there are no spade losers, two heart losers, a diamond loser and no club losers. That makes ten winners and three losers. If, however, the spades break 4–1 (or, horror of horrors, 5–0) then the number of winners decreases while the number of losers increases.

Anyway . . . when declarer can see enough winners for his contract, then he should usually aim to draw trumps and set up his winners in the other suits. In the specific case of Hand 3, South should win the heart lead and play off the three top trumps. Assuming that the suit breaks 3–2, then declarer should switch his attention to diamonds and drive out the diamond ace.

Often we meet puzzling hands where we count winners and losers and they don’t add up at all (we see eight winners and only three losers, for example). Where we

Mike Scottock and Jeffrey Allerton (Surrey) won the 2012 Corwen Trophy for County Pairs, ahead of Andrew Southwell and Ian Lancaster (Sussex).
have ‘extra’ tricks, then it means we can usually discard our losers if given the opportunity. We have already seen one example in Hand 2.

More tricky are the cases where the winners and losers add up to less than thirteen. In these cases it is often the right plan to try to make the extra tricks by ruffing the losers.

On this deal there are ten winners (five spades and five hearts) but only two losers (one club and one diamond). How can we make this work to our advantage? Well, the solution is to make an extra trick by ruffing a club in the dummy (the hand with the shorter trumps, note).

The opponents have led a heart (which could well be a singleton), so declarer must first draw trumps. Let us assume that they split 3–1. Now declarer can run off dummy’s heart suit if he wishes, throwing some rubbish from his hand. South now concedes a club to the opposition and waits patiently until he regains the lead. At that point South can lead his club and ruff it on the table. In effect South makes six trump tricks and five heart tricks for a total of eleven winners and two losers.

It is important to realise that extra tricks can only be made by ruffing in the ‘short hand’ – in this case that’s the North hand. Declarer makes five spade tricks plus one extra ruff for six in all. Ruffing a diamond in the South hand doesn’t help, as declarer still only makes five spade tricks. This is a very important point, which will be explored in a later article. Players (even experienced ones) often make the fundamental mistake of trumping losers in the hand with the long trump suit. In essence they have achieved nothing by doing this.

Tony Forrester is the most capped England player. He has won most of the national trophies at least once and the Gold Cup an amazing ten times. Among his achievements are coming second in the 1987 Bermuda Bowl and winning the European Teams in 1991.

Top Table

Tony Forrester

When did you start playing bridge?
My parents taught me after a selection of unsatisfactory O-levels. Curiously, my exam results improved after that. Most odd.

How often / where do you play?
Just major events. I have not played serious local bridge since my days at Wakefield, which I still remember fondly.

Do you always play with the same partners / team-mates? What do you expect of them?
I have always sought an eclectic mix of partners, because I feel you learn more from a varied diet of styles and theories. I have at least ten favourites over the years, which shows that the approach has worked.

What do you do for a living?
I write for the Daily Telegraph and dabble in sports betting on the side.

What are your favourite bridge books?
For technique superbly explained, Terence Reese’s The Expert Game. For humour and fun, Skid Simon’s classic Rubber at the Club.

What are your hobbies?
Any sport where you can hit, kick or throw a ball. Walking in the Black Mountains. And here’s one you would not expect: shopping.

What would you change in bridge?
Improve dress code; scrap alerting procedure. Focus on 35+ age group of professionals who are looking for a hobby in later life. Streamline the EBU (sorry, it is too cumbersome).

What’s the bridge success (so far) closest to your heart?
My first Gold Cup win comes close, but it has to be the European Championships with Andrew Robson in 1991. Probably the best bridge of my life.