

One of the controversial areas in bridge teaching is the method of planning the play, particularly at suit contracts. Many teachers prescribe counting *losers* as the main approach. While this works on most hands, it has a number of traps and pitfalls, and the student is often bewildered when he hears something like “well, on this hand you should have counted your winners instead.”

The Pavlicek method is to always count winners at all contracts. It might take a little more adding on some hands, but it will always give the right answer. Further, the habit of counting winners will make the student a better all-around player! For example, on defense it will be easier to visualize declarer’s tricks and defend accordingly.

Emphasize the fact that *winners take tricks* and that’s what the game is all about.

### Trump Winners

In planning the play at a suit contract, always look at the trump suit first and estimate how many tricks you are entitled to win assuming a *normal* trump break. Do not count ruffs, and if there is a trump finesse to be taken, assume it will lose.

The reason for assuming a normal trump break is to initiate a plan that will usually work. If it turns out that trumps break badly, there is usually nothing you can do about it and the contract is destined to fail. Worry about normal situations, not about things you cannot fix.

1.           4 3 2  
          A K 7 6 5

Count 4 trump winners. These are the natural tricks you are entitled to win with a 3-2 break, just by leading trumps.

2.           5 4 3 2  
          A Q 7 6

Count 2 trump winners: the ace plus the long trump. In other words, assume the finesse will lose.

3.           4 3 2  
          A 9 8 7 6 5

Count 4 trump winners. The enemy cards will break 3-1 or 1-3 about 50% of the time, and 2-2 only 41%. Hence it would be too optimistic to assume a 2-2 break.

### Side Suit Winners

In the three suits besides trumps, or in all suits at a notrump contract, count only the tricks you can cash off the top. Do not count tricks that must be established, and assume any finesse will lose. Also, do not count ruffs.

4.           A Q J 5  
          4 3 2

Count 1 winner. Obviously, you can establish at least 1 more, and the king might be onside, but do not assume this.

5.           K  
          A 4 3 2

Count 2 winners. Even if this is a side suit at a trump contract and you can ruff in dummy, do not count those tricks yet.

6.           5 4 3 2  
          A K Q 6

Count 3 winners. Do not assume a 3-2 break in a side suit as you do in counting your trump winners.

### Top Tricks

Add your trump winners (if contract is a suit) and all your side-suit winners to find how many “top tricks” you have. Compare this with the number of tricks required for your contract to see how many additional tricks you need.

### Additional Tricks

Once declarer has a basis to work from (top tricks), he should look for additional tricks. These may come from promoting high cards, establishing long cards, or by ruffing.

7.           ♠ J 3 2  
          ♥ K 3 2  
          ♦ A Q 8  
          ♣ 9 4 3 2
- |   |   |   |   |  |   |  |   |  |   |  |  |
|---|---|---|---|--|---|--|---|--|---|--|--|
| ♠ 5<br>♥ Q 10 9 7<br>♦ J 9 7 6<br>♣ K Q J 7 | <table style="margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table> |   | N |  | W |  | E |  | S |  | ♠ 8 7 6 4<br>♥ J 8<br>♦ K 10 5<br>♣ 10 8 6 5 |
|   | N   |   |   |  |   |  |   |  |   |  |  |
| W   |   | E |   |  |   |  |   |  |   |  |  |
|   | S   |   |   |  |   |  |   |  |   |  |  |
- ♠ A K Q 10 9  
♥ A 6 5 4  
♦ 4 3 2  
♣ A

Assume the contract is 4 ♠, and West leads the ♣ K. Counting winners you have 5 spades, 2 hearts, 1 diamond and 1 club, or 9 top tricks. The best chance for a 10th trick is the long heart in your hand (establish it if hearts are 3-3 or ruff it in dummy). Another chance — the diamond finesse — can wait until later.

Draw one round of trumps (optional) but *do not lead a second trump*. Cash both top hearts, then concede a heart. Regardless of the return, if the fourth heart is not good you can ruff it in dummy with the ♠ J. The only risk in this play is the slight chance of a singleton heart; but even then you may survive if you guess to cash the right heart honor first.

It is important to understand how additional tricks are actually gained by ruffing. Otherwise, you might be counting the same tricks twice. An important rule:

- A trick is gained by ruffing only if the hand that ruffs is left with *fewer* trumps than the opposite hand.

In the typical case, ruffs are made in the shorter trump hand to gain a trick. The rule, however, works just as well for equal trump divisions or the so-called dummy reversal.