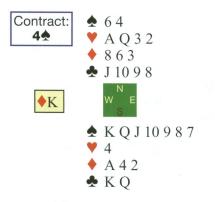# Ask Jerry

*Well-known teacher and player **Jerry Helms** answers your bridge questions.*
Send your questions to askjerry@jerryhelms.com.

Dear Jerry: Is it better to count losers or winners in a suit contract?
—T. K., New York, NY

Dear T. K.: Neither. Count both! You can have enough potential winners to make a contract and yet have too many losers to be successful.

Consider this deal:

Contract: **4♠**

♠ 6 4
♥ A Q 3 2
♦ 8 6 3
♣ J 10 9 8

♦ K

N W E S

♠ K Q J 10 9 8 7
♥ 4
♦ A 4 2
♣ K Q

You're South, the declarer in a 4♠ contract. West leads the ♦K.

Although there are only two sure tricks, the ♥A and ♦A, you can count eleven winners. There are six spades after the defenders' ♠A is played. There is a heart trick, a diamond trick, and three club tricks after the ♣A is gone.

Unfortunately, when you count the losers, there are four fast losers after you win the ♦A: the ♠A, ♣A, and two diamonds.
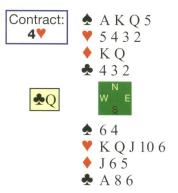
You have eleven winners but four losers. How do you balance what seems to be a contradiction?

With enough winners, the problem during the play becomes the disposal of losers. The timing—the order of cards played—depends on whether the excess losers are 'fast' or 'slow.'

Here, the losers are fast. If you let the opponents have the lead, they will be in a position to take four tricks. So you have to do something about at least one loser before giving up the lead.

The only way to dispose of a loser is to try the heart finesse. If it loses, you will have created an extra loser. Down two will be the result. But it's worth trying. It is better, in my mind, to try for a 50% finesse than to give up any hope.

So, win the ♦A. Facing four fast losers, recognize the futility of leading trump immediately. Instead, play a heart to dummy's ♥Q. If it wins, you can throw away a diamond loser on dummy's ♥A. With the loser count now under control—the only remaining losers are a spade, a diamond, and a club—start on the trump suit.
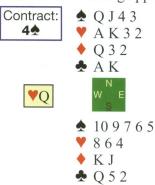
Here's another example:

Contract: **4♥**

♠ A K Q 5
♥ 5 4 3 2
♦ K Q
♣ 4 3 2

♣ Q

N W E S

♠ 6 4
♥ K Q J 10 6
♦ J 6 5
♣ A 8 6

You're in a 4♥ contract. The lead is the ♣Q. There are only four sure tricks, the ♠A–K–Q and ♣A, but I can count ten winners: three spades, four hearts after the ♥A is played, two diamonds after the ♦A is played, and a club.

Unfortunately, after the ♣Q lead, there are now four quick losers. After the ♣A is played, the defenders can immediately take the ♥A, ♦A, and two club tricks on gaining the lead.

Suit declaration requires counting and categorizing losers and counting winners. Despite holding adequate winners, too many fast losers often affect the order of play.

On this deal, instead of drawing trump right away after winning the ♣A, the best play is to take the ♠A–K–Q and discard a losing club. Then draw trump.

There are many examples of deals where counting both winners and losers is the winning approach.

Contract: **4♠**

♠ Q J 4 3
♥ A K 3 2
♦ Q 3 2
♣ A K

♥ Q

N W E S

♠ 10 9 7 6 5
♥ 8 6 4
♦ K J
♣ Q 5 2

On this deal, you're in 4♠, and the lead is the ♥Q. There are only five sure tricks—the ♥A–K and ♣A–K–Q. But there are ten winners: three spades after the ♠A and ♠K are gone, two sure hearts, two diamonds after the ♦A is gone, and three clubs.

There are only three fast losers: the ♠A, ♠K, and ♦A. However, there is a loser in hearts on the third round. That's one loser too many.

To find a place to park the extra loser you need to consider which suit to play first. If you give up a spade trick, the defenders only have three fast tricks to take. They'll lead another heart, however, and it will be too late to dispose of the loser in that suit.

Attend to the 'speeding' heart loser by attacking diamonds immediately. Win the ♥A and play a high diamond. After the ♦A is played, dummy's ♦Q will become a winner on which your heart loser can be discarded.

Do you count winners or losers? Winning bridge is to count both. ♦