END PLAYS BASED ON COUNT
by Maritha Pottenger

In addition to the usual sorts of end plays (where you get opponents to "find a queen" or break a suit for you—limiting your losers in that suit), some end plays depend primarily on counting the hand.

In those situations, you still have to do your elimination homework as usual. However, the end positions come down to distributional issues. If an opponent has preempted, for example, you may be able to strip that opponent of his/her safe exit cards in 3 suits and throw the opponent into the lead when s/he has only cards in that long suit left—so must give you a ruff-and-sluff.

It does not even have to be a really long suit. If one opponent has opened a 5-card major, you might still be able to give that opponent the lead when s/he has no cards other than those in the major and must give you that precious ruff-and-sluff.

Hands that appear to be slated for obvious defeat can be saved by these end plays based on count. Suppose that LHO (Left Hand Opponent) opens 1S and you and your partner get to 4H with:
xxx Axxxx Axx Ax opposite xx Kxxxx Kxx Kxx. You ruff the 3rd round of spades and pull two rounds of hearts, getting the bad news that LHO started with QJX of hearts and now has a trump trick. It appears that you must lose 2 spades, 1 diamond and one heart. **Do NOT give up!** Play Ace of clubs and King of clubs, and trump a club. LHO follow to three rounds. So, LHO started with 5 spades, 3 hearts, 3 clubs, and 2 diamonds. Cash Ace and King of diamonds. NOW give LHO the heart trick. S/he has nothing left to lead except spades—giving you a ruff-and-sluff and your losing diamond magically disappears.

Sometimes the distribution means that opponents' tricks are "blocked" and they may not be able to unblock them before you take advantage of the situation. Suppose you have a side suit that consists of:
A10542 opposite 963. (We'll say the suit is diamonds.) It would appear that you have two losers in that suit. However, if you do your elimination homework first, you could be surprised. Let's say that you pull trumps (retaining at least one trump in your hand and in dummy). Then you eliminate the other two side suits from your hand and dummy. NOW you play Ace of diamonds and a diamond. You can win several ways. If one opponent has Kx of diamonds, s/he will win second round of diamonds (unless s/he drops King under Ace) and must give you a ruff-and-sluff. If one opponent has QJ and the other has Kxx, if the person with QJ takes the 2nd round of diamonds, must then give you a ruff-and-sluff. If the person with the King overtakes their partner's honor on the 2nd round, they promote your 10 to winning rank. If either opponent has two honors doubleton (QJ or KJ or KQ), they cannot escape the end play.

A similar variation could occur when RHO has shown up with a long suit and you have a count on the hand so know that RHO has a singleton in a side suit (we'll say hearts). You also know that the singleton must be an honor because LHO did NOT lead hearts and you are missing KQJ. If you have A10x in hearts in dummy, you can do your elimination homework and then play a LOW heart. If RHO has a singleton King, s/he is immediately end played and must give you a ruff-and-sluff. If RHO has a singleton Queen or Jack, then LHO can overtake with the King or Queen, but then is setting him or herself up to be finessed next round by the A10x in dummy

When you are playing for optimum safety, you should consider cashing the Ace first in situations when you have AQX opposite xxx. Once in a great while, you pick off the singleton King. More importantly, if you do your elimination homework FIRST and have cashed the Ace first in this suit (we'll call it clubs), when you play

low toward the Queen, you are fine if LHO has the King (and you had one club loser anyway). When RHO has the King, you win big time if the King was doubleton, because RHO now has to grant you a ruff-and-sluff.