THE ULTIMATE COUNTING METHOD

The total efficacy of a Blackjack count depends on its correlation with (1) the true advantage or disadvantage of the remaining cards in the deck(s) for betting purposes and (2) the playing efficiency that it provides. Unfortunately, a count that does (1) well does not do (2) as well, and vice versa..

I had started out with the simple HI-LO count (23456+1, TJQKA-1) but wanted to look for something better.

Counts are described by how many "levels" they comprise. A count that gives all cards either a 0, 1, or -1 value is a "level 1" count, while one that gives 0, 1, -1, 2, or - 2 values to cards is a "level 2" count, and so on. The higher the level, the greater the betting accuracy but the more difficult the counting effort becomes.

Examining the count analyses for both betting and play efficiency in *The Theory of Blackjack* by Peter Griffin I saw that Stanford Wong's moderately difficult "Halves" count has a betting accuracy correlation of 0.99. In whole numbers Halves counts aces and ten-cards as -2; 9 as -1; 2 and 7 as +1; 3, 4, and 6 as +2, and 5 as +5. It is more convenient, however, to divide all these numbers by two when counting, hence the name "Halves." HI-LO's betting correlation is 0.89 according to Griffin, so Halves is a somewhat better system for betting.

Looking at the playing efficiency of Halves, which is 0.58 according to Wong, it isn't quite as good as the HI-LO count (0.59 according to Griffin). It's close enough, however, to think that using Halves for both betting and play would be the simplest course.

But then I looked at the playing efficiency for other counts and saw there were a number of them with efficiencies of 0.61 and higher, up to 0.67. Could I perhaps employ two counts, one for betting and one for play? No, my brain isn't up to that. But wait! I saw that HI-OPT I (3, 4, 5, 6 +1 and TJQK -1), with a 0.615 playing efficiency, is actually a subset of Halves. Suppose I were to keep the HI-OPT I count in my head and the difference between the two counts on the fingers of my right hand. Then I could use HI-OPT I for play and add the two counts (to get Halves count) when considering a bet. That shouldn't be hard, with a little practice (but it was, requiring a lot of practice).

So how do I keep the count on my right hand? Easy. Plus counts are on the nails to begin with, tween-finger is ½, and on to the first knuckle for +5. Negative counts are done the same, but on the inner side of the fingers. Incidentally, I keep negative mental counts in French because it's much easier to think, for instance, "trois" instead of "minus three."

Griffin has an equation, very approximate, for measuring the combination of betting and play efficiencies to arrive at the potential profit available when K units are bet in favorable situations and one unit is bet otherwise::

$$[8(K-1) \times BE + 5(K+1) \times PE] / 1000$$

where BE = betting efficiency and PE = playing efficiency. “The formula suggests,” he says, “that the two efficiencies are equally important for a 1 to 4 betting scale and that betting efficiency is rarely more than one-and-a-half times as important as playing efficiency.”

Assuming a 1 to 4 spread, with Halves for betting (0.99 BE) and HI-OPT I for play (0.615 PE), I get an overall number of 0.039, or 3.91% profit per hand played. Griffin says to add 20% more for standard Las Vegas strip rules and 10% less for standard Reno rules. Of course the “standards” have changed since he wrote that.

The result for HI-LO BE (0.89) and PE (0.592) is 3.85%, only 0.06% worse.

If I apply the formula for Halves alone, with a PE of 0.58, for a 1 to 4 spread I get 3.83% profit per hand.

So maybe it isn’t worth the effort. But wait! The playing efficiency of each count is much different for some situations, HI-OPT I is better than Halves for the majority of decisions but Halves is much better for some. If I were to employ both counts for playing purposes, choosing the appropriate one for each decision, PE would go up a bit (how much I don’t know).

Conclusion: Use HI-OPT I for play and Halves for betting. Maybe the gain isn’t great over a single count, but there is satisfaction in knowing that this is probably the best overall count system. When contemplating the splitting/resplitting of 10s, a lot of money may end up on the table, and it is comforting to know that Halves is pretty accurate for making that decision.

Peter Griffin’s book told me how to determine which count is superior for a playing decision. I ended up using Halves only for decisions for which it was plainly superior, which are: hitting or standing with 16 vs 10, doubling with 10 or 9, and splitting 2s, 7s, 9s, and 10s. There were other marginal cases favoring Halves, but this was enough to remember.

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