



Lesson 5: Notrump Play – Developing a plan

So far, we have covered tools you will use in playing the hand:

- Promotion of lower ranking cards to winners
- Long suit development
- Entry Management
- Finesses

In this lesson we will put it all together and develop a plan for taking the most tricks possible. We will also introduce strategies that a good declarer uses to prevent the defense from defeating the contract.

Review – NT Play

In prior lessons, we covered the basics of making a plan:

1. Count your sure Winners
2. How many tricks do I need to develop to make the contract.
3. How to create more winners
 - a. Promotion
 - b. Developing (Establishing) Long Suits
 - c. The Finesse

New: Strategies to counter the defense attack

As declarer, we not only need to establish tricks, but we also need to do it in such a way that the defense cannot defeat our contract. So, we have to add strategies to our plan aimed at countering what the defense is trying to do.

The Hold-up Play

The defense makes the opening lead of every bridge hand. They will try to lead their best suit, with the plan that they can drive out our high cards (stoppers) in the suit, thus promoting their lower cards to winners that they can cash. We are in a race with the defense to establish tricks, but they get a head start. Declarer will frequently have to lose the lead in order to drive out high cards the defense may hold and establish the winners needed for the contract. The hold-up play is a strategy to prevent the defense from being able to cash the winners that they have in a suit when they gain the lead in a suit declarer is trying to establish.

Suppose the defense leads a suit they have 8 cards in, and we only have one stopper, the Ace. We know the suit is most likely to be divided 5-3, so one defender will only have three cards in the suit. If we can hold up our stopper until the 3rd trick, that defender will have no more cards in the suit. If we then lose a trick to that defender, they have no more cards in the danger suit to lead. We have effectively prevented the defense from cashing their tricks; this is also called “cutting communications”.

By holding up our stopper, we have made one opponent the “dangerous hand” and one opponent the “safe hand”. This assumes the dangerous opponent doesn’t have an entry in another suit. So as declarer it is our job to promote tricks by losing the lead to the safe opponent.

Example: The contract is 3NT and West's opening lead is the ♥5. East plays the ♥Q.

♠ A 7 3
♥ 8 4
♦ K J T 9 8
♣ 5 4 2

♠ K 8 2
♥ A T 2
♦ Q 6 3
♣ A K T 6

Since this is a notrump contract count your winners.

♠ = 2; ♥ = 1; ♦ = 0; ♣ = 2; Total = 5.

Plan

Dummy's ♦ suit will provide 4 winners, but we must drive out the opponent's ♦A to establish 4 winners, and the opponent's opening lead has established their heart suit. Must we go down? Won't the opponents cash their heart tricks when they are in? Let's consider how the heart suit is divided. If we are lucky the suit is divided 4-4, then the defense only has 3 heart tricks to go with the ♦A. What if the heart suit is divided 5-3? If we win an early heart trick the opponents can always cash their 4 heart tricks to go along with the ♦A and will defeat our contract. However, if we win the **third** heart trick, the opponent that started with 3 hearts will be out of hearts. If they happen to have the ♦A then we can make our contract because the defense cannot cash their established heart tricks. We are hoping for a layout like this:

♠ A 7 3
♥ 8 4
♦ K J T 9 8
♣ 5 4 2

♠ T 9 6
♥ K J 7 5 3
♦ 5 4
♣ Q J 9

♠ Q J 5 4
♥ Q 9 6
♦ A 7 2
♣ 8 7 3

♠ K 8 2
♥ A T 2
♦ Q 6 3
♣ A K T 6

Danger: When you drive out the ♦A, the defense may be able to win 4 ♥ tricks.

Solution: Hold-up your ♥A until the third round and hope that East has ♦A.

Hold-up rules

- Holding 5 cards win the 3rd round. Protects against a 5-3 split
- Holding 6 cards win the 2nd round. Protect against a 5-2 split
- In general, subtract the number of cards you have from 7, and that tells you how many times to hold-up. This is the rule of 7.

Using the finesse to avoid the danger hand

The hold-up play is just one weapon in our arsenal. Sometimes we can use a finesse to our advantage to avoid losing the lead to the danger hand. This is called an avoidance play. Usually this is combined with the hold-up play. We hold up first, and then take a finesse into the safe hand. Sometimes we can intentionally lose an unnecessary trick to the safe hand to avoid the danger hand. This is called a safety play.

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♠ K 8 2
♥ A T 2
♦ A 6 3 2
♣ A K T

Plan

This hand is very similar to the last one, the defense has established their heart suit, and since West led hearts, they are expected to have the length, so West is the danger hand. So, we start by holding up in hearts twice ($7 - 5 = 2$), and we win the third trick with our ♥A. Then we play diamonds by cashing the ♦A and then finessing the ♦J into the East hand. We don't care if East wins a diamond trick because if hearts are 5-3, they will not have a heart to lead to their partner. If hearts are 4-4 then the defense only gets 3 hearts and a diamond trick. So why didn't we cash the ♦A and ♦K hoping to drop the ♦Q and win an extra trick? If West had ♦Q x x then the contract would go down. The extra trick is not worth losing the game bonus that we get for making the contract.

Suppose we knew that East had 5 hearts? Then the proper play would be to hold-up in hearts twice, and then play to the ♦K and then lead the ♦J to finesse East for the ♦Q! Now we will only lose to the West hand, which is the safe hand. This is why two-way finesses are so powerful, they allow declarer to decide which hand can win the trick to avoid the danger hand.

Analyzing the opening lead against notrump

Part of good declarer play is to consider the opening lead and decide what the defender has led from. These are general rules that you should be aware of.

- When the opening lead is an honor (Ace, King, Queen, Jack or Ten) it is typically the top card from a sequence of at least three, and typically shows length in the suit.
- When the opening lead is a spot card (9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2) it is typically the fourth best card in the suit.

With no other information to go on, you should play the opening leader to have length in the suit that was led.

As an example, if the opening lead is the $\spadesuit K$, we can expect the opponent to also have the $\spadesuit Q$ and $\spadesuit J$ and probably lower spot cards in diamonds as well.