Lesson 6 – Trump Suits, Ruffing and Discarding

In our previous lessons we have only discussed Notrump contracts, where the highest card in the suit led wins the trick. This lesson introduces a trump suit, or master suit.

The Trump Suit

The trump suit is a master suit. If you have no more cards in the suit that is led, you may play a trump. The trump beats any card in another suit, so then the highest trump played on a trick wins the trick. This is called ruffing, or ruffing the trick. However you must follow suit if you have a card in the suit led. You can only play a trump if you are completely out of the suit led.

The trump suit is selected during the bidding. Any suit can be named trump, and it is to the declaring side's advantage to name a suit where they have lots of cards. These cards can be used to ruff the opponents tricks in other suits.
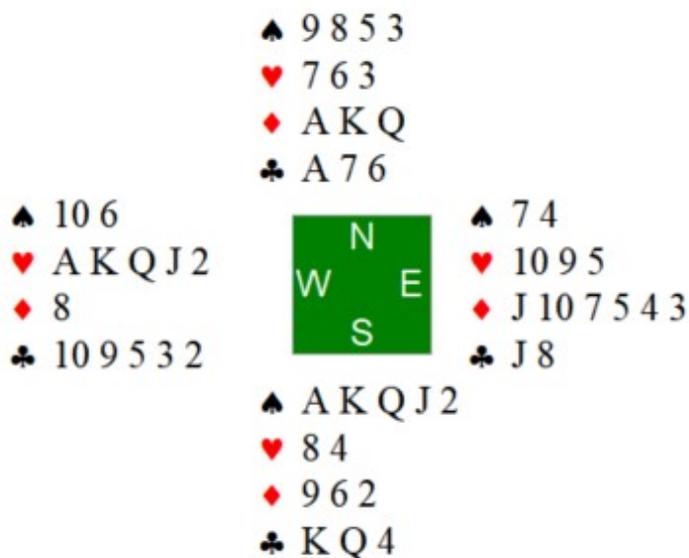
When can a trump be played

A trump may be led at anytime, including the opening lead. If a trump is led, every player must follow suit, and play a trump if they have one. If they do not have a trump, they may discard any card in their hand. If a trump is led, the highest trump played to the trick wins. A player may also play a trump anytime a suit is led that they have no more cards in. The player is not obligated to play trump, they can choose to discard another suit instead. Deciding whether to ruff a trick is a strategic decision, and will depend on the hand you are playing.

Suit Contracts vs. Notrump Contracts

In a notrump contract, we are concerned with winners, we count sure winners, and then we see where we can establish other winners to take enough tricks to make our

contract. In a suit contract, winners are still important, and we have to establish winners to make our contract, but being able to ruff changes things. So let's take a look at an example hand, and see how it would play in 3NT and then how it would play in a suit contract. It is a very instructive example. It shows how trumps can be used to neutralize the opponents long suit, and a short suit becomes an asset, not a liability.

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                    ♠ 9 8 5 3
                    ♥ 7 6 3
                    ♦ A K Q
                    ♣ A 7 6
        ♠ 10 6                          ♠ 7 4
        ♥ A K Q J 2         N           ♥ 10 9 5
        ♦ 8            W         E      ♦ J 10 7 5 4 3
        ♣ 10 9 5 3 2        S           ♣ J 8
                    ♠ A K Q J 2
                    ♥ 8 4
                    ♦ 9 6 2
                    ♣ K Q 4
```

 Case 1: 3NT NT by South. Lead: ♥A.

West leads the ♥A and can play 4 more hearts, winning the first 5 tricks, and defeating the contract by 1 trick. Even though South has 11 winners, they must discard some of those winners on the play of the heart suit.

Case 2: 4♠ declared by South. Lead: ♥A.

Here declarer should pause and make a plan at trick one. The master hand is South:

♠ - No losers; ♥ - Two losers; ♦ - no losers; ♣ - No losers;

Declarer only has two heart losers, because on the third heart trick declarer will have no more hearts, and can ruff the trick (or over-ruff if East happens to be out of hearts as well).

Plan: I will ruff the third trump trick and then I will play high trump drawing all the defenders trumps. Then I will play my sure winners in the other suits and will take 11 tricks.

So in 3NT declarer will only take 8 tricks, and in 4♠ declarer will take 11 tricks!

Strategy in Suit Contracts vs Notrump Contracts

In a notrump contract we are concerned with winners, sure winners and establishing winners. In a suit contract we count our losers, and then decide how to take care of the losers, by using a finesse, ruffing them, or discarding them on a long suit.

The hand with the longest trump is called the master hand, and we always, always, count losers with respect to the master hand. This is typically the declarer's hand. If the two hands have an equal number of trump, the master hand is the hand with the strongest trumps. The hand with fewer trump is called the short hand. The following table summarizes how declarer should plan the play of the hand.

Suit Contracts	Notrump Contracts
Count your **LOSERS**	Count your **WINNERS**
Figure out how to get rid of excess losers	Figure out how to create needed winners
Make a plan	Make a plan
Execute the plan	Execute the plan

Remember to always plan a suit contract with respect to the master hand. Losers in the short hand do not matter, only losers in the master hand. So why do we count losers? It is because the power of the trump suit negates the defenses long suits. Losers are tricks you know you must lose:

Examples:

KQJ opposite 432 = 1 loser

AK2 opposite 654 = 1 loser

We can think in terms of two types of losers, immediate losers (or "fast" losers). These are losers that your opponents can take whenever they have the lead. Eventual losers (or "slow" losers) are losers that your opponents can take only after they promote their high cards. So in the first example above you have 1 fast loser, in the second example you have 1 slow loser.

Examples: How many losers are in your hand, sitting West?

(You) ♠ A 9 2		(Dummy) ♠ 6 4 3	Two slow losers in the West hand. The ♠A prevents West from having any immediate losers.

(You) ♠ 7 5 3		(Dummy) ♠ A K 8	One eventual loser in the West hand. East's high Spades "cover" two of the small cards in the West hand.

(You) ♠ 8 2		(Dummy) ♠ 9 4 3	Two immediate losers in the West hand. By the time those two tricks are lost, West can trump any other Spade trick.

In making a plan, count losers from the perspective of the "long trump" or master hand.

As Declarer, how do I count losers?

Decide which hand – your own hand or the Dummy hand – is the "long trump" or master hand.

- When one hand has more trump cards than the other, the hand with more trump cards is the master hand.

- When both hands have the same number of trump cards, the hand with stronger trump cards is the master hand.

Then, **in the master hand only,** count suit by suit (including trump!):

- Count the number of tricks you must lose because they are not top cards

- Look to see if the losers can be covered by top cards in the Dummy hand

- It's okay to account for promotion in a long suit

- Add the number of losers across all suits

Other than Promotion, don't think about how to eliminate losers YET! (We'll do that soon.)

Practice counting losers

In the following examples the contract is always 4♥ by West:

Your Hand	Dummy Hand	
♠ 943 ♥ AQJT6 ♦ K4 ♣ AQ7	♠ AK62 ♥ 854 ♦ AQ5 ♣ 863	Your hand is the master hand Count 4 losers total: 1♠ (slow), 1 ♥(slow), 2 ♣(slow)
♠ AK62 ♥ 654 ♦ A5432 ♣ 8	♠ 943 ♥ AQJT6 ♦ K6 ♣ AQ7	Dummy hand is the master hand Count 4 losers total: 1 ♠ (slow), 1 ♥(slow), 2 ♣(slow)
♠ 943 ♥ AQJT6 ♦ K6 ♣ AQ7	♠ AK6 ♥ 654 ♦ A543 ♣ 863	Your hand is the master hand Count 4 losers total: 1 ♠ (slow), 1 ♥(slow), 2 ♣(slow)
♠ AK6 ♥ 875 ♦ QJT9 ♣ K53	♠ 943 ♥ AQJT6 ♦ 84 ♣ A97	Dummy hand is the master hand Count 5 losers total: 1 ♠ (slow), 1 ♥(slow), 2 ♦(fast), 1 ♣(slow)
♠ QT4 ♥ AQT42 ♦ 863 ♣ AT	♠ AK7 ♥ K9763 ♦ T742 ♣ 6	Your hand is the master hand Count 4 losers total: 3 ♦(fast), 1 ♣(slow)

Do I have too many losers?

For any contract, we know how many tricks you need to win… just add 6 to the number in the contract. To know how many losers you can afford, subtract the number of tricks from 13.

Contract Level	Tricks Needed	Maximum losers
1	7	6
2	8	5
3	9	4
4	10	3
5	11	2
6	12	1
7	13	0

Or if you want a "magic" formula:

- Take 7 and subtract the number in the contract…
- that's the number of tricks you can afford to lose

What if I have too many losers?

If you have counted more losers than you can afford, you need to work to eliminate some of the losers from the long-trump hand.   We can use the same tools as in a notrump contract to eliminate losers, promotion, developing long suits and finessing. However in a trump contract we have three new tools:

- Ruffing losers in the short hand

- Discarding losers on extra winners

- Taking a ruffing finesse

We will take a look at each of these three new techniques.

Ruffing losers in the short hand

Ruffing in the master hand does not help eliminate losers. You may need to do this to control a suit that the defenders have lots of high cards in, but to eliminate losers you must ruff one of the master hands losers, as in the example hand below.

Your Hand	Dummy Hand	
♠ QT4	♠ AK7	Your hand is the master hand
♥ AQT42	♥ K9763	Count 4 losers total: 3 ♦ (fast), 1 ♣(slow)
♦ 863	♦ T742	
♣ AT	♣ 6	

In a contract of 4♥, you have one loser too many. What's your plan?

There is not much you can do about the diamonds, in fact the defense is likely to lead a diamond and cash the first three diamond tricks. The ♣A will cover the singleton club in the dummy hand (short hand). After that, you can ruff your losing ♣T in dummy.

Plan: I will lose the first 3 diamonds. If diamonds are continued I will ruff the fourth diamond in the master hand. I will draw trump, and then I will play the ♣A and ruff a club in the short hand. I will end up taking 5 trump in the master hand, 3 spades, the ♣A and a club ruff in dummy for 10 total tricks.

To ruff losers in the short-trump hand, look for these conditions:

- You have some losers in a particular suit
- You have more cards of that suit in the master hand than in the short hand
- You have enough trumps in the short hand to be able to ruff the losers from the master hand
- You have some way to get the lead into the master hand after you have created a void in the short hand

You gain an extra trick when you ruff a loser in the short hand. **In general, you do not gain a trick when you ruff a loser in the master hand.**

Discard losers on extra winners

When you have extra winners in the short hand, you can discard losers from the master hand using these extra winners. An example shows this technique:

Your Hand	Dummy Hand	
♠ AKJ	♠ Q43	Your hand is the long-trump hand
♥ QJT963	♥ 8752	Count 4 losers total: 2 ♥(fast), 2 ♦(slow)
♦ 953	♦ A64	
♣ 3	♣ AK7	

In a contract of 4♥, you have one loser too many. What's your plan?

The opponents lead the ♦K. Your 2 slow losers have now become fast losers, the opponents can cash them as soon as the gain the lead. *If you play trumps first,* the opponents will gain the lead and take two more diamond tricks.

Instead, *before drawing trumps,* play the ♣A and put the ♣3 on the trick. Then play the ♣K and discard a small diamond. Now you have only one diamond loser along with the two heart losers. It is now safe to draw trump.

Plan: I will win the ♦K. I will delay drawing trump, and instead will play dummy's two top clubs discarding a diamond loser from my hand. Only then is it safe to draw trump. I will lose 2 trump tricks and 1 diamond trick taking 10 tricks in all.

To discard losers on extra winners, look for these conditions:

- You have a suit with multiple winners, and more cards of that suit in the short hand than in the master hand
- You have a different suit with a loser that needs to be eliminated

Some examples (Declarer is the master hand in all of these):

Dummy	AKQ	Declarer's loser is covered by the Ace; then there are two more winners in
Declarer	3	the dummy hand that can cover losers in other suits in declarer's hand
Dummy	AQ3	The dummy hand has an extra winner here. Win the first trick with the K
Declarer	K4	(high card on the short side), then cross to the Ace. Now the Queen can
		allow you to discard a loser in some other suit from declarer's hand
Dummy	AQ3	The dummy hand has no extra winners in this suit. You'll have to find
Declarer	K42	other ways to cover losers in other suits in declarer's hand.

As with ruffing, you gain an extra trick when the discarded loser comes from the long-trump hand.

The Ruffing Finesse

In a suit contract we can use trump to provide a way to neutralize high cards that are favorably located by taking a ruffing finesse. This example shows how it works.

<pre>
                    ♠ A Q J T
                    ♥ A 8 6 2
    ♠ ??   ♠ ??
    ♥ ??   ♥ ??
                    ♠ 2
                    ♥ K Q J 3
</pre>

You could take the simple finesse against the ♠K in the West hand. This gains 1 extra trick if the ♠K is favorably placed. However, if declarer leads the ♠2 and takes the ♠A in dummy, the ♠Q can now be led. If the ♠K is favorably placed in the East hand, declarer can develop two extra tricks!   If East plays the ♠K, declarer can ruff in his hand, and the ♠J and ♠T have been promoted to winners without losing a trick. If East plays low, then declarer can discard a loser from another suit, and then can return to dummy with the ♥A to repeat the ruffing finesse with the ♠J.