



Lesson 8: The Right Tool at the Right Time

Declarer's Goals

For every contract you play as declarer your primary goal is to make the contract. If you have the tricks to make your contract, you should not risk taking a chance for an extra trick, if that could result in the contract going down. Your secondary goal is to take as many tricks as possible, once your contract is secure.

Strategies for Declarer Play

There are several strategies that you can use in declarer play. There are general strategies that apply to both suit and notrump contracts, and there are strategies that are specific to only suit contracts, and some strategies that are specific to only notrump contracts.

General Strategies

Think before you play to trick one. Hands Off!!

Never, and I mean never, play a card to trick one until you have planned out the hand! Even if there is a singleton in dummy, pause and plan the hand. The time you take to plan the hand, will pay off in faster play during the hand, and a better overall result.

- Study the cards of the dummy hand. What are the assets in dummy that you can use to develop more tricks?
- Study the opening lead. Why did the opponent lead that card? Why did the opponent not lead another suit?
- **Always** make a plan **before** you play the first card from the dummy hand.

Order matters

Some suits will be “project suits” and need more work than others – work on your project suits first. Frequently if you have one suit where you need to lose the lead in order to promote tricks, you will want to develop tricks in this suit first, and then develop tricks in a suit where you have a finesse. You need to think about where the defense is trying to develop tricks, and how well you have that suit stopped.

In a suit contract, you must decide if you should draw trumps first, or if you have a good reason to delay drawing trump.

Direction matters

In general, you want to lead toward your honor cards. When you have an unbalanced suit, you want to win (or play) a high card from the short side first. This prevents you from having to use an entry to cash the suit, the entries will come from the suit itself.

Entries matter

When planning you have to consider if you have the entries to carry out your plan. If dummy has a long suit, it does no good to promote tricks in that suit if dummy has no entries to cash the suit. You need to make a different plan. Sometimes, you will have to lead high cards in a suit (rather than leading toward your high cards) because the entries are not there to lead toward the high cards. Every time you plan, you should think about where your entries to carry out your plan will come from.

Strategy for Notrump Contracts

Count your sure winners

In a notrump contract you are in a race with the defense. Which side can develop their tricks first? So when planning, you first count your sure winners and that then tells you how many tricks you must develop to make your contract.

Plan to develop potential winners

When you don't have enough winners, think about each of the tools that can create additional winners:

- **Promotion.** Playing high cards to force out the defense's stoppers in a suit. Since promotion requires you to give up the lead, think about the defense's suit, and whether you still have a stopper to prevent them from running their suit.
- **Developing long suits.** Sometimes your long suit will cash with a normal break in the suit. Sometimes you will have to give up the lead in order to establish your long suit. Take this into account in your plan. If you have to give up the lead, do you still have a stopper in the defense's suit?
- **Finessing.** Finessing will work sometimes, but other times will not work. If you cannot give up the lead, because the defense's suit is ready to run, a finesse (or multiple finesses) are your only option, unless you have a long suit of your own that is ready to cash.

If you already have enough winners, think about whether it is safe to try and create additional winners.

Once you have developed your plan, execute your plan.

Strategy for Suit Contracts

Count your losers

In a suit contract, first count your losers in the long-trump hand (or master hand). Compare your losers to the number of tricks you can afford to lose and still make your contract.

Plan to eliminate losers

When you have too many losers, you must figure out a way to eliminate them. The common techniques to eliminate losers:

- **Ruffing in the short hand.** If you can ruff losers in the short hand, your losers are eliminated. Ruffing in the master hand does not eliminate losers.
- **Discarding losers on winners in the short hand.** If you have an extra winner in the short hand, you can discard a master hand loser on it.
- **Promotion.** You can promote winners in the short hand, and then use these winners to discard master hand losers.
- **Developing Long Suits.** You can develop a long suit in the short hand, and then pitch losers on it. Frequently this will involve ruffing in the master hand, and then using entries to get back to the short hand.

If you don't have more losers than you can afford, think about whether it is safe to try and get rid of even more losers.

Once you have developed your plan, execute your plan.

Remember

- The "master" hand has more trumps than the short hand
- If both hands have the same number of trumps, the "master" hand has the higher-ranking trumps
- Count losers in the master hand – these are the ones that will prevent you from making the contract

Tools for Creating Winners or Getting Rid of Losers

As declarer you have many tools that you can use to create winners, which in a suit contract, can be used to get rid of losers.

Promotion

Use this tool in Notrump contracts or in suit contracts.

Use this tool when:

- You're missing the highest card(s) in a suit
- You hold a sequence of the next-highest cards in that suit
- You hold enough cards in the suit to be able to cash winners after the opponents' top cards have been played

When using Promotion:

- You **will** lose one or more tricks
- It is usually best to "take your losers early" while you have control in other suits
- Play the "high card from the short side first" to avoid blocking the suit

Developing or Establishing Long Suits

Use this tool in Notrump contracts or in suit contracts

Use this tool when:

- You need to create winners in a suit
- You have some non-top cards in that suit
- The split is likely to be in your favor
- Your suit is long enough that you will still have some even after the opponents have played all their cards in the suit

What is the split of the opponents' cards? If one opponent has too many cards in your suit, this tool might not produce results. Remember the odd-even rule:

- An even number of outstanding cards is most likely to divide unevenly
 - Most common: 4 outstanding cards most often split 3-1
- An odd number of outstanding cards is most likely to divide as evenly as possible
 - Most common: 5 outstanding cards most often split 3-2

When is a suit worth developing? It depends on the length of your combined holding in the suit:

- Your 10-card suit or 9-card suit is always worth developing
- Your 8-card suit is almost always worth developing
- Your 7-card suit is sometimes worth developing

You can develop a long suit by:

- **Cashing winners** – play out your top cards; if the split is favorable, all the opponent's cards are gone and your remaining cards are high
- **Losing tricks** – play out your low cards until all the opponents' high cards are gone and your remaining cards are high (similar to Promotion)
- **Ducking tricks** – let the opponents win a trick you could have won, so you can win tricks in that suit later

The Finesse

Use this tool in Notrump contracts or in suit contracts.

Use this tool when:

- The opponents hold a high card in a suit – the “danger” card
- You hold the card ranked immediately below the danger card
- Often, you also hold the card ranked immediately above the danger card

How to finesse:

- Choose a card they hold to finesse against
- Choose a card you hold to finesse with
- Choose a defender to finesse through
- Think about:
 - Is one defender more dangerous than the other?
 - Which hand must you lead from?
 - How will you get the lead into that hand?

Which card to lead?

- Usually, lead a small card toward the card you are finessing with
- Lead the card you are finessing with (toward your card that can overtake the danger card) if a lower card is promoted even if the finesse fails

Discarding Losers on Extra Winners

Use this tool primarily in suit contracts

Use this tool when:

- You have a small number of cards in a side suit in the long-trump hand
- Your short-trump hand has more winners in the side suit than cards that are held in the long-trump hand in that side suit
- You have another side suit in the long-trump hand with a loser that you need to get rid of

Examples:

Declarer is the long-trump hand. You’re looking at the cards held in a single side suit.

Dummy Declarer	AKQ 3	Declarer’s loser (the 3) is covered by the Ace; then there are two more winners in the dummy hand that can cover losers in other suits in declarer’s hand.
Dummy Declarer	AQ3 K4	The dummy hand has an extra winner here. Win the first trick with the K (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 Declarer	AQ3 K42	The dummy hand has no extra winners in this suit. You’ll have to find other ways to cover losers in other suits in declarer’s hand.

Ruffing Losers

Use this tool in suit contracts; it is not available in Notrump contracts.

Use this tool when:

- Your long-trump (master) hand has some losers in a side (non-trump) suit
- You have more cards of that side suit in the long-trump hand than in the short-trump hand
- You have enough trumps in the short-trump hand to be able to ruff the losers from the long-trump hand
- You have a way to win a trick in the long-trump hand after you have created a void in the short-trump hand

Example:

Your Hand	Dummy Hand	
♠ QT4	♠ AK7	Contract: 4♥ Your hand is the long-trump hand Count 4 losers total: 3 Diamonds, 1 Club
♥ AQT42	♥ K9763	
♦ 863	♦ T742	
♣ AT	♣ 6	

- You can afford 3 losers, so you have one loser too many. What's your plan?
- Your ♣A will cover the singleton club in the dummy hand. After that, the dummy hand can ruff your losing ♣T.
- The opponents have only 3 trumps, so you can afford to draw trumps first.
- Now that you've made the plan, you are ready to play.
- The opponents win the first three tricks with top diamonds. Win the fourth trick, and draw trumps. Win a trick with the ♣A, then play the ♣T, ruffing it with a heart from dummy.
- You lose only the three Diamond tricks, winning 10 tricks and making your contract.

Techniques for Success

Hold-Up Play

The holdup play is delaying playing your stopper in the opponent's suit until one opponent has no more cards in the suit.

Purpose: Prevent one opponent from being able to lead their partner's suit back to them.

When to Hold Up:

- You have only 1 stopper in an opponent's suit
- You need to lose a trick to make the contract – for instance, by Promotion

How to Hold Up:

- In general use the rule of 7, subtract the cards you hold from 7, this gives you the number of times to duck.
- Holding 5 cards in the suit, duck twice to protect against a 5-3 split
- Holding 6 cards in the suit, duck once to protect against a 5-2 split

Why to Hold Up:

- Cut communications between the defenders
- Make one defender the "safe" hand and the other the "danger" hand
- Arrange to lose tricks to the "safe" hand

Avoidance Play

The Avoidance play is used, often in combination with the Hold-Up play, to keep a dangerous opponent from gaining the lead.

Example:

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

♠ A 7 3

♥ 8 4

♦ K J 10 9 8

♣ 5 4 2



♠ K 8 2

♥ A 10 2

♦ A 6 3 2

♣ A K 10

How many sure winners? - 7 (2 ♠, 1 ♥, 2 ♦, 2 ♣).. need 2 more.

What suit gives them? - Diamonds

Which hand is dangerous? West, they have the long heart suit.

Hold up in hearts first – duck two rounds, then win 3rd with the ♥A

What tool? Finesse against the ♦Q

Which opponent do you finesse? West, the danger hand

How to finesse? Cash the ♦A and then lead toward the ♦J

Which opponent can win the ♦Q? East, the safe hand

What is the likely diamond split? 3-1, protect against West holding ♦Qxx

Plan:

Duck two rounds of hearts, and then win the ♥A. Play the ♦A to and if no ♦Q shows up, then finesse **through** West, by leading toward the ♦KJ, finesse **with** the ♦J, **against** the ♦Q, into East's safe hand.

You don't mind losing a trick to the safe hand because, after your hold-up play, the safe hand no longer holds cards that can hurt you.

Would you rather (a) definitely lose a small number of tricks or (b) possibly lose a large number of tricks? When you choose (a), this is an example of a "Safety Play".

Sometimes the danger suit is not the suit of the opening lead.