

PLANNING THE PLAY OF A BRIDGE HAND

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POINTS TO REMEMBER – HOW TO PLAN A SUIT CONTRACT

- When you are planning a suit contract, you begin by counting the potential losers in your hand, looking at each suit in turn to see whether dummy can help you. If the total number of losers is more than you can afford, then in order to make the contract you must look for the safest plan to reduce that number.
- There are three main ways to avoid a loser: ruffing, finessing and discarding. When you need to avoid two or more losers, you may have to use two different techniques on one deal.
- Before you embark on the play, try to fix a brief plan in your mind.

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POINTS TO REMEMBER – MAKING A PLAN TO FINESSE

- In most finesse positions, you lead toward the high card that you are hoping will give you a trick. For example, you lead toward a king in the hope that the ace lies with the defender playing second to the trick.
- When you hold several cards of equal rank, you may be able to lead a high card on the trick where you perform a finesse. For example, with ♥QJ10 in your hand and ♥A63 in the dummy you would lead the ♥Q. Your aim then is to ‘trap the ♥K’, rather than to ‘score a trick with the ♥Q’.
- If you are unsure whether you should lead a high card, when taking a finesse, do so only when you will be happy to see the high card covered.
- When you hold three honors of equal rank between the hands (such as ♦A10xx opposite ♦KQ9xx), you should normally begin with a top card from the hand containing the two honors.
- Plan carefully the entries that you may need to take finesses. When you hold AQJ10 in your hand, for example, you may need to finesse several times, perhaps using entries in the trump suit to reach the dummy.

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POINTS TO REMEMBER – MAKING A PLAN TO DISCARD LOSERS

- Whenever possible, you should draw trumps before taking any discards. Otherwise a defender may ruff one of your winners.
- Sometimes you must ‘set up a discard’. In other words, you must establish a surplus winner in a suit, on which you will take the discard. For example, suppose you hold $\spadesuit QJ7$ in dummy opposite $\spadesuit K3$ in your hand. By knocking out the $\spadesuit A$, you will establish a discard on the diamond suit,
- You can also set up a discard by taking a finesse. With $\heartsuit K962$ in dummy opposite a singleton $\heartsuit 7$ in your hand, you would lead toward dummy’s $\heartsuit K$. When the ace lies in front of the king, the defender must either rise with the ace, setting up a discard, or surrender his trick in the suit by allowing the king to win.
- When dummy has a long side suit, you may be able to ‘establish the suit’. You ruff a round or two in your hand until the defenders have no more cards in the suit. You can then take a discard on a winner in the established suit.

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POINTS TO REMEMBER – MAKING A PLAN TO RUFF LOSERS

- When you are planning to take a ruff or two in dummy, it may not be possible to draw trumps immediately.
- When you can afford to, without risking the subsequent loss of a trump trick, ruff with a high trump to prevent the risk of an overruff.
- Ruffing in the short-trump hand gives you an extra trick; ruffing in the long-trump hand does not.

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POINTS TO REMEMBER – HOW TO ESTABLISH A SUIT

- In a suit contract, you can sometimes establish a suit by taking one or more ruffs. For example, with Axxxx in dummy opposite a singleton, you can take three ruffs in your hand and establish the thirteenth card (provided the suit breaks 4-3.)
- With a suit such as Axxxx in dummy opposite xx, you will have to lose a round at some stage. It is normally right to duck the first round so that you can use the ace as an entry on the second round.
- Even with AKxxx opposite xx, it may be beneficial to duck the first round. You can then cross to the ace and establish the suit with a single ruff when it breaks 4-2.
- Since you may need to use the trump suit for entries when establishing a suit, consider carefully whether you can afford to draw trumps first.

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POINTS TO REMEMBER – PLANNING WHEN TO DRAW TRUMPS

- The general rule is: Draw trumps immediately unless there is a good reason not to.
- When you are planning to ruff a loser or two in the dummy, you may have to delay drawing trumps until after taking the ruffs.
- Sometimes the need to take a discard, or to establish a suit that will provide a discard, is more pressing than the need to draw trumps.

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POINTS TO REMEMBER – HOW TO PLAN A NOTRUMP CONTRACT

- When planning a notrump contract, you count your ‘top tricks’ (immediate winners) rather than your losers.
- You count the available top tricks in each suit, arriving at a total that will often be less than that required to make the contract.
- You must then seek a safe (or the safest available) plan to set up the extra tricks that you need.
- Your plan must give you a chance of making the contract before the defenders can score enough tricks to defeat you.

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POINTS TO REMEMBER – PLANNING A HOLD-UP PLAY IN NOTRUMP

- When you hold the ace of the suit that has been led, it is normally right to hold up the ace for two rounds. The intention is to leave the other defender with no cards in the suit.
- Think carefully about holding up an ace when this will give the defenders a chance to put the contract in danger with a switch to a different suit.
- When you need to knock out two of the opponents' winners to achieve the tricks you need, it may be right to hold up in a suit even if you have two stoppers.

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POINTS TO REMEMBER – ESTABLISHING A SUIT IN NOTRUMP

- When dummy's long suit is headed by the ace, it is often right to delay playing the ace until you lead the last card in the suit from your hand. With $\spadesuit A9732$ in dummy opposite $\spadesuit 854$ in your hand, duck two rounds and then cross to the $\spadesuit A$.
- By ducking a round of a suit such as $\clubsuit AKQ73$ (in a dummy with no side entry) opposite $\clubsuit 82$, you will be able to score four tricks when the defenders' cards break 4-2.
- You can gain an entry to dummy by overtaking an honor in your hand. For example, with $\clubsuit A10986$ in dummy opposite $\clubsuit KQ$ you can overtake the $\clubsuit Q$ on the second round and lead the $\clubsuit 10$ to clear the suit.

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POINTS TO REMEMBER – PLANNING TO WIN THE NOTRUMP RACE

- When planning a notrump contract, ensure that your plan will allow you to ‘win the race’. In other words, make sure it will give you the tricks that you need before the defenders can score enough tricks to beat you.
- The correct line of play will often depend on whether the opening lead is from a five-card suit or a four-card suit. By observing the opening lead, and sometimes the play to the second trick, you may be able to tell how the defenders’ main suit is breaking.
- When the opening lead is a two, or the lowest spot card that is not visible in your hand and the dummy, you can assume that the leader holds only four cards in the suit.
- Be wary of allowing your right-hand opponent to win the opening lead when he may then have the chance to make a damaging switch.
- When you may have to knock out two stoppers, to set up the tricks you need, it is normally right to ‘attack first the entry to the danger hand’. When you then drive out the stopper held by the other defender, he will have no cards left in the suit that was led.

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POINTS TO REMEMBER – OTHER TYPES OF FINESSE

- When you plan to finesse twice against two missing cards, this is called a ‘double finesse’. For example, with ♠AQ10 in dummy opposite ♠763 in your hand, you would finesse the ♠10 first. Whether or not this lost to the ♠J, you would finesse the ♠Q next.
- When taking a double finesse, it is normally right to finesse the lower card first.
- With ♣AJ9 opposite ♣652, you would finesse the ♣9 on the first round, hoping that West held the K10 or Q10 and that the ♣9 would force the queen or king from East. You would subsequently finesse the ♣J, to score two tricks from the suit. Because you are missing three high cards, this is known as a ‘deep finesse’.
- When you have no cards left in one hand, you can lead one of touching honors from the opposite hand for a ‘ruffing finesse’. For example, you might lead the ♥K from ♥KQ82. If the next player covers with the ♥A, you will ruff. The ♥Q will then be established. If the next player does not cover, you will discard a loser instead of ruffing. Even if the king loses to the ace, at least the queen is now high.

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POINTS TO REMEMBER – PLANNING YOUR ENTRIES

- By winning the first trick with an unnecessarily high card in your hand, you may ensure a later entry to dummy in that suit. For example with ♣Q73 in the dummy opposite ♣AJ5 in your hand, you win with the ♣A, rather than the ♣J, to preserve the ♣Q as an entry.
- By overtaking one honor with another, you may be able to set up an extra entry to dummy. For example, with ♦A764 in dummy opposite ♦KQJ2 in your hand, you cash the king and queen (both defenders following) and then overtake the jack with the ace. You can then overtake the ♦2 with the ♦7 on the fourth round.
- Beware of spot cards that can block a suit, causing you to end up in the wrong hand. Sometimes you can unblock these on the early rounds.
- By testing a suit before you use up dummy's last entry, you can discover in time whether a finesse will be necessary.

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POINTS TO REMEMBER – PLANNING TO DRAW SOME TRUMPS BUT NOT ALL

- When there is only one trump out and it is a master, there is usually no point in drawing it. The defender's trump is going to make a trick anyway and you will waste two of your lower trumps drawing it. The exception is when you are planning to run a long suit in dummy and do not want the defender to ruff in.
- When you need to ruff a loser in a dummy containing three low trumps, you can reduce the risk of an overruff by drawing two rounds of trumps before taking the ruff.
- When your only high trump is the ace, it may work well to duck the first round of trumps. When you regain the lead, you will draw one more round with the ace, remaining in control of the hand.

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POINTS TO REMEMBER – PLANNING TO KEEP THE DANGER HAND OFF LEAD

- During the play of a hand, it often happens that one of the defenders becomes 'dangerous'. He may have some winners to cash; he may be able to lead through an honor in your hand or the dummy.
- Whenever possible, you should aim to keep the danger hand off lead as you develop your extra tricks.
- When you have a choice of finesses to take, it is usually a good idea to take a finesse that is 'into the safe hand'. Even if it loses, the defender will not then be able to damage you.
- When establishing a suit, it may work well to duck a trick 'into the safe hand'.

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POINTS TO REMEMBER – PLANNING TO COMBINE TWO CHANCES

- It is nearly always better to combine two different chances of making the contract, rather than relying on just one.
- For example, suppose dummy has $\spadesuit AKQ4$ opposite $\heartsuit 873$ in your hand. A 3-3 diamond break would allow you to discard a loser from your hand. If diamonds did not break 3-3, you might be able to take a finesse in a different suit as your second chance.
- When you can see two chances to make the contract, think carefully which chance to try first. Ask yourself: if the first chance fails, will I still be able to take the second chance?
- It frequently happens that you can ‘play for the drop’ in one suit (your first chance) before taking a finesse in another suit (your second chance).

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POINTS TO REMEMBER — PLANNING FURTHER HOLD-UP PLAYS

- When you have a stopper of AJx and a low card is led to the king or queen on your right, you must consider carefully whether to hold up. When you expect the defender on your right to gain the lead, it is generally right to hold up. When instead you expect your left-hand opponent to gain the lead, you should win with the ace and retain the Jx as a second stopper.
- When dummy holds Kxx in the suit that has been led, and you have only low cards, it is rarely right to play the king on the first round.
- A hold-up can prove useful in a suit contract, as well as in notrump. The objective is the same — to break the communication between the two defenders.

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PLANS THAT INVOLVE COUNTING

- To play most contracts to best advantage, you should keep track of the distribution of the defenders' hands.
- A defender who is long in one suit is likely to be shorter than his partner in the other suits.
- When you have a two-way finesse for a queen, try to discover which defender holds more cards in that suit. Unless the bidding gives evidence to the contrary, that defender is the favorite to hold the queen.
- Counting the high-card points for each defender can also provide important information.
- When a defender declines to open the bidding, he is unlikely to hold 12 points. When a defender does not respond to his partner's one-bid, he is unlikely to hold 6 points. Such inferences may allow you to calculate where a particular honor card lies.

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