

Lesson 6

Declarer Play

In this lesson we will take a break from bidding and discuss some of the principles of card play. As declarer your object is to make your contract, and this requires a plan. You will be a steady loser if you just win and lose tricks at random.

Count Your Top Tricks

The first step in planning the play is see where you stand; that is, how close you are to fulfilling your contract. This is done by counting the number of tricks you could win by cashing your top cards in each suit. Remember, we are *counting* them only; do not play them yet. I call these your “top tricks” because they can be cashed off the top.

Subtract the number of top tricks from the tricks required to make your contract. The difference is the number of tricks you must develop in order to succeed.

Additional tricks can be developed in three ways: Promoting high cards, establishing long cards, and ruffing.

Promoting High Cards

The simplest way to develop tricks is to promote the king, queen, jack or 10 (sometimes even the nine or eight) in a suit. This is done by leading that suit to let an opponent win the ace or other card that is higher than yours. This is easiest to do when your high cards are in sequence, such as the K-Q-J between your own hand and dummy.

When convenient try to lead a *low card* from one hand toward a *high card* in the opposite hand. This is called a “finesse” and it increases your chances of success.

Establishing Long Cards

If your hand or dummy’s hand contains a *five-card* or longer suit, or a four-card suit facing three cards in the opposite hand, it may be possible to establish the long card or cards. This is done by leading the suit as many times as necessary to remove the enemy cards, after which any remaining card will be able to win a trick regardless of its rank. The longer your suit is, the more you will benefit from this.

As an example, assume you hold A-K-7-6-5 and dummy holds 4-3-2. After winning the A-K and losing a trick to the opponents (not necessarily in that order), your remaining two cards will be winners if the suit divides in normal fashion — that is, if one opponent has two cards and the other has three.

Establishing long cards often requires a lot of work and must be done early.

Ruffing

Ruffing is possible only at trump contracts. A plain suit (not trumps) is led from one hand and a trump is played from the opposite hand. Of course, the opposite hand must not have any cards in the suit led, else it would be mandatory to follow to the suit led.

The ability to ruff is the backbone of a trump contract. Besides developing tricks outright, the ruffing process may assist you in promoting high cards or establishing long cards.

In general, ruffing in the hand with shorter trumps (or either hand if equal) will gain a trick. Ruffing in the hand with longer trumps usually will not gain a trick.



I always ruff
in the dummy.



That's right! You always ruff
and you sure are a dummy!



Notrump Example



3 NT by South

♠4 3
♥8 7 4
♦A 8 4 3
♣K Q J 2

Lead: ♠K



♠A 8 5 2
♥K Q 2
♦K 6 2
♣A 9 3

Assume you are declarer in three notrump and the opening lead is the king of spades. First count your top tricks. You can win one spade trick (the ace), two diamonds (the ace and king) and four clubs (the ace, king, queen and jack). This adds to seven, so you will need two additional tricks to make your contract. Where will they come from? Your best chance is to promote the king and queen of hearts. You must lead hearts twice from the dummy toward your honors and hope that your right-hand opponent has the ace — when he plays low, you will win an honor; if he wins the ace, you will play low.

Let's play it. You should hold up your ace of spades until the third round is led — the purpose is to break up the opponents' communication so it will be difficult for them to run the spade suit. Next lead a club to dummy's jack, then a heart toward your queen. If this wins, cross to dummy again and lead a heart toward your king.

Suit Example



4 ♠ by South

♠ 10 3 2

♥ Q 9 6 3

♦ A 7 5 4

♣ Q 3

Lead: ♦ 3



♠ A K Q J 9

♥ 7 4

♦ 2

♣ K J 7 4 2

Now assume you are declarer in four spades and the opening lead is the diamond three. You can count five solid trump tricks and the ace of diamonds — six top tricks. You need four more tricks to make your contract. Which suit might give you that? The club suit! Your plan should be to use one of the club honors to force out the enemy ace; this will develop two tricks with your high cards. Next you plan to ruff a club in the dummy to gain a third trick. Finally, barring a fluke distribution your long club will be a winner. Observe that the club suit will provide tricks in each of the three possible ways.

Let's play it. Win the ace of diamonds and lead a low spade to your ace. Do not lead any more trumps. Lead the club two toward dummy's queen. Assume it loses to the ace and a diamond is returned which you ruff in your hand. Win the club king (save the jack for later) and ruff a low club with dummy's *spade ten* (else you may be overruffed). Lead a trump to your hand, draw trumps, and the J-7 of clubs are good.

Quiz 6

1.  3 NT by South

♠K 4 2
♥A 7 2
♦6 5 4 2
♣K 5 4

Lead: ♠J



♠A Q 7
♥Q 6 3
♦Q J 10
♣A Q 7 2

You are in three notrump with the spade jack lead.

How many top tricks do you have? _____

How many more tricks do you need? _____

Which suits have promotable high cards? _____

Which suits have potential length tricks? _____

Will you win the opening lead? _____

Which suit will you lead first? _____

2.  4 ♥ by South

♠9 2
♥K J 2
♦A K 6 5
♣Q 7 5 2

Lead: ♦10



♠Q J 4 3
♥A Q 10 9 3
♦7 2
♣A 3

You are in four hearts with the diamond 10 lead.

How many top tricks do you have? _____

How many more tricks do you need? _____

Which suits have promotable high cards? _____

Which suit may provide a ruffing trick? _____

Will you draw trumps immediately? _____

Which card will you lead at trick two? _____

3.  4 ♠ by South

♠ A 10
♥ A 5 4
♦ A Q 2
♣ K 7 6 5 3

Lead: ♥ 6



♠ K Q J 9 8 7
♥ K 3 2
♦ 10 7 3
♣ 8

You are in four spades with the heart six lead.

How many top tricks do you have? _____

How many more tricks do you need? _____

Which suits have promotable high cards? _____

Which suit has a potential length trick? _____

Will one ruff in your hand gain a trick? _____

Which card will you lead at trick two? _____

Answers

1. 7
2
♥ ♦
♦ ♣
Yes
2. 8
2
♣ ♣
♣
No
♣2
3. 9
1
♦ ♣
♣
No
♣8