

Play of the Hand – Part 3

The Finesse – Finding another Trick

As important as POTH is to success at the Bridge table beginners tend to focus on the complexities of bidding. There are some complex playing maneuvers such as End Plays and Squeezes that require experience and forward planning but the basic techniques, and there are only 6, are rather easily mastered. The 6 are (1) Suit development, (2) Finesse, (3) Hold-up plays, (4) Ducking, (5) Unblocking and (6) Dummy Reversal. Some techniques (3 and 4) are primarily used to protect the declarer from defensive assaults. Unblocking is used to make sure Declarer is able to get “all her tricks”. The three primary methods to “gain a trick” are Ruffing in the short hand, Finessing and Development. To determine which technique should be used one must PLAN the POTH starting with the very first trick. Keep in mind that the finesse is a 50-50 proposition, while the other two choices generally give a higher probability of success.

Competent defenders make strategic opening leads that can usually say something about their hand. They know they are telling the declarer but more important is the fact that they are telling their Partner - it's the an important way defenders have of trying to overcome the advantage Declarer has in seeing and controlling two hands. Competent Declarers know they need to “read the lead”!

PLAN/ARCH The very first action by Declarer should be to Make a PLAN: **P**ause figure out what to do, **L**oser Count (Trump contracts), **A**nalyze the alternatives, **N**exus – make the connections. ARCH is a part of alternative **A**nalysis: **A**nalyze the lead – read the lead, **R**eview the Bidding, **C**ount winners/losers, **H**ow do I make the Hand.

Example: You are missing the AK or KQ of a suit but that suit is not the suit of the Opening Lead. You know LHO doesn't hold either the AK or KQ of that suit. If it is a suit contract he doesn't have an empty A in the suit led. If the lead is a low card (2,3,4 or 5) you know he has an honor (not the A) in that suit and probably has 3 or more cards in that suit. If the lead is a middling card (7,8,9) you know he likely doesn't have an honor and probably doesn't have more than 3 cards in the suit. There is a lot of information in the opening lead. ANALYZE THE LEAD.

Next: You count your winners (No-Trump contract) and find you have one less winner than what you need – or count your losers and find you have one (or more) than you can afford. You must look to see if there is any possibility to employ one or more of our techniques for gaining a trick.. Look for 7+ card suits (especially those divided (5-2) that provide a hope for suit development. Suit development offers an almost “fault-free” method of gaining a trick – if the opponents holdings in our “long suits” are “balanced” i.e. 3-3 for our 7-card holdings, or 3-2 for our 8-card suits then we can gain a trick and only have to be careful, if there are losers in those suits, that we do not lose control of the hand when we concede a trick in the effort to develop a suit. COUNT.

Look for short-suits in the dummy. Example: you hold xxx and dummy has xx you might possibly gain a trick by trumping that suit in the dummy. Note: Dummy normally is the hand shorter in trump and we know you can only gain a trick by using trump in the short-trump hand to cover a loser. HOW.

FINESSE Now we come to the magic of finessing. By now we should know what a tenace is. TENACE == any multiple honor holding where there is a missing intermediate honor. Example holding only AQ and some spot cards in a suit either as Axx opposite Qxxx or AQxx opposite xxx. The middle card (the K) is missing. Similarly holding both the A and the J in a suit is a Tenace as is a Axx Txxx. Despite the fact that the name sounds like it comes from the A-T type holding, that particular Tenace can rarely profit from the finesse. All other Tenace holdings give promise of an extra trick from the technique of finessing. There are 3 basic ways to finesse.

The SIMPLE FINESSE arises from the maneuver of leading toward the lower ranking honor hoping that the missing honor is held by the hand that must play before the hand holding that lower honor. We will look first at the “classic” simple finesse, a missing K when the AQ is held in

just one hand. AQx opposite xxx. In “the Count” this holding has 2 losers, i.e. only 1 sure winner – the A. But if we lead toward the Q from the xxx holding, the next player should be reticent to play the K, if he holds it, because the A will kill the K and promote the Q to a winner. A sure way to make a 2-loser (1-winner) holding into a 2-winner holding. This realization holds whether the AQx is visible or in the hidden hand. It is also viable if the two honors are in different hands. So long as we remember that the technique only works if we lead “small” toward the lesser honor. Note: one never leads the card that one wants to “make into a winner”; doing so is sure suicide. Consider a Axx Qxx holding. If we lead the Q, mistakenly thinking that if the K gets played we can kill it with the A – we've error-ed. It is true A's are K killers but we have not gained a trick. There are still two losers in the suit. Just what we started with. Here's another example of the simple finesse: you hold Kxx opposite xx in a suit. This time there is no Tenace but if the A is in the hand that plays before the hand holding the K then the K can be made into a winner simply by leading toward it. Leading toward the card we hope to make a winner – the same situation as in the Tenace holding. We play the card we hope to make a winner after we and one opponent has played. The hope-for winner is the card being finessed. Another way to look at the finesse is to say we only want to give one opponent a chance to capture that honor – if we lead it we've given both opponents the opportunity.

With no knowledge of the location of the Card we are finessing against the finesse becomes purely a 50-50 proposition. Either it works because the card is where we hope it is or it isn't; but we may gain some help even if the finesse fails. In determining what the opponents hold we now have a better certainty on how many points the player who defeats our attempt has.

We've noted that **one should not lead an honor** we hope to make a winner. There is at least one exception. When we have transportation problems we are sometimes forced into leading the honor but we can only gain a trick if that honor has a “backup”. Consider this holding: AQJ opposite xxx. We might be able to make this 2 sure-trick holding into a 3 trick holding by leading small toward the AQJ, first by playing the J and if it is successful returning to the hand originally holding xxx and repeat the finesse. But if the holding is divided differently say QJx opposite Axx. The first time we lead x toward the QJx it will succeed but LHO certainly will not let it happen a second time. You can gain 1 trick but not 2.

FREE FINESSE Consider the following holding AJx opposite KTx. We have a situation in which we can finesse in either direction. We can lead low toward either the AJ and finesse the J or low toward the KT and finesse the T. There are times when we are forced to make that 50-50 attempt; but if we can induce an opponent into leading that suit we get what is known as a free finesse. If either opponent leads this suit we can, in the second hand, play the small card (effectively ducking) and wait for the third hand to play, winning the trick by killing the missing honor with our higher honor or freely play the lower honor. It is for this reason that when on defense we are admonished thusly: *when the Board is on your right, never lead a suit in which the board holds a Tenace*. This particular example is also referred to as a two-way finesse.

DOUBLE FINESSE Also called a deep finesse this occurs when there are two touching honors missing. For example: you hold AJT opposite xxx. There are four possible cases

LHO holds	RHO holds
KQx(x)	xxx(x)
xxx(x)	KQx(x) or
Kxx(x)	Qxx(x) or
Qxx(x)	Kxx(x).

As always a finesse is executed by leading small toward the lesser honor. Hence the first time the finesse is attempted there is only a 1 in 4 (the first combination) chance that it will succeed. The second time the finesse is attempted, if the first attempt failed there is a 3 in 4 chance that it will

succeed. That is by finessing in the same direction we have a 75% chance of gaining a trick. We have just lost a trick we couldn't win anyway in order to give ourselves a 75% chance of gaining a trick. The phenomenon on which this case is, in the field of statistics, called restricted choice. If we do not repeat the finesse, that is if we chicken out and play the A on the second round, we have reduced our success rate to 24%.

CONTINUING FINESSE All of the finessing situation we have looked at so far require that if the finesse is to be executed a second time, it requires that we return to the original hand that led small toward the lower ranking honor. We now consider the following AQxx opposite JTxx. Here we are trying to finesse around the K, for the finesse the K has to be in the hand playing before the AQ holding but that does not mean we need to follow the same procedure of leading small toward the Q. We can now repeat the finesse without having to separately return to the originating hand. By leading first the J and then the T prior to leading the small, the lead is automatically in the hand necessary to have the lead for the repeat finesse.

OBLIGATORY FINESSE This situation commonly arises in a Trump suit but can also arise in a No-Trump contract or in an outside suit. It comes about when we have the K and Q in two opposing hands missing the 3 remaining honors. Consider the following Kxxx opposite Qxxx. An 8-card fit for which we hope that the outstanding 5 cards are split "normally", i.e. 3-2 and that the A is a part of the Doubleton. As is usual the finesse starts with the lead of a small toward an honor we want to 'make good'. If the finesse is successful we then lead small toward the other honor with the intention of ducking. Let's look at the defensive holding where this works: Ax opposite JTx. When the first finesse works one hand is left with the bare A and the other with JT. On the second round we play small on small and the opponents are forced to play an honor on an honor, and that will be on the only losing trick we will have in that suit.

RUFFING FINESSE This is the only finesse where the card you hope to make good is led. You hold KQJT_x or any continuous honor holding where there is a single higher honor outstanding, e.g. the A has been played and the K is outstanding and you hold QJ_x or QJT_x and have a void in the opposing hand. Knowing or hoping that the outstanding honor is in the hand following the honors, you lead the honor and 'let it ride' if that higher honor doesn't materialize or ruff if it does.

BACKWARD FINESSE This situation arises when you know, for example through bidding and/or suit count, that a particular card – the one you want to finesse around is in a particular hand. Consider holding AJxx opposite Kxx. The Q is the card you are finessing around and the normal finessing situation would be to lead small toward the J, but in this case you know the Q is in the hand that follows the hand holding AJxx. Here you would lead the J and play small if the Q isn't played. The Backward finesse is then a case where you actually lead the card to be finessed. This can only be a successful move when you actually gain a trick by executing it. If the K were not in the hand toward which you led the J you would not gain a trick. You are only sacrificing the J.

Last Look You have KJ52 opposite Q43 and need three tricks in this suit. You have two chances to get your 3 tricks. You hold 7 cards, if the remaining 6 are split 3-3 you have an long suit trick and two natural tricks. Otherwise, if the 4-2 split is such that the A doubleton is on-side i.e. playing before the KJ52. In the same vein you hold Axxx opposite QJx, if leading x toward the J works, do it again and if the K is in the second hand to play you have three tricks.

When you hold 8 trump, the Magic-8, you should always try for 6 trump tricks (gained by trumping in the short trump holding) then you will only need 2 additional tricks (for a 2-level contract) or 3 (for a 3-level contract) or 4 tricks (for a 4-level contract) in all the other suits. Those tricks being gained through High Card strength, finesses, or promotion. Note that if you Trump are divided 4-4 you can still get 6 trump tricks by only drawing 2 rounds of trump, and use the remainder to trump other suits. The potential of winning 6 tricks in one suit is a reason the 8 card holding is called the *magic-8*.