

Play of the Hand [POTH]: Bridge Players Do It with Finesse

A translation, if you will: the French word Finesse means 'a masterful strategic maneuver'. In Bridge, a Finesse occurs when one leads a small card toward a higher card in an effort to make the high card good even though there is a card of higher value still outstanding.

A simple example: The dummy has the following suit **AQ78** and in the same suit in the DECLARER's hand is 54. Leading the 5 from the her hand toward the dummy, the declarer watches LHO play the 7. Not really knowing where the **K** is located the DECLARER plays the **Q** anticipating that the LHO had the **K** and didn't, in fear of the **A**, play it. Another way to look at it she hoping that RHO doesn't have the **K**.

If the DECLARER had simply led the **Q** from the board, with the **A** also sitting there, the **Q** is subject to capture by either opponent, no matter which opponent holds it. If the **A** wasn't there and hadn't yet been played the same situation as just described still exists. Basically what has been done is the **Q** has been laid out to be captured by either opponent. Leading up to the **Q**, whether the **A** is present or not, the **Q** is only subject to capture by only one opponent, the last to play; it becomes a 50-50 situation. There is a 50% chance that the **Q** will be made good.

This example contains an important concept; that of a tenace (pronounced almost like the game tennis). Anytime one hold a combination of Honors with one or more intermediate values missing. **KJT9**, **QT7**, **AKJ8** are examples, he holds a tenace. Whenever a tenace is present there is an opportunity to Finesse. Care must be taken when more than one Honor is missing, e.g. **AJ87** is a tenace but to lead to this combination one has to have the hand holding both the **K** and **Q** play before the holding. It is called a double Finesse.

It's clear in the previous that the opponent playing before the tenace is reticent to play her **K** because the **Ace** will certainly pounce on and capture (kill) the **K**. But the finesse works even if the **A** is not present. Let's consider a Dummy holding **Q78**. If the opponent playing before the Dummy holds the **K** she should still be reticent in playing the **K** because the 8 is available to be played under the **K**, thus promoting the **Q** into a winner.

The Finesse is an important offensive tool but can be used to the defense's advantage as well. Consider the first example: if the LHO to that hand were to lead that suit, the DECLARER, if not holding the **K** doesn't know where its at. It may be important for the DECLARER to maintain control and thus wants to get the lead. She is either forced to play the **A**, setting up the **K**, or chance losing the **Q** and the lead. It's a two edged sword held by an Opponent over the Declarer.

This concept underlines two adages for defensive play: When leading (a) if the board plays immediately after you, your better play is generally to play the strongest suit or importantly to a tenace on the board; and (b) if the board is on your right and the last to play to a trick, one leads to the weakest suit on the board. Reason (b) helps protect any tenace your partner might be holding. It is your lead and the following board is on your right. ♠T ♥AQ74 ♦J5 ♣6. Whether you hold the ♥K or not, it is foolhardy to lead a ♥. Why? If Declarer hold the ♥K you have put him in the lead. If Partner holds the ♥K she is forced to play it, making the ♥Q a good trick as well because the ♥A will capture the ♥Q. Why is Partner forced to play the K? If Declarer doesn't hold the ♥K and Partner doesn't play it the ♥Q is an automatic winner. You have just given the Opponents an easy trick. On the other hand, if Partner leads a ♥, without knowledge of the whereabouts of the ♥K Declarer must decide to play the ♥A promoting the defense's ♥K or risk losing the ♥Q if you hold it. Partner has just made Declarer's life more difficult. We can carry this point a bit further.

For much of the same reasoning as we just looked at it is advantageous to the Defense if the weakest hand in a particular suit is the last to play – and conversely if the strongest hand is the first to play. Thus if the Dummy is on your right it is the last to play to a trick on which you lead; you should

endeavor to lead to a weak suit. Conversely if the suit in the Dummy is weak it can be assumed any opposition strength in that suit must be in Declarers hand – it might even be in the form of a tenace. Just as the example above you might cause Declarer problems if you lead into his potential tenace – suggested by a weakness on the board. So a different version of (a) and (b) above: (a) Board to Left – Lead to its strength; (b) Board to Right – Lead to its weakness.

As always this information should not be used blindly or in isolation. It is just a part of the tools you need to consider during the POTH. There is a later chapter that explores the world of Finesses even further.