

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' an intricate or delicate move. We could easily said said "he did it with panache". In Bridge, a Finesse occurs when one leads a small card toward a higher card in an effort to make that higher card a trick winner 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 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: declarer is 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 immediate 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. If executed properly the finesse always has a 50% chance of success.

This example contains an important concept; that of a tenace (pronounced almost like the game of tennis). Anytime one holds 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 should be clear from the previous that the opponent playing before the AQ tenace is reticent to play her **K** because the **A** 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** there should still be reticence in playing the **K** because the 8 is available to be played under the **K**, thus promoting the **Q** into a winner. **Promotion is a potential means of gaining a trick.**

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. Declarer is either forced to play the **A**, setting the **K** up to be a winner, 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 lead a dummy's stronger suit or importantly through 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 a weaker 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 holds 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 ♥K. 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 two easy tricks. 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 the ♥K. 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 create a problem for Declarer if you lead into his potential tenace – suggested by a weakness on the board. So a different version of (a) and (b) above: (a) Dummy to Left – Lead to its strength; (b) Dummy 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.