

Play of the Hand in No Trump Contracts

Before we consider the difference between Declarer play of a No Trump or a Suit contract we need to discuss general playing techniques. It all starts from the point of view of tricks. There are sure tricks and potential tricks and so when the dummy is exposed it is critical that we get some sort of a count on how many tricks are there to win or lose. We know the level of the contract so we know how many tricks we need to take. I am often amused when I see a player, who is in the middle of playing a suit contract stop to count the number of tricks they have taken; as if the quest is to take x more tricks, rather than avoid losing a certain number of tricks. This tells me that they probably started their thinking in the wrong direction or **more importantly** started playing the hand before making a plan. There are a number of acronyms that help us remember the process the declarer **MUST** go through before even calling for the first card from the dummy. However, they all center around a counting process.

In a NoTrump contract there is never a possibility of an Ace being trumped or a K that is accompanied by a Ace being a loser etc. Thus, in NT, a trick that can be won by an A is a sure trick, and if the combined hands have the A and the K in the same suit there are 2 sure tricks. If you must give up a trick in order for an honor to be setup as a winner that honor is not a sure trick it is a potential trick. Sure tricks are of the type that can never be lost, so it makes sense to count how many sure winners you have and you can only do that in a No Trump contract (e.g. a 2NT contract requires 8 tricks). You know how many tricks you must take to make your contract and so the difference between how many you must take and how many sure winners you have is how many tricks you must **“find”**. For the moment we will only consider two methods we have to “find” those missing tricks – we might be given a trick by poor defensive play but we can not anticipate those. The two “trick finding” techniques we can control are **the finesse** and **suit development**, the latter also called suit establishment or promotion. Suit establishment is the method where upon we make potential winners into sure winners because we have excess cards in a suit or more than one trick-taker falls on a single trick (promotion). Establishment and finesses provide potential tricks, not sure tricks. Potential tricks entail giving up the lead. Giving up the lead means giving up control and so it is best to do that while you still have control of all the suits. If you don't have control of a suit when you give up the lead you can be sure that the defenders will take their advantage in that suit. We want, then to attempt, suit establishment early in the play when we can get control back. Suit establishment generally offers more tricks than the finesse and it also generally has a higher potential for success so we give more emphasis to suit establishment – its our first consideration.

The Finesse – is based on the holding of a tenace, i.e. holding two non-touching honors, the two honors may or may not be in the same hand. The maneuver is such that we attempt to make the lower honor a winner while the intermediate honor(s) is still outstanding. Example: as the Declarer you hold AQxx in a suit and in the dummy there are 2 small cards. If you lead a small card from the dummy toward the AQxx holding, the next player to play, if holding the K (the intermediate honor) must decide to play the K or not, if not and you play the Q, the Q will win the trick, despite the fact that the K is still outstanding – you have gained a trick – converted a potential trick into a sure trick. The K has been finessed (fooled by – remember K's are made to capture Q's and here the Q got away). However, if the K lies with the hand that plays after the hand holding the AQxx, and the Q is played, the K will capture the Q and win the trick AND you have, at least temporarily, lost control AND the potential trick. It should be clear from this that the finesse is a 50-50 play. That is, the K is either going to be in the hand that plays before the Q or it is not. There are several points that many beginners fail to see. First and importantly, we rarely lead the card that we are trying to make a winner, we lead toward that card. In this way there is only one hand that is a threat to the card we are trying to make a winner. To make this clear consider both ways of holding a tenace, the two cards of the tenace in the same hand and also split between the Declarer and Dummy. Holding AQxx does it make sense to lead the Q expecting it to win? No! Because no matter which defender holds the K, the Q will be captured. So, now if the A is in one hand and the Q in the other we lead toward the Q, there is still only one hand – the only one that plays after the Q - that can capture her. If we lead the Q and the K is played next, we can still win that trick by playing the A but now there are no more tricks to

be made in that suit, we have not gained a trick.

Establishment – To fully understand the principle of establishment, which is the method of gaining a trick from the fact that one hand has at least 1 more winning card than all the others, we must first consider how the cards can be distributed. We will focus on just one suit which, as we know, has 13 cards. Those 13 cards can be distributed in many ways across the 4 hands but let's start with the case where they are as evenly distributed as possible 4-3-3-3. So one team has 7 cards total and the other 6, there is only one hand with more cards than the others and it is held by the side with the total of 7 cards. Thus to have hopes of establishing a suit you should have a total of at least 7 cards in that suit. If you hold a total of 6 cards divided 5-1 or 6-0 the possibility of the opponents having theirs distributed 4-3 is good and so such a 6 card holding must not be ignored – but establishment of a 6-card suit is a longer shot.

There is another point to consider and that is how the opponents cards are distributed. If the opponents hold an odd number of cards in a suit i.e. 3, 5, 7, the chance that they are divided as evenly as possible is the highest thus corresponding to 2-1, 3-2, 4-3 respectively. However, when their total is an even number 4, 6, 8 the division with the highest probability is not even, but just off even i.e. 3-1, 4-2, 5-3. (This last division, 5-3, is the reason we gravitated toward opening 5-card majors, because if you have a 4-card Major there is a lesser chance that partner has 4 to make the 8-card fit. And the percentages are with you that partner has 3)

Sometimes you will hear of a 3rd method of gaining a trick, it is called promotion. Promotion is just a special case of establishment. Consider a holding of KQxx, missing the A. If you lead the K and it forces the A, the Q has been promoted the importance of the (or established as) a winner. If the A is not played the K is established as a defacto winner. The notion of promotion is another reason for the importance of the magic-8.

Holding a suit with 5 or more cards means that the other 3 hands must share the remaining 8 cards. Likely to be 332 or at perhaps 422. In the first case, after the suit has been played 3 times the hand with 5 have 2 remaining cards that are winners. Those cards could be the 2 and 3, those lowly numbers have been **promoted** into or established as winners. We will conclude by saying that, in general, suit establishment and promotion give us better than a 50-50 chance at succeeding so it should be the preferred technique, leaving the 50-50 finesse to be the technique of last resort.

Now that we know the basic methods for gaining tricks we need to look at techniques that assist us in achieving them. Actually it is on suit establishment that these apply to because the finesse is a matter of how the honors are distributed, there's no guesswork. The finesse either works or it doesn't.

We can now consider the difference between the way we approach a NoTrump and Suit Contract. In both cases we generally find that we have an insufficient number of tricks available to comfortably make our contract. As noted, in NoTrump there is no fear of losing a trick by having a trick-taker trumped, so we are free to immediately embark on establishing tricks. In Suit contracts we must make additional decisions regarding how we are going to tackle the trump suit so that whatever the opponents hold in that suit doesn't interfere with our establishment of suit(s). Regardless of which type of contract the following techniques are usable but more important in NoTrump contracts. The play in NoTrump contracts can reasonably be compared to a race between the two sides to get their own suits established. That is why the lead of the 4th best is a good opening lead, it tells partner which suit you think should be developed by the defense, based solely on the defense getting a 'length trick'. We have several ancillary methods or maneuvers available that help us achieve suit establishment.

Holdup – the first maneuver we will look at, commonly used in NoTrump hands, is the holdup play. It is related to our discussion on how the opponents cards are divided, suit establishment and the issue of control. It primarily becomes useful when there is only one trick available in a suit and the holdup is done to exhaust one of the defenders hands of that suit. Consider this: between the two hands you hold 5 cards total in the opening lead suit. That means that the opponents have 8 and how do those 8 most commonly divide? 5-3 is the most common! You only have 1 winner in that suit; that means that the side holding the 5-card suit has 4 tricks in that suit. If you are in a 3NT contract those 4

tricks are all you can afford to lose. That makes the LHO (Left Hand Opponent – the opening leader) the **danger hand**. We want to endeavor to keep the danger hand from winning a trick once we gain control. If we take control on the first trick that means no matter which opponent wins a later trick the opening leader can be put back on lead and you have missed making your contract. So the Holdup maneuver is used to clear the non-danger opponent's hand of that suit – here it is your RHO, presumably holding 3, that you are trying to exhaust in that suit. Of course you can only do that if you hold the A. If the lead had been from a 4-card holding then the situation isn't as dire, the opponents can only get 3 tricks in that suit, because they are split 4-4, they get 3 you get 1 or possibly 2.

Unblocking – This is related to two issues, particularly important in NoTrump hands. The first we call **transportation**, i.e. the ability to put yourself in either hand (Dummy or Declarer) at will. This isn't always easy, especially in the absence of a Trump suit, generally because one hand will be decidedly stronger than the other. So we must endeavor to make sure we can navigate to a particular hand when we need to. The Second consideration is **Entries**. Consider this situation: In the Dummy is QJT873 and the Declarer holds K2. This holding, in NoTrump is worth 5 tricks in NoTrump. We will also assume the Dummy has no other means of winning a trick – no other sure tricks. If we attempt to 'knockout' the A by leading the Q and are successful we cannot reach the Dummy to harvest the 5 remaining tricks in that suit. The K will win the second trick in the suit and you are stuck in the wrong hand. You might ask what if there were a separate entry into the Dummy available? That might work, but if your opponents are good defenders they will be trying to rid you of that other entry in anticipation of what you are trying to do, i.e. set up that long suit for extra tricks. This leads us to a maxim for good Declarer play: Always play your **honors** from the **short side first**. That ensures that we always unblock without having to think much about it.

Ducking – This is similar to the Holdup play, the difference is you holdup when the opponents lead, you Duck when you lead. Ducking is best illustrated by two classic examples. In the first, a hand holds AK5432 and the other has xx, an 8-card total holding. The opponents holding is most likely 3-2, but could be 4-1. You are in a NoTrump Contract and this is the only suit that offers the possibility of length tricks – length tricks are tricks achieved through establishment. Now consider that you have 8 sure tricks and thus only need one additional trick to make your contract. Look at your holding; if you play the AK you will never recover after inevitably losing the 3rd round in the suit. However, if indeed the opponents are 3-2 in that suit and you lead a low to the AK and then play the 2 (or the other way playing the 2 first) you lose that same one trick but now when you play the A followed by the K both opponents will have been exhausted of that suit and you can cash your 3 winners for two overtricks. But what if the opponents 5 cards were divided 4-1 rather than 3-2. You would then have only won the A and K and be short a trick of making your contract, so to be safe since if you only need one additional trick is best to duck twice in that suit to guard against the 4-1 break. It is better to make your contract that to risk going down in order to get an over-trick.

A word of caution. In executing any of the above you will be relinquishing the lead (i.e. control of the hand) which means that you must be able to regain when you determine it necessary and that means while you still have sufficient control of all the other suits – that is normally very early in the play. That is why it is so important that you inspect the hand and make your plan before you play the very first card to the hand.

So to recap:

- 1 When playing NT contracts count your winners, i.e. tricks you can take without giving up the lead
- 2 Generally it is best to attempt at establishing your long suits, first
- 3 Generally you have to give up tricks to establish a suit.
- 4 Give up your losers early while you still have control of the other suits.
- 5 Finesses can establish extra tricks but don't take unnecessary finesses.
- 6 Watch your entries in determining how to play the hand
- 7 An even number of missing cards will divide slightly unevenly most of the time.
- 8 An odd number of missing cards will divide evenly most of the time.
- 9 Some suits are better led by the opponents.

An example of this last point. You hold Kxx and the Dummy has Qxx. If you lead the suit you are only guaranteed 1 trick. Whereas if the opponents lead the suit your hand that plays 2nd can duck and if the A is played the 4th hand can duck as well. Both your K and the Q have been established as winners, you can win 2 tricks. Note: If the A is not played you know where it is.

In each of the following cases the contract is 3NT without opponents bidding.

♠AK4	♠873	
♥AQ5	♥K86	
♦KQ74	♦63	OPENING LEAD: ♥J
♣752	♣QJT86	

Hand 1 is fairly straight forward. The ♥ lead is favorable. Count your winners. You have 3 winners in ♥ and two in ♠. You have one potential winner¹ in ♦. You still need 3 more and the only means is to establish the ♣ suit. Fortunately you can knock out the ♣A-K and still get to dummy with the ♥K to run the suit. You just to make sure to leave that K on the board until you are ready to use it. Just make sure to tackle the Clubs as soon as possible.

♠AQ7	♠K8	
♥AK4	♥8753	
♦54	♦QJT96	OPENING LEAD: ♠J
♣KQJ53	♣76	

Hand 2 is a slight variation of hand 1. However here you are in trouble. You can't set up the ♦'s before the defense knocks out your only entry(♠K). Your only other option is to play for a 3-3 split in ♣s, hoping they will also attack ♦'s before knocking out your entry.

♠AK	♠J2	
♥Q2	♥AK83	
♦QJT9864	♦532	OPENING LEAD: ♠3
♣AT4	♣KQ98	

In hand 3 you have 2 winners in ♠, 3 in ♥, and 3 in ♣ for 8 total. The ♦ suit could provide several more tricks after the ace and king are knocked out. However, the opponents can establish their ♠'s before you can set up your ♦'s. Your only chance again is that ♣ break 3-3 and if so you can get a 4th ♣ trick. If not, you can only hope that you can get to the established ♦'s.

♠AJ62	♠5	
♥94	♥AK7653	
♦AK863	♦92	OPENING LEAD: ♦Q
♣A8	♣J732	

In hand 4 you have 1 winner in ♠, 2♥, 2♦, and 1♣ for a total of 6. You can get 3 more tricks in ♥. But watch your entries. Duck one round of ♥'s and you can get to dummy in ♥'s to run the suit if it is split 3-3. Note you can only duck ♥ once (for 3 needed tricks).

♠AK7	♠94	
♥KQ2	♥A75	
♦A852	♦T64	OPENING LEAD: ♥J
♣873	♣AK642	

1 Holding a potential winner as in this case, a sure but potential winner, it is called a slow winner. A slow winner is a winner and can be counted at the start.

Hand 5 is similar but you have an extra entry in ♥'s. Winners: in 2♠, 3♥, 1♦, and 2♣ for a total of 8 winners and need only one more in clubs for your contract. However don't get careless and play AK and another club. Even if the suit breaks 4-1 you can set up the suit, if you duck twice.

♠A54	♠T9	
♥J42	♥AQT3	
♦AK92	♦QT75	OPENING LEAD: ♠3
♣A98	♣Q53	

Hand 6 involves holding up on an ♠A so the opponents can't run the suit. You have 3 or 4 ♦ tricks², and 1 trick in each of the other suits. You need 3 maybe 2 ♥ tricks to make your contract. However, you can't let the opponents have more spade tricks if the ♥ finesse loses. Duck 2 rounds of spades and take the third before taking the heart finesse and then the ♠ have to split 5-3 to make the contract.

♠J842	♠A75	
♥KQ6	♥95	
♦AJT3	♦KQ96	OPENING LEAD: ♥4
♣KT	♣AJ96	

In hand 7 you have 7 tricks (1♠, 0♥, 4♦, and 2♣) however your RHO plays the ♥10 and you win with the Q. Now you have 8 tricks (1♠, 1♥, 4♦, and 2♣) and must get a 9th in ♣. How do you play the ♣? Can you figure out East's ♥ holding? What if the ♥4 had been the ♥2?

♠AQJ	♠976	
♥AK3	♥J62	
♦652	♦AK743	OPENING LEAD: ♥T
♣Q654	♣J8	

Hand 8 requires play in the right order. You have 5 top tricks. You can get 2 more in ♠ with a successful finesse for the K. You also can get 2 extra ♦ tricks if the suit breaks 3-2. Plan the sequence of plays.

♠A43	♠KQ92	
♥74	♥A86	
♦AQJ86	♦T93	OPENING LEAD: ♣Q
♣K72	♣A86	

Hand 9 is an example of preserving all potential entries to the hand with the developable suit. Before playing you see that you have 3♠, 1♥, 1♦, and 2♣ tricks, 7 total the obvious place to get the needed 2 tricks is in ♦. On the opening lead you might be tempted to play ♣K because you have the ♠A and the top ♦ as entries but if you do you are missing the opportunity for an additional trick. If you win in your hand you are in the position to attempt a ♦ finesse. Normally we avoid the finesse but here there is no problem if you lose

2 3 if the ♦'s split 4-1 where the J is in the group of 4, and 4 if it's not or if they split 3-2

the finesse, you still have all the suits stopped and you have knocked out the ♦K setting up the remaining ♦ tricks . If the finesse is successful you gain that trick as well. That is, as long as you start with the ♦T so that you can remain in your hand to run the ♦9 to the AQ. That gives you 3 chances to capture the ♦K. You end with all 13 tricks.

Just because the finesse is the maneuver of last resort doesn't mean we ignore it completely!

There is something obvious to take note of we haven't yet to mention. The maximum tricks you can get from a suit is the number of cards in your longer holding. Thus if you are 4-4 you can get no more than 4 tricks from that suit. Likewise a 5-3 holding may produce 5 tricks but no more.