Play of the Hand in Suit Contracts

When we encounter a NoTrump hand we count our sure winners to decide how many more winners we need to make our contract. In a Suit contract sure winners can be ephemeral, they can disappear before you even get control of the hand and if you must give up control transient winners can come back to haunt you. Unlike in NoTrump contracts Aces and Kings are not always safe tricks. So we need to approach a suit contract differently. We count our certain losers and if there are more, and most of the time there will be, more losers than we can afford our focus shifts from creating winners to eliminating losers. These are different sides of the same coin. But to keep sanity in our corner we probably should also count both our winners and losers if for no reason other than to make sure we got everything right. There are 13 tricks so if you have 4 losers you should have 9 winners if you don't it means there needs to be further investigation – you probably mis-assigned a loser as a winner. We'll leave that for later, and return to the techniques we learned about creating additional winners in No Trump, Finesse and length-tricks. To that we can now add trumping a loser but only in the hand with the shorter trump holding. For now we will just tell you that trumping a loser in the 'long hand' will generally not gain a trick but trumping a loser in the 'short-hand' can. There is an additional danger that we must always be aware of. When a partnership "wins the battle for the contract" it generally indicates it has more HCP but that advantage can easily disappear. If an A or K or Q falls under a lowly 2 of Trump, the 3 HCP advantage you once had, that is a whole trick, is lost.

This danger leads some to feel that the trump in the defensive hands must be removed as soon as they gain control, but there is a caveat we must apply: *If a trump card, in the short hand is needed to cover a loser in the long hand we may want to preserve that trump card by not drawing all the trump from defenders!* And so, after counting losers, the first decision we must make is "*When do I draw trump" and How many*?

The result of all this is that, in suit contracts, we have an additional method of gaining tricks, but that must be tempered with the understanding that setting up length-tricks is jeopardized by the trump cards in hands of the defense. You will find that the time it takes you to analyze a hand is longer and more complicated than it is for a No Trump contract. We have a hand that illustrates this complexity well. But before we go further lets formalize how we should count our losers. We first must determine which hand will be the "Master Hand" and that will normally be the hand with more Trump and generally that will be the Declarer. Consider these combined holdings:

Dummy: A7645   KT98   K94   A83

Declarer: 6   Q3   876   K2

In the 1st combination Declarer has only 1 card and can thus have just 1 loser, but that loser can be covered by the Ace, therefore 0 losers.

In the 2nd combination Declarer has 2 cards that are not immediate winners; two losers. However the Q will likely drive out the Ace or will be allowed to win and then only the 3 is a loser to be covered by the K, therefore 1 potential losers. Potential losers are cards that are not winners so long as the defenders hold trump. This holding is said to have 1 slow winner, and 1 quick loser.

In the 3rd combination Declarer has 3 cards and even though the K can drive out the A the card that is played with it is a loser and there remains 2 more losers, therefore 3 losers. The K, a slow loser.

In the 4th combination Declarer has 2 cards but the A in the Dummy will cover the 2 and promote: the K into a winner, therefore 0 losers. These combinations then evaluates to 4 losers, we also see 3♠, 1♥, 1♦, 1♣, i.e. 6 winners. Six winners and 4 losers out of 13 tricks?? Where did the other 3 tricks go? Let's look at a full deal with bidding.

North	South	
♠A764	♠KQT98	East and West were Silent. South started bidding with 1♠.
♥64	♥KQ	N responds with 3♠, a Limit raise, showing 10-12 HCP, 4-card support
♦Q32	♦K54	South with a minimum but nice hand accepts the invitation with 4♠.

♣AQ63   ♣J54   OPENING LEAD: ♥J   by West

   Declarer's initial analysis: Unless Trump is 4-0 with South as Master Hand: 0♠, 1♥, 2♦, 2♣ losers; 2 too many. Can't avoid the ♥ or ♦ loser so the ♣ finesse must work for the contract to be made, but that only eliminates 1 of 2 necessary losers to be eliminated. (Remembering that finesse's are the technique of last resort, we should be willing to see how things develop before resorting to it.) Note that even with the finesse working we have 1 more loser than we can afford, and the only other possibility is a length trick and we have the two black suits to look at for these. But ♠'s are trump so that extra ♠ in south's hand is already a winner, it doesn't need to be developed – that is why we say that additional tricks can only be gained by trumping in the short-hand. It looks like we will be down 1; but lets see.

To the opening lead we play ♥4 and East wins with A; ♥ suit now seems safe! East knows his partner's J promised nothing higher and seeing 2 of the 3 ♥'s higher than the J now knows that declarer has ♥K and decides to switch because a ♥ lead might set up an eventual rough in the dummy. Defense doesn't want to allow that trick gaining event to occur. East also sees the ♣ tenace in the Dummy and knows that to lead ♣'s guarantees declarer 2 tricks there and so wants to avoid ♣'s. East choice is a ♦ or a ♠. A ♦ looks promising if partner has the A or K and leading the J from ♦JT96 tells Partner you have the T (so the ♦J is the proper lead, Top of Sequence, when breaking a new suit).

Declarer plays low and West the 8 (encouraging?) allowing the Q to win the trick. Declarer now has an opportunity to review adding the information gained from the first two tricks. East's ♦J lead suggests West has the ♦A, even though he didn't play it. Why didn't West play the ♦A? The J, says nothing higher but shows the T maybe the 9, that means Declarer has the K and West maintains control of the suit by saving the A as the K killer. Playing the A gives Declarer 2 tricks in ♦. Since West knows that Declarer has the K, there is no danger that the defense's A will be trumped. Declarer, realizing there is still a chance that West has the ♦A and that the ♦K is Vulnerable decides to test the Trump suit leading low to the Q, W following with the J. Note also that at present there is no reason to delay the testing of trump. Why? There are only 4 outstanding Trump and if 3-1 there will still be an additional trump in dummy to trump and gain a trick. We said test Trump rather than draw Trump because we want to make sure Trump is not 4-0 which means we might not want to draw all the trump, so that we can leave one in dummy for a potential dummy ruff. Dummy ruffs generally gain a trick and Declarer still needs one more trick.[1] We might ask ourselves, at this point *"do I need the Trump suit for transportation?"* The answer here is No.

The ♠J suggests that W is short in ♠ which might mean W is long in another suit hopefully ♣, and it also means ♠'s are not 4-0 – a good sign. For the ♣ finesse Declarer must lead from his hand and so returns to hand in Trump drawing a second round and indeed W shows out! That confirms trump was split 3-1, East starting with 3, Perhaps East – having 3 trump and earlier switching to a high ♦ – and we being short in ♥ – might be short in ♣'s, perhaps a singleton K! But recall ♣ is the suit we needed for a length trick which means they need to be 3-3. It is now time to test the ♣ suit but we must beware that if the finesse loses to East, the danger hand (because it can lead a ♦ through the ♦K to the ♦A) will be on lead. So at trick 6 Declarer plays a low ♣ to to the A. West follows low, you play the A and East follows low. We played the A knowing we don't want East on lead and.... (lets analyze that move further)

Perhaps we're lucky and ♣'s are split 5-1 with the K being the singleton in East's hand. We haven't lost the chance to finesse if the K is finesse-able, i.e. onside, the finesse is still available on a 2ⁿᵈ round in ♣. Recall for success the finesse has to work. So Declarer decides to test the possibility of 5-1 split by playing a low ♣ toward the A; first taking the ♥ winner and taking West's 2 trump. If West wins with the K you let it ride – don't cover with the A! West is the hand you want on lead if you lose a trick (East is the danger hand). West is now on the spot, he is out of trump and if he leads a ♥ he gives you ru8ff and sluff; if he leads a ♦ he is either playing or under-leading the A giving you the K; and leading a ♣ gives you 2 tricks there. If the K doesn't fall, you play the A and return to your hand with the ♥K to try

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1   With a complicated hand such as this one, we suggest you lay out the 2 offensive hands and then see the consequences of particular plays as they are exposed.

the ♣'s again. The rationale behind not continuing drawing trump is such with West being out of trump could dump the ♣K thus possibly setting up a ♣ trick to East's potential J who could then force you to give them 2♦ tricks. Either way a 1♥, 1♦ & 2♣ losers or 1♥, 2♦, 1♣ losers are more than you can afford. The Club suit has to break 3-3 for you to make the hand and West, if you allow the ♣K to win, must resist leading a ♦.

In our exposition we made note of the use of information that came from the way the cards were played, in particular what information the defensive leads conveyed. We were able, not initially but before the end of the hand were able to determine the sole way in which we could make this difficult hand. Your first thought might be, well if I am on defense I won't make those leads so as to throw the declarer off. The problem with that is that you also damage the only communication process you have on defense – it behooves the defense not to try try to befuddle the declarer if it will also give false info to partner. Another key point we must realize from this example is how we came to the conclusion that proper play of the ♣ suit was the only way the contract could be made. If indeed a particular play is the only approach that will secure the contract that is the alternative that will be available to everyone else playing the hand – everyone is on equal ground. There are times when you might have alternative ways of approaching the hand each of which may provide an avenue to success, and you should always check to see if there are – one might be safer than the other. In these cases we need to continue the analysis in a way that allows us to compare each alternative and then choose the alternative that, if it fails, doesn't negate our ability to try the other(s). The next example hand demonstrates this.

North	South	
♠AKQ4	♠8	East and West were Silent. South started bidding with 1♥.
♥64	♥AKQJT7	North responds with 1♠, South jumps to 3♥. North bids 4♦ denying a club
♦AT7	♦KJ8	stop. South bids 4NT, North showing 2. South bids 6♥.
♣JT95	♣K42	OPENING LEAD: ♥5 by West

 With South as Master Hand there are 0♠, 0♥, 1♦, 3♣ losers; `You have a definite ♣ loser (because you can dump the remaining on the good ♠'s but that means you must 1st gain control and hope the ♠ suit behaves – that may be too much to ask – that is why you have 3♣ losers). You also have a potential loser in ♦ but have a 2-way ♦ finesse. *The North hand has 5 uncovered losers (1♠, 1♦, and 3♣ one will fall under the A) but you have only 4 "free" trump in the South hand.* (we will discuss this italicized statement later.) Even if the ♠ suit behaves the ♦ finesse eliminating a loser appears to be the only alternative or is it?

You win the opening Trump lead and draw a second round, both following – there is still one trump outstanding. You played the second round because there are no losers in the long hand that can be eliminated by trumping in short hand – dummy's ♠ are not a problem, ♦ are same length ♣ are longer. For the same reason we draw the remaining trump, discarding a ♣. We then play 3 rounds of ♠'s discarding two of Declarers ♣'s and rough the 4th ♠ in hand. Note the remaining cards in the two hands (all tricks, so far have been won)

North	South
♠	♠
♥	♥JT
♦AT7	♦KJ8
♣JT9	♣K

    While playing the ♠ tricks you should make note of how times one of the defenders follows suit. You already know 1 defender had 2♥'s, the other 3.

    We now lead the ♣K which is going to lose to the ♣A, and it doesn't matter which defender wins the ♣A. If the winner leads ♦ a the guess has been eliminated and we've made the hand.

    If West has ♣A and not a fifth ♠ he will be forced to lead a minor suit. A ♣ lead will either win in the dummy and give declarer a ♦ discard or force the Q which Declarer can ruff and that will establish a ♣

for a ♦ discard. If West has a 5th ♠ and leads it you will be forced to dump a ♣ and rely on ♦ guess.

   If East has ♣A and not a fifth ♠ he will also be forced to lead a minor suit. A ♣ lead will force Declarer to rough as well as make the ♦ guess if the ♣Q doesn't fall. The guess may be incorrect, but no other line of play would have given any more information to eliminate the guess.

   Information during the play is another factor we must consider. This hand might illustrate three important facts we should be trying to extract by watching the cards played by the defense:

   a. Parity – Defenders are warned to 'maintain parity'. This means, if you hold a card higher than the lowest card you card see (i.e. in the dummy) maintain the same length in that suit. How does this help? If a defender discards a suit in which you have 4-cards, they don't have 4 cards in that suit.

   b. Count – Defenders should be 'giving count' on your leads. Pay attention to their signals, there may be important information you can extract. Information such as their split in the suit.

   c. Empty spaces – If you knew that there was a 5-2 split in a suit, common sense should tell us that there is a 5 to 2 or 71% chance that the holder of 5 has a particular card. The concept of empty spaces translates this to help you decide which defender has a particular troublesome card. E.g. In several ways you may 'discover' that an opponent has a long suit for example a 5-card suit and their partner 2. In addition both followed suit twice, say in your trump draw. This translates into the fact that the holder of 5 has 7 known cards or 6 unknown cards (I.e empty spaces for an unknown card in another suit to be in. The other has 4 known cards and 9 empty spaces. There then is a 9-6 chance that the holder of 9 empty spaces has an unknown card. Who would you finesse? Obviously, the person with a 9-6 or 60% chance of holding the card. This is one very important reason for postponing taking the 50-50 finesse until the last moment.

   The line of play just described postponed the guess on which direction the finesse should be made to the last moment. This illustrates why we say the finesse is the technique of last resort. We try to garner information that helps make the decision on which way to finesse. Playing slowly and safely can allow us to gain some additional information to add in the making the guess. This brings us to the point of keeping track when a defender followed suit when the four ♠ tricks were played. We also know that one of the defenders had an extra trump card. As an example let us assume that East has shown to have 5♠ and 3 Trump, that meant that West had 3♠ and 2 Trump. Each followed to the ♣ trick. This means East has 4 unknown cards and West has 7 unknown cards and that there is a 7 to 4 chance that the missing ♦Q is in the West hand. You should assume that West has the Q and first play the ♦K dropping the 7, followed by the ♦J dropping the T, and lastly play the ♦A. If the extra Trump had been with East then the odds that the Q is with West falls to 6 to 5 but still favors finessing West for the ♦K. This was easier than workiing with empty spaces. But there will be times when empty space considerations are necessaary.

   The italicized statement above is an analysis that we haven't met yet. It's is a test to see if we should change Master hands; i.e. if the loser count is better and the hand handled better if the Dummy is the Master hand. You can see that it's a relativity quick assessment. We'll come back to this later.

   Let us return the first example and ask how dangerous was it not to first draw trump before 'fiddling' with the ♣ suit. This is where our understanding of how cards divide comes in handy. We held 7♣ and the defenders 6. Recall that just off even is the highest so a 4-2 division at 49% means that slight less half the time we are safe in executing two rounds without danger of being trumped, but when we consider that the next most probable is the even 3-3 split comes in at 35%. That tells us that almost 75% of the time we are safe in leaving trump outstanding when we are working on a suit that started with 6 cards in the defenders hands. Lets now look at the 3 techniques that anchor our ability in creating tricks in view of our shifted focus of eliminating losers. We'll start with the holdup play. Remember holdup is purposely losing a trick, when we could have won the trick, in order to forstall taking control. This is another example of why we would wamt to hold up..

North	South	
♠QT8	♠AKJ732	South started bidding with1♠.

♥64	♥AT	North responds with 1NT*; East Overcalls 2♥. South rebids 2♠
♦AQT93	♦J76	With 12PP and 3-card support North rebids 4♠. All Pass
♣K95	♣74	OPENING LEAD: ♥3 by West

Our Losers: 0♠, 1♥, 1♦, 2♣ ; Our Winners: 6♠, 1♥, 2♦, 0♣   Total 13 as expected. We can only afford 3 losers and we have 4 and need to eliminate 1 but which one? Obviously there are enough ♦ winners to eliminate 2 ♣ losers but we might have to relinquish the lead to get them established if we win the 1st trick. If we do the defense when they get control with the ♦K, will be able to take a ♥ and possibly 2♣, our 4 losers. ♣,'s are our problem suit. Why? We can protect our contract by holding up on the first trick if East plays anything higher than the T; if he doesn't the ♥ loser has been eliminated. When East easily wins he must assume that partner has the A and dutifully returns the suit.   He might "eye" the board and be tempted to switch suits but sees that a ♣ lead will automatically give you the K and a ♦ lead is into your AQ tenace. His best choice is to return a ♠ or ♥ even if he knows Partner doesn't underlead A's. Your holdup on the 1st trick has setup your hand. Did you notice that West is your danger hand because of your unprotected ♣K – you don't want West on lead to push a ♣ through your K. This in the primary reason for holding up.   You draw trump ending in your hand and lead the ♦J. If the K doesn't fall you let the J ride and if it's captured by East, your ♦'s are established and the opponents can only get 1 ♣ trick. They get at most 1♥, 1♦, and 1♣.

We have just seen how a play technique useful in NoTrump, the holdup play, can be adapted to a suit contract, but we warned that suit contracts add an addition element to the play, trump. Mainly, when and why should we delay getting such a dangerous weapon out of the hands of the enemy is an important decision. Let's look at a hand where this is imposed on us.

North	South	**Nobody Vulnerable**
♠KQ743	♠85	North starts with 1♠, and East Overcalls 2♦. South justifiably with 10HCP shows
♥AK3	♥QJT972	his biddable suit with 2♥. West becomes competitive raising partner to 3♦
♦J52	♦7	Perhaps the AK gets North questionably excited to bid 3♥ …..
♣95	♣AK74	OPENING LEAD: ♥6 by West

Perhaps it was the lack of vulnerability that caused over exuberance but the bidding escalated to where South ended up in a 5♥ contract. And when the Dummy comes down it doesn't look that bad. With South as Master hand there are 4 losers: a sure ♦, 1♠ to the A, and 2♣, however the club losers could be removed by trumping after the AK are played. So initially that is the PLAN. Win the opening lead in hand, play the top ♣'s and ruff 2♣'s. There's no problem using the trump AK to trump because of South's nice trump holding and that fit with a running a suit we need to trump with high trump. Now before actually executing the plan let's execute it mentally. Everything is fine until we get to the first ♣ ruff. Can we see that at this point we have no way to get back to Souths hand to lead the 4th ♣. It turns out that the opening lead caused us a problem. Is there an alternative line of play? YES!

If we win the open in hand and sacrifice a ♠ by leading toward the K. We will likely lose trick 2, but will be able to regain the lead immediately or after losing the inevitable ♦. We win the subsequent trick with ♠Q. We can then lead a ♣ to the A, play the ♣K and a 3rd ♣ ruffing in the Dummy. We now have an entry to our hand via a ♠ ruff and can lead the last ♣ to be roughed. At this point South's hand has nothing left but trump. Whether this approach is successful is dependent on how on how the opponents four trump are distributed. If 2-2 we are assured success, if 3-1 it likely depends on the ♥8 being the singleton. Otherwise you'll have ♥ loser.

There are two lessons to be taken from this hand. The 1st is that we sometimes need to delay drawing trump in order to save dummy's trump to remove declarer's losers.   The 2nd is the importance in planning, especially the mental play-of-the-plan which might disclose a flaw.   The next hand continues the emphasis on planning, and shows an example where unblocking rules.

North	South	
♠QT82	♠KJ	South started bidding with1♥. The Opponents silent!
♥64	♥AKQJ9	North responds with 1♠; South with 2 short suits rebids 2♦

♦AKQ   ♦JT986   North looking for a ♣ stopper and game, bids 4th suit forcing, 3♣
♣9542   ♣7   With no stopper South is forced to rebid 5-card ♥ suit, and South
                            carries it to 4♥.   OPENING LEAD: ♣Q by West

     Standard routine! Losers: the ♠A and a ♣, the long ♦ can cover 2 of the Dummy's losers, but there is danger that they will be trumped. So with only 7 total Trump the question is "can you afford to pull trump"? Test it mentally remembering suit division, opponents have 6 total likely dividing 4-2, better 3-3 but could be 5-1. If trump are divided 4-2 or 3-3 there's no problem because trumping a ♣ will provide an entry to the longer ♦, but if 5-1 there's no entry, you will lose the ♠A and 3 ♣'s. The problem is even worse when we return to the real play. The opening lead is going to hold, you can't win it, and the defense will likely continue the suit so the question becomes "do you ruff the 2nd round"? If you do you will be reduced to 4 trump and the 4-1 split leads to the same result as the 5-1. There is no reason not to ruff the 2nd because a further ♣ continuation will force you to do it anyway. So what do you do. You must recognize that the problem is your blockage in the ♦ suit. The ♦ in the declarers hand are just as strong as those in the dummy which are in the way, the Dummy's ♦'s need to be unblocked by removing them. How? When you gain control by trumping on 2nd trick, play a single ♦ and then play 4 rounds of trump. On the last 2 rounds of the Trump draw you can discard the Dummy's remaining ♦'s. The lesson in this hand is not just the unblocking action (in this case by discarding the good ♦'s) it is also when you see that you have the requisite number of tricks, stop to see what could go wrong. Again that is the benefit of the mental play of the hand before exercising any plan. Here you have more tricks than you need considering the 5 Trump 5♦ and some potential ♠ tricks.   Let's recap with the simplest of examples.

North   South
♠T74   ♠QJ3   South started bidding with1♥. The Opponents silent!
♥A943   ♥KQJT85 North responds with 2♥; South jumps to 4♥
♦95   ♦AK6
♣J952   ♣8   OPENING LEAD: ♣A by West

     With South as Master Hand the loser count is 2♠, 0♥, 1♦, 1♣; That's 1 more than we can afford. So long as we save 1 trump in the Dummy to we can trump the ♦ loser, reducing losers to 3 and securing the contract. With 4 outstanding trump the only thing standing in the way of success is a 4-0 trump split. The defense will win trick 1, and possibly find the two ♠ tricks but will eventually yield control to you. Thus whenever you gain control you can play up to 3 rounds of trump, in the attempt to strip trump from the defense, before tackling the ♦'s. We have just seen a simple example of one of three means of eliminating losers. (1) Trumping (ruffing) a loser in the Dummy. The other 2 are: (2) Discard a loser on a long suit winner and (3) a successful finesse.

North   South
♠JT7   ♠KQ3   South started bidding with1♣. The Opponents silent!
♥AQ43   ♥K8   North responds with 1♥; South jumps to 3♣
♦T83   ♦A6   Contract ends in 6♣
♣K52   ♣AQJ983   OPENING LEAD: ♦K by West

     With South as Master Hand the loser count is 1♠, 0♥, 1♦, 0♣; That's 1 more than you can afford. How to eliminate at least 1 loser. The ♠ loser is unavoidable so we need to focus on ♦'s. Since ♥'s have 3 winners and only 2 cards in Declarers hand the third winner can be used to eliminate Declarer's ♦ loser. The plan is then to win the 1st trick, eliminate trump from defenders hand (no problem on this count) and then to address the ♥'s remembering to play honors from the short side first. On the 3rd ♥ trick led from Dummy the the ♦6 can be discarded – no more ♦ loser. Here the ♥'s were not that long (4), but having 3 top winners and only 2 in the hand that needs a loser eliminated is effectively a long suit winner. Here's the final example.

North   South
♠KT72   ♠AQJ943   With the Opponents silent you reach a 4♠ Contract! With 24 HCP!
♥AJ43   ♥Q

♦J84   ♦965
♣94   ♣AQ2   OPENING LEAD: ♦K by West

    With South as Master Hand the loser count is 0♠, 0♥, 3♦, 1♣; That's 1 more than you can afford, a loser needs to be eliminated. When the Defense starts with ♦'s and collects 3 tricks in the suit it is obviously the ♣ loser that must be eliminated. At least 2 trump will likely be required to draw trump and 3 will be required to cover Dummy's ♥ losers. It's a ♣ loser that's the problem and there is no way to rid the Dummy of it's 2nd ♣ to allow trumping if they were available. Loser can not be ruffed and can't be discarded so the only option is the finesse. We can use the ♥A or make sure our Trump draw ends in Dummy; we can then lead a ♣ to the AQ tenace, playing the Q if East does not play the K. It's a 50-50 proposition, East either has the K or not. Note our analysis indicated that the finesse must work to make the hand, so it can be tried at any time after we gain the lead. There is no other way the contract can be made.