

Declarer Unblocking at Bridge  
(August 30, 2021)

Sometimes when you are the declarer, you have to be careful NOT to block yourself out of winning tricks. When the opening lead is made, STOP before you call for first card from the dummy. You should see right away that you have 9 top tricks; but, you must be very careful in the order in which you cash your tricks.

Example 1.	AK63 Q762 983 AJ		Contract: 3NT South
			Opening Lead: Queen of spades
	QJ109	84	
	J83	10954	Bidding: 1D 1H
	Q10	AK75	1N 2S
	9754	1062	2N 3N
	752		or 1D 1H
	AK		1N 3N
	J642		
	KQ83		

Analysis of the hand: Top tricks = 9 (2S, 3H, 4C). The problem in this hand is that you need to be careful NOT to block yourself out of getting all of those 9 tricks. When West leads the queen of spades, win it with the ace. Unblock the A/J of clubs. Lead a small heart to your ace and cash the king of hearts. Cash your K/Q of clubs. Lead a small spade to dummy's king. Now, cash your queen of hearts for the 9<sup>th</sup> trick. The key to playing this hand is to cash the high honor(s) from the short side first; or, you run the risk of blocking a suit.

Sometimes a suit is blocked from the very start. When the dummy comes down with a strong suit and you have no outside entries, you are helpless to take advantage of the winners in that suit. In this case, there is nothing you can do unless the opponents are kind enough to help you out.

Example 2.	QJ1042		
	963	875	
	AK		

The bigger tragedy is when you block a suit by failing to play the high card(s) from the short side first. You wind up in the wrong hand. Your partner's winning tricks die on the vine unless you have an outside entry.

A suit is blocked when you have winning cards stranded in one hand and no way to enter that hand in order to play those winning cards. It's too sad for words as the following hand painfully illustrates.

Example 3.	85		Contract: 3NT South
	86		
	62		Opening Lead: King of diamonds
	KQJ10765		
		KQ42	Bidding: 1N 3N
J976		Q1075	
KJ2		1043	
KQJ9		94	
83			
	A103		
	A943		
	A875		
	A2		

South is in a contract of 3NT. Total number of winners = 10 (1S, 1H, 1D, 7C). Unfortunately, when the hand was played the declarer played the 2 of clubs at trick 2; thus, blocking himself out of the wonderful 7 club tricks he was going to reap!

**ALWAYS PLAY THE HIGH HONOR(S) FROM THE SHORT HAND FIRST.**

Example 4.	AQ62		Contract 3NT South
	A6542		
	A		Opening Lead: King of clubs
	872		
		KJ4	Bidding: 1D 1H
		97	1N 2C*
		KQ863	2D 3N
		A43	

\* = New Minor Forcing

Analysis of the hand: Total tricks = 9 (4S, 1H, 3D, 1C). To take your nine tricks you must play carefully. First, win the opening lead. Lead a small diamond to the ace. Lead a small spade to your king and cash the jack of spades. Cash your K/Q of diamonds. Then lead a heart to dummy's ace. Now cash your A/Q of spades for 9 total tricks.

**REPEAT: ALWAYS PLAY THE HIGH HONOR(S) FROM THE SHORT HAND FIRST.**

A suit is blocked if you don't have the spot card you need to lead to the winners in the opposite hand.

Example 5.           AQ62

                          KJ

The suit is blocked because you have no small card in your hand to lead to dummy's winners. In the above example, you have no way to cash dummy's two winners unless you have an outside entry to the dummy. If this is the case, then play the king and overtake the jack with the ace or queen. You can still make three tricks in the suit.

A blocked suit might refer to any of the examples below:

(i)	KQ	(ii)	AJ	(iii)	Q	(iv)	AKQ
	AJxx		KQxxx		AKJxxx		Jxxxx

In each case it is normal to cash North's blocking honor card(s) first and then cross to the South hand to cash the remaining tricks in the suit. In order to do this, you will need an entry to the South hand in a different suit.

If you do not have an outside entry to the South hand, you would have to play the above combinations differently. In (i) you would cash the king and then overtake the queen, In (ii) you would cash the ace and then overtake the jack. In (iii) you would overtake the queen. In each case you would make five tricks (six in iii) if the opponents' cards were split 3-3. In (iv), you cannot overtake any of North's cards; so, unless you have an outside entry, you will make only three tricks in the suit.

Even if you did have a sure outside entry to the South hand, you might still play a blocked suit in a different way. For example, you might be able to combine the unblocking of the suit with using the blocking cards themselves as entries. See example 6 below.

Example 6.

A543  
10764  
KQ  
1043

Contract: 3NT South

Opening Lead: 2 of spades

K1082  
QJ8  
J63  
J86

Q96  
K932  
874  
A97

Bidding: 1D 1H  
2C 2S\*  
3N P

J7  
A5  
A10952  
KQ52

\* = shows spade stop; not 4<sup>th</sup> suit forcing to game

Please note that N/S reached a very shaky 3NT contract. Even in a bad contract, you must try to give yourself a chance to make the contract.

Play of the Hand:

West led the two of spades. Total tricks = 5 (1S, 1H, 3D). East won with the queen and led back the 9 (second highest from 3). Your jack is covered by the king. Win with the ace as you do not want a heart shift.

Normally, you would cash the king and queen of diamonds to **unblock** the suit. And, then cross to the South hand to cash the remaining diamonds for a total of 8 tricks. At trick 3, cash the king of diamonds and lead a low club toward your K/Q. Using the Rule of Eleven, you know that the spades are breaking 4-3. East played low and you win the king of clubs in your hand. Now lead a small diamond to the queen of diamonds to complete the **unblock** of the diamond suit. Lead another club toward your hand. If East ducks again, play your queen of clubs and cash out the diamonds to make 10 tricks.

Note: South kept dummy's second diamond as an entry that allowed him to lead a second club towards his hand.

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## Blocking the Opponents' Suit

Preventing the run of opponents' suit by blocking it is a play which does not come up very often. The diagnosis is usually made on the opening lead. The leader has led his fourth best. Therefore, you conclude that he did not have a sequence of honors. His partner must have one of the missing honors. By refusing to duck, you may compel the third hand either to discard his high card giving you a trick in the suit or to retain it resulting in a block of the suit.

Example 7.	A8 KQ95 AJ7 Q952		Contract: 3NT South
			Opening Lead: 3 of spades
KJ532 J32 8 J1084	Q7 A1086 106542 76	Bidding: 1D 1H 1N 3N	
	10964 74 KQ93 AK3		

West leads the 3 of spades. Total tricks = 8 (1S, 4D, 3C). A ninth trick is coming from the heart suit. However, the danger is that the opponents might run four spades and the ace of hearts. This can be done only if West has a five-card spade suit. Note: if he has only a four-card suit, there is no danger.

If West has five, East can have only two. The important point is that East must have either the king, queen, or the jack. If West had had all three, the proper lead would not have been the low card; but, the king. By playing your ace to the first trick, you will compel East to **unblock which gives you an additional spade stopper. If East retains his honor card, the suit will be blocked.**



Just as we unblock suits when we are trying to run a suit as declarer, we also need to do so on defense. Specifically, when we are defending notrump, we frequently try to run a long suit. Our goal is to set up that suit by knocking out the declarer's stopper(s) while also untangling and unblocking our cards in the suit. We want our partner to be able to cash the final tricks in the suit. I presented you with three examples last week.

#### Hand 1.

When partner leads a suit and we hold AJ2, we need to know what to do. Assuming that the dummy does not have an honor for us to hold onto our ace to capture, we win trick 1 with our ace. We should return the jack (giving count). Returning the jack also unblocks the suit. If we incorrectly return the two on the second trick and the queen is played from declarer's hand and won by our partner's king, we are stuck with the high card in the short side—the singleton jack. This blocks the suit. Return the jack at trick 2 and unblock the suit for your partner.

#### Hand 2.

When partner leads a suit and we hold AJ32, we play similarly as in Hand 1. Play the ace at trick one and return our remainder count at trick. This means we should return the two. We can afford to return low because we will NOT block the suit. We are left with J3 in the suit. The 3 is low enough that we can play that card later to return to partner so he can cash out the remainder of the suit.

#### Hand 3.

When partner leads a suit and we hold AJ102, we need to go out of our way to unblock the suit. Win the ace at trick 1 and return the jack at trick 2. If we lead back the 2 (giving remainder count) to partner, we will be left with the J/10 and the suit will be blocked. You must return the jack at trick 2, starting to unblock the suit. Note: this is an example of when it more important to unblock than to give correct count to your partner.

In conclusion, playing a suit the best way possible involves trying to take the most tricks as well as taking them in the order that is best. The best order can involve using the suit for transportation or just trying to take winners. When we are just trying to cash our winners, we want to do so in a way that allows us to run the suit. Unblocking a suit is sometimes hard to see. We must think a few trick ahead. If we try to keep in mind “untangling the suit,” then we will be able to avoid suit blockage and be able to more easily cash our tricks.

## Correction of Flannery Hand (August 23, 2021)

How do you bid the following hand?

Axx  
Kxxx  
AKx  
AKx

KQxx  
AQJxx  
xx  
xx

2D	4C
4H	4S
4N	5C
5N	7NT or 7H

2D = Flannery: 4S/5H (11-15 HCP)

4C = Slam Interest in hearts

4H = Minimum opener

4S = Kickback for hearts

4N = 1 or 4 key cards

5C = Queen ask; outside king ask

5S = Shows queen of hearts and king of spades

7NT or 7H

7NT scores higher at matchpoints