

Notrump Contracts—Part III
(July 26, 2021)

Today, I want to end our discussion of notrump contract hands with some basic information and tips on the play of the cards.

Safety Plays in Notrump Contracts

Recall from our lesson on June 21, 2021, that a safety play is a means of protecting against a bad break—a break that could possibly defeat your contract. It should be understood for the purposes of our discussion that you have no anxiety to prevent an opponent from obtaining the lead.

But, if you need two tricks immediately in a suit without letting an opponent in, you might not have the luxury of doing a safety play first. Certain safety plays cost nothing. They are merely precautionary plays.

Example 1. A943
 KQ1075

Holding nine cards, the only way to lose a trick in the suit is for one opponent to have all four, including the jack. You can discover which opponent might have all four cards to the jack by playing either the king or queen from the South hand at trick one. If West shows out, you can finesse the 10. If East shows out, you can finesse the 9. The above play is the first safety play which beginners are taught.

A slight variation of example one is illustrated by example two below.

Example 2. K965
 AQ874

With this combination of cards, can you lose a trick? Yes, if one opponent has all four outstanding cards. The next question is, can you do anything about it? Yes. But, it depends on which opponent holds all four cards to the J10xx.

a) If West holds all four, you must lose one trick. The cards would have been placed as follows:

K965
J1032 NONE
 AQ874

But, if East holds them, you can keep from losing any tricks by first making the **safety play** of leading the king from the dummy. The cards would have been placed as follows:

b) K965

 NONE J1032

 AQ874

The important thing is to find out **early** whether East has all four outstanding cards. The instinctive play of leading one high card from the South hand turns out to be the incorrect play in Example 2(b).

When a hand seems to be a cinch, always ask yourself the following question? What misfortune can befall me?!!

Example 3.	863	Contract: 3NT
	852	
	AKQ1042	Opening Lead: 3 of hearts
	10	
	A10	Bidding: 1C 1D
	AQ6	1N 3N
	53	
	A9843	

Analysis of Hand: You have 7 top tricks: 1 in spades, 2 in hearts (with the heart lead), 3 diamonds, 1 club. The outstanding diamonds are: J9876.

West leads the three of hearts, East plays the king (unblocking) and you win your ace. You breathe a sigh of relief that West didn't find a black suit lead. You turn your attention to the play of the diamond suit. You have seven top tricks. Everything seems to be on track to make this contract with ease. But what could go wrong? What is the safety play in this hand that will guarantee the contract?

Finessing the 10 of clubs is tempting hoping that West has been dealt four diamonds to the jack. However, the true safety play is to duck the first diamond completely. The crucial case occurs when West is dealt all the five missing diamonds. By ducking all around, you guarantee yourself five diamond tricks. Note that if you do finesse the 10 at trick one, you are held to only four diamond tricks. Down one.

The Dangerous Opponent*

When playing in any notrump contract, important questions to ask yourself are: Is one of my opponents a threat to my making this contract? What can I do to protect myself? How can I keep the dangerous opponent out of the lead?

Example 1.	AJ1092	Contract: 3NT
	873	
	KQ	Opening Lead: 5 of hearts
	J104	
	Q4	
	KJ6	
	AJ105	
	AQ93	

Analysis of the Hand: You have 7 tricks: 1S, 1H (with the heart lead), 4D, 1C. West leads the five of hearts. East plays the 10. What is the heart position, who is dangerous, and what can you do to protect yourself?

When East plays the 10 (third hand high principle), West is marked to hold the AQxx(x) of hearts. You cannot afford to duck trick one, lest a heart return through the K-J reduces you to rubble. You win the 10 with your jack of hearts.

The heart length is with West; but, East is the dangerous opponent. A heart lead from East finesses you out of your king; but, a heart from West (ace or low) converts your king into a second stopper. This is the key in determining your line of play.

With seven tricks certain, either black suit could generate the extra winners. Your course of action should be clear: cross to dummy in diamonds and finesse in clubs. Only concern yourself with a losing finesse: If the king of clubs is with East, your contract is safe because the hearts are stopped (West cannot hurt you by returning a heart). You have developed two extra tricks in the club suit.

Should West return a spade, refuse to take the finesse. Play your ace and cash your remaining tricks to make your contract of 3NT.

Note: If you try the spade finesse instead of the club finesse and the spade finesse loses, East will return a heart. Now you are in danger of losing the next four heart tricks when West started with AQ9xx. Down one.

*Material and examples taken from Three Notrump in Depth by Augie Boehm.

Example 2.	J63	Contract: 3NT
	A6	
	AK742	Opening Lead: king of clubs
	874	
	AK74	Bidding: 1H 2D
	KJ1093	2S 3C
	6	3N
	A93	Flannery: 2D 2N
		3C 3N

Analysis of the Hand: You have 7 tricks: 2S, 2H, 2D, 1C,

West leads the king of clubs which you duck. He continues with the 10 of clubs (which means he started with the KQJ10(x) of clubs) which you duck one more time. West drives out your ace of clubs and East discards the 5 of spades.

West is clearly the dangerous opponent, having started with five clubs. If you can manage to lose any trick to East, rather than West, that will be the correct line of play. Laying down the ace of hearts and then finessing your nine is highly risky. A much safer play is to lead the jack of hearts and let it ride. If it loses, the remainder of the suit is established, guaranteeing you four hearts, two diamonds, two spades and a club.

If the heart finesse wins, continue the suit, return to your hand with a high spade and cash the king of hearts. If the queen of hearts has appeared, you're making an extra trick. But, if West holds queen fourth in hearts, you cannot risk cashing a fourth heart. Your only play for the hand now is to cash your other top spade and hope that the queen drops. If it doesn't, then you are down one.

Example 3.	7543	Contract: 3N
	A105	
	AJ854	Opening lead: 7 of hearts
	Q	
	K6	Bidding: 1C (1S) 2D (2H)
	83	3D (P) 3H (P)
	K1032	3N
	AK762	

Analysis of the Hand: You have 6 tricks: 1H, 2D, 3C.

Your first instinct is to duck the heart lead. That's correct in a vacuum but NOT on this deal. The risk is that when East gets the lead, he will instantly shift to a spade. When West holds the ace, it's curtains. Therefore, you must play your ace of hearts at trick one. East is the dangerous hand. With your heart stopper erased, both East and West qualify as dangerous opponents. You have to run the next eight tricks without losing the lead. This means that you need all 5 diamond tricks. Begin by unblocking the queen of clubs. Come to your hand with the king of diamonds and cash the A/K of clubs. Try to get a count on the E/W hands. Then, lead the 10 of diamonds. It is imperative that you cash your A/K of clubs prior to leading the second diamond. Why? When West's queen falls, you make 3NT.

Unblocking Plays

We have already discussed the importance of unblocking in a suit when you are the defenders. (See February 15th lesson.) Equally important is to unblock high cards when you are the declarer.

Example 1a. QJ1065

 AK

Play the A/K as early as possible. If you have no outside entries to dummy, hopefully the opponents will help you by leading the suit for you later in the hand.

Example 1b. KJ1065

 AQ

If North has no outside entries, play the ace and overtake the queen with the king.

Example 1c. QJ1065

 K2

If West leads the ace of this suit, play your king (assuming you have no outside entries to the suit).

Example 2. (D) QJ10
 (Cl) KQJ109

(D)4

(D) 9

(D) A73
(Cl) 32

South is in a notrump contract. North has no outside entries in either spades or hearts. West leads the four of diamonds. East plays the nine. If South lets the 10 hold and leads a club, the defenders will hold up taking the ace of clubs. South cannot ever get to the dummy to cash all the now good clubs. At trick one, South must play the ace of diamonds. Lead clubs to drive out the ace. Eventually, the declarer can get to the dummy with a diamond.

Note: The unblocking play of the ace of diamonds preserved an entry to dummy to cash the remaining clubs.

Example 3.

KJ5
QJ1084
64
753

Contract: 3N

Opening Lead: 4 of spades

Q1074
762
Q952
Q8

832
AK3
J83
J1096

Bidding: 1D 1H
2N 3N

A96
95
AK107
AK42

West leads his fourth best spade which is covered by dummy's five spot. East plays the eight. South could see that the North, East and South hands together possessed seven spades higher than the four spot led by West ($11-4 = 7$). Since the North and South hands held six of these, East's eight spot had to be the only one he had that was higher than the four. Thus, West must hold the spade queen.

The key play for South is to win the eight with his ACE (unblocking play) and not the nine. This crucial unblocking play allowed him to now be able to finesse West for an additional entry to dummy should it be needed. After winning the ace of spades, declarer sets about to knock out the A/K of hearts to bring home his contract of 3NT. He has established two entries in the spade suit by the play of his ace at trick one.

Assignment: How do you plan to play the following hand?

962
105
73
AKJ964

Contract: 3NT

Opening Lead: queen of spades

QJ1073
KJ64
984
2

64
Q92
K1065
Q873

AK5
A873
AQJ2
105

Next Week: Penalty Doubles (Please have a copy of a Convention Card at hand.)

Drury and Reverse/Two-Way Drury

The following hand was taken from the **Roanoke Times**:

Your Hand: A6
Q9763
A7
A983

The Bidding: P (P) 1H (P) 2C* = Drury; must be alerted.
2C* (P) ???

Drury is a passed hand 2C* response to a major suit opening in the third or fourth position. It is used on invitational hands; and, it is designed to allow the partnership to stop at the two-level when the opener has a light opener (10-12 HCP). The bid promises three-card support and a minimum of 10-11 HCP (not enough points to open the hand in first or second position). **Reverse/Two-way Drury** is a 2D* response to a major suit opening in the third or fourth position. The bid promises four-card support and a minimum of 10-11 HCP.

The opener reevaluates his/her hand to place the contract in 2H (minimum) or to make a bid that is game going. In the above hand, the opener holds 14 HCP. Knowing that his partner holds about 10/11 HCP and three hearts, he should bid 4H.

Additional Information:

Many people play that Drury or Reverse/Two-way Drury can be used even when the 1H/1S opening is doubled.

P (P) 1H/1S (X)

2C* or 2D* = Bids have the same meaning as above

Many people play that Drury or Reverse/Two-way Drury can be used even when a 1H opening is overcalled with 1S.

P (P) 1H (1S)

2C* or 2D* = Bids have the same meaning as above

See Convention Card under **Major Opening**. The 2C or 2D bids must be **alerted**.