

Strategies for Eliminating Losers (May 3, 2021)

The contract is set. The opening lead has been made. You've identified your loser(s) in terms of the master hand. The next step involves planning how to avoid the loser(s).

The two types of losers are ones you have a chance to eliminate and the others that are unavoidable. NOTE: There is no point in wasting energy on the unavoidable ones, i.e., the ace of trumps! Rather you want to concentrate on the loser(s) and way(s) in which you might be able to eliminate them.

Three Basic Ways to Eliminate Losers

- (1)**Pitching:** by cashing a winner in the short hand in a suit in which the master hand is void and is discarding a loser from his hand;
- (2)**Ruffing:** by trumping a loser in the short hand; and,
- (3)**Finessing:** by leading toward your tenaces, i.e., AQx, KJ10x, etc.

These three basic ways are listed in order of preference. A pitch is better than a ruff; both are superior to the finesse. This preferred order is based on the probability of success. If trumps are drawn and you can pitch on a winner in the dummy, it's a 100% sure thing. If no trumps are outstanding, then a ruff is a sure thing; but, often ruffing needs to be done prior to completely drawing all the trump. It always carries the risk of an overruff.

A finesse is 50%, by far the least reliable of the three ways for eliminating losers. Recommendation: Before settling on trying a finesse, try to see if there is a better way, either a pitch or a ruff, to eliminate the loser.

to preserve as many entries in dummy as may be needed to establish the spade suit for the diamond discard. Don't thoughtlessly waste the king of diamonds and the ace/king of clubs until the spade suit is established for the needed diamond pitch!

(2)By Ruffing—for a ruff to exist, the following three conditions must be met:

The short hand must have fewer cards in the suit than does the master hand.

The short hand must have a trump.

The master hand must have an entry (in order to lead the card to be ruffed).

There is always the danger of an overruff if the opponents still have trumps higher than the trump in the short hand. Of course, the more times the suit is played, the greater this risk becomes. General Rule: ruffing the second round is pretty safe; but, by the fourth round, you should expect one of the opponents to be able to overruff.

| | | |
|------------|-------|------------------------------|
| Example 3. | 4 | |
| | KQJ10 | Contract: 7H |
| | A832 | |
| | KQ64 | Opening Lead: 2 of clubs |
| | A62 | (The opponents did not bid.) |
| | A9876 | |
| | K7 | |
| | A83 | |

Losers: Spades = 2 (avoidable)
Hearts = 0
Diamonds = 0
Clubs = 0

Total Losers = 2

The only way to eliminate the two spade losers is by ruffing them. Note that dummy's trumps are so strong there is no danger of an overruff.

(3)By finessing. The finesse should be the last option you use in eliminating a loser. You may think an opponent holds a certain card based upon the auction (s/he may have made a take out double or made an overcall). But, sometimes opponents make unbelievable bids (overcall with three points, etc.) So, before committing to a finesse, always check to see if you have another way to eliminate the loser.

Example 4. K32
 AQ Contract: 7S
 AKJ105
 752 Opening Lead: 3 of hearts

 AQJ94 (The opponents did not bid.)
 82
 Q74
 AKQ

Lowers: Spades = 0
 Hearts = 1 (avoidable)
 Diamonds = 0
 Clubs = 0

Total Losers = 1

You have two options for eliminating the heart loser. Take the finesse at trick one or pitch your second heart on the diamond suit. Because the finesse is only 50% certain, it is preferable to take the pitch which is a 100% certainty.

Practice Exercises

For each of the following exercises, identify any possible pitches, ruffs, or finesses.

Exercise 1. 32
 KJ43
 AKQ8 Contract: 4H
 764 Opening Lead: 4 of diamonds

 A87
 A752 (The opponents did not bid.)
 J9
 KQ83

| | | |
|---------|---|---|
| Lowers: | <u>North as the Master Hand</u> Spades = 1 (avoidable) Hearts = 2 (avoidable) Diamonds = 0 Clubs = 2 | <u>South as the Master Hand</u> Spades = 2 Hearts = 2 Diamonds = 0 Clubs = 3 |
|---------|---|---|

Total Losers = 5

Total Losers = 7

Designate the North Hand as the Master Hand.

Pitches: Two pitches in spades are available in diamonds.

Ruffs: North can ruff his spade loser.

Finesses: Finesse the jack of hearts, hoping West has the queen.

Lead towards the KQxx of clubs, hoping East has the ace.

Exercise 2.

92

AKJ6

QJ98

K87

Contract: 3D

Opening Lead: Queen of clubs

853

532

A10532

A6

(The opponents did not bid.)

Losers: Spades = 3 (2 unavoidable and 1 avoidable)

Hearts = 1 (avoidable)

Diamonds = 1 (avoidable)

Clubs = 0

Total Losers = 5

Pitches: Possible pitch on the fourth round of hearts.

Ruffs: The third round of spades can be ruffed.

Finesses: Lead toward the jack of hearts hoping West has the queen.

Run the queen of diamonds, hoping East has the king.

Exercise 3.

QJ2

Q3

K74

AKJ64

Contract: 6S

Opening Lead: Jack of diamonds

AK1094

KJ7

AQ65

5

(The opponents did not bid.)

Losers: Spades = 0
 Hearts = 1 (unavoidable)
 Diamonds = 1 (avoidable)
 Clubs = 0

Total Losers = 2

Pitches: Pitch the diamond loser on the clubs.

Practice Hand: Occasionally, the normal method of play should be departed from because of information gleaned from the bidding.

| | | |
|--------|--------|--------------------------------|
| | North | |
| | 754 | |
| | 6532 | Bidding: West North East South |
| | AKQ | 1H P P 1S |
| | J62 | P 2H P 4S |
| West | East | Contract: 4S |
| K9 | J108 | Opening Lead: King of hearts |
| AKJ874 | 9 | |
| J104 | 976532 | |
| 108 | 953 | |
| | South | |
| | AQ632 | |
| | Q10 | |
| | 8 | |
| | AKQ74 | |

Losers: Spades = 2 to 3
 Hearts = 2 (unavoidable)
 Diamonds = 0
 Clubs = 0

West leads the king of hearts, ace of hearts and the jack of hearts. Declarer ruffs the third heart. You have no diamond losers or club losers. You have to play the spades to lose only one trick. Five spades to the KJ1098 are out against you.

What is the proper way to play the spades? West almost surely holds the king of spades as part of his opening bid. Therefore, the finesse of the queen is doomed. You have but one chance

and that is if West holds exactly two spades, one of which is the king. Play your ace of spades and a small spade. Your lucky day, West takes the king. Now your queen pulls East's last trump. Four spades bid and made! How valuable was the bidding in guiding you to the only play to make the hand.

Let's look at your assignment from last week's lesson. In the following hand, which hand should be designated as the master hand? How do you plan to make 4H?

2
KQ9xx
Qx
Qxxxx

Contract: 4H

Opening Lead: Ace of clubs

(The opponents did not bid.)

K9xx
AJ10xx
AJx
x

Whether you designate the North or the South hand as the Master Hand, you have the same number of losers in each hand.

North as the Master Hand: Spades = 1
Hearts = 0
Diamonds = 1
Clubs = 5

South as the Master Hand: Spades = 4
Hearts = 0
Diamonds = 2
Clubs = 1

Total Losers = 7

Total Losers = 7

West leads the ace of clubs. He sees a problem when the dummy hits the table. He doesn't want to continue the clubs for fear of setting up the queen. If he leads a spade, it would help you. If he leads the diamond, you get a free finesse. His best option is to lead a trump at trick two. You win the trump in dummy and lead the spade toward your king.

Let's say West wins and leads another trump. Now you essentially crossruff the rest of the hand, ruffing spades in dummy and clubs in your hand. At some point you try the diamond finesse. Note: you have a chance to get rid of a diamond in dummy should East play the ace of spades, making your king good for a diamond discard.

Next Week: Making a Plan of Action

