

The Master Hand
(April 26, 2021)

The bidding is completed. You find yourself in a suit contract. The opening lead is made. Dummy is tabled. **Prior to playing to trick one, you need to analyze the hand and make a plan.**

Recall from our last lesson the six questions you need to ask yourself:

- (a) What information can I glean from the auction and the opening lead?
- (b) How many losers do I have?
- (c) How can I eliminate the avoidable losers?
- (d) How do I plan to play the hand?
- (e) Is there any reason for me to delay drawing trumps?
- (f) What card do I play at trick one?

Today, I want to focus on Step two: How many losers do I have? In making this determination, **first designate which hand is the Master Hand.** The other hand then becomes the **Short Hand.** Losers should always be counted from the master hand side.

Normally, the master hand holds more length in the trump suit. Even if you have a 4-4 trump fit, always designate one hand as the master hand and count losers from that hand. Let's look at some examples which were taken from the book When to Draw Trumps by Adam Parrish.

Example 1.	Kxx xxx Axx Q10xx AQJxx x Qxx KJxx	Contract: 3S Opening Lead: King of hearts (The opponents did not bid.)
------------	---	--

Losers: Spades = 0
Hearts = 1 (unavoidable)
Diamonds = 2 (one unavoidable; the other possibly avoidable)
Clubs = 1 (unavoidable)

Total Losers: 4

You have to lose a heart and the ace of clubs (both unavoidable). Try to hold the diamond losers to one by leading toward the queen in hopes that East has the king. If so, you will make 4S on the hand.

Example 2.	xxx AQJx xx KJxx AQ109x xxx Axx xx	Contract: 2S Opening Lead: King of diamonds (The opponents did not bid.)
------------	---	--

Losers: Spades = 2 (possibly avoidable)
Hearts = 1 (possibly avoidable)
Diamonds = 2 (one avoidable; the other unavoidable)
Clubs = 2 (one possible avoidable; the other unavoidable)

Total Losers: 7

In this hand, you need to eliminate at least two losers. When the king of diamonds is led, hold up taking until the second round. Then ruff a little diamond in the dummy. In playing the spade suit, first finesse the ten and next the queen. If all else fails, try finessing the club king as a last resort.

TIP: There is no suit combination that is made worse by having the defense lead the suit for you. This is an important point which is applicable to all suit combinations. For example, the combo below is a suit you want the opponents to break for you. If they lead the suit, you are guaranteed at least one trick if you play second hand low! If you break the suit, you will probably not take any tricks unless the defense makes a mistake.

Qxx
 A10xx Kxx
 Jxx

Example 3.	J8754 942 A72 54 K9 1054 K93 AKQ63	Contract: 2S Opening Lead: King of hearts (The opponents did not bid.)
------------	---	--

Bidding: 1NT-2H-2S-PASS. NOTE: The Master Hand is the dummy due to its length in trumps.

Losers: Spades = 3 (at least 2 are unavoidable)
 Hearts = 3 (unavoidable)
 Diamonds = 1 (avoidable)
 Clubs = 0

Total Losers: 7

Although this contract has little chance to make, the 2S contract should fair better than letting your partner play in 1NT.

The master hand is usually the one holding length in the trump suit. But, how do you designate the master hand when you are in a 4-4 fit? Neither hand has longer trumps than the other. So, which hand should become the master hand? It can be either. You MUST choose one, either the dummy or your own, to be the master hand before making a plan to eliminate losers and to plan the play of the hand.

Here are some things to consider:

- (1) Shape—the hand which has more shape (stronger side suit) often will have fewer losers and should be made the master hand.
- (2) Count losers from both sides and choose the hand having fewer losers.
- (3) If the shape and number of losers are the same in both hands, select the hand with stronger trumps to be the master hand. Use the smaller trumps in the other hand for ruffing purposes.

Example 4.

Axxx
xx
xx
KQJ10x

Contract: 2S

Opening Lead: King of hearts

Kxxx
Axx
Qxx
xxx

(The opponents did not bid.)

Treating South as the master hand:

Treating North as the master hand:

Losers: Spades = 2
Hearts = 2
Diamonds = 3
Clubs = 1

Spades = 2
Hearts = 1
Diamonds = 2
Clubs = 1

Total Losers: 8

Total Losers = 6

Make North the master hand because it is more shapely; and, has fewer losers.

Example 5.

AKJ3
QJ3
98
Q742

10542
K76
Q653
K5

Contract: 2S

Opening Lead: Ace of diamonds

(The opponents did not bid.)

Both hands have four trumps and both hands have the same shape. Whether you treat North or South as the master hands, you will find that both hands have seven losers.

Treating North as the master hand:

Spades = 1 (may be unavoidable)
Hearts = 1 (unavoidable)
Diamonds = 2 (unavoidable)
Clubs = 3 (one unavoidable; and,
two maybe avoidable)

Total Losers = 7

Treating South as the master hand:

Spades = 1
Hearts = 1
Diamonds = 4
Clubs = 1

Total Losers = 7

On this deal, both hands have seven losers and the same shape. Make North the master hand because its trumps are much stronger.

Moysian Fit (4-3 Trump Fit)

Sometimes through “No fault of your partner!”, you somehow end up in a 4-3 trump fit. The master hand will always be the hand with the four trumps. Let's look at the hand below:

K
AJx
Kxxx
Kxx

Axx
Kxxx
Jxx
xxx

Contract: 2H
Opening Lead: Jack of clubs

Possible Bidding: 1D-1H-2H-P

Losers: Spades = 1
Hearts = 2
Diamonds = 3
Clubs = 3

Total Losers: 9

We will be looking at strategies for playing the Moysian Fit hands in a subsequent lesson.

Practice Exercise:

North
9862
K9
AK75
Q72

Contract: 6S

Opening Lead: Queen of diamonds

(The opponents did not bid.)

West	East
74	1053
Q108	J643
QJ10	9832
K8643	95

South
AKQJ
A752
64
AJ10

With 4-4 trumps, designate the South hand as the master hand because of the superior trump strength.

Losers: Spades = 0
Hearts = 2 (avoidable if you can ruff them with dummy's small trumps)
Diamonds = 0
Clubs = 1 (avoidable if the club finesse holds)

Total losers: 3

The most important question to ask yourself is if there is any reason NOT to draw trumps immediately?
YES! You need to ruff two heart losers in the dummy.

To make 6S, you need either a successful club finesse and one heart ruff or 2 heart ruffs. Should the club finesse work, you have a chance to make seven. You cannot afford to draw two rounds of spades before going after the two heart ruffs. Lack of entries makes this a bad choice. Note that if you draw two rounds of trumps, play A/K of hearts and ruff a heart, you don't have an easy way to get back to your hand to get the second heart ruff.

If the club finesse fails, West could lead a third round of trumps; thus, removing your last trump. This leaves you with a heart loser to eat. Down one! But, if you give up on taking the club finesse by playing the ace and another club, you forego one of the ways you have to make six on the hand.

If you cash a second diamond and return to your hand via a ruff, you shorten yourself in the master hand. Also, you have left yourself open to a force in diamonds.

Plan of Action:

The best strategy is to try for two heart ruffs, using the trump suit for transportation.

- (1) Play ace of diamonds on opening lead.
- (2) Cash one round of trumps.
- (3) Play A/K of hearts; ruff a heart.
- (4) Return to your hand with a trump and ruff your last heart.
- (5) If the second ruff holds, take the club finesse. Note that you are in dummy for the last time. It's now or never to try the club finesse.

Reminder: In playing any contract, try to give yourself as many options as possible to make the hand.

Assignment: In the following hand, which hand should be designated as the master hand? How do you play the hand to make 4H? If you have time, text me with your answer.

2
KQ9xx
Qx
Qxxxx

K9xx
AJ10xx
AJx
x

Contract: 4H

Opening Lead: Ace of clubs. (The opponents did not bid.)

Next Week: Strategies for Eliminating Losers

Your assignment from last week was to analyze the following hand. Let's look at it together. To facilitate the discussion of the hand, I have included all four of the hands.

<u>North</u>		
AQ6		
QJ63		
86		Contract: 4S
J1094		Opening Lead: King of clubs
<u>West</u>	<u>East</u>	
87	J92	
K82	10754	The opponents did not bid.
J932	754	
KQ72	A86	
<u>South</u>		
K10543		Losers: Spades = 1
A9		Hearts = 1
AKQ10		Diamonds = 1
53		Clubs = 2
		Total Losers: 5

Ways to eliminate the losers:

Spades (hope the suit splits 3-2, the J is singleton or that East holds Jxxx)

Hearts (finesse for the king by leading queen of hearts and letting it ride)

Diamonds (hope jack of diamonds is doubleton or tripleton, ruff the third or fourth round, finesse for the jack, pitch on the jack of hearts should the heart finesse lose)

Clubs (the club losers are unavoidable)

Plan: The two club losers are unavoidable. Multiple options exist for eliminating the diamond loser. Your best option depends on what happens in hearts. If the heart finesse loses, then pitch the losing diamond on the jack of hearts. If it wins, you still should try to eliminate the diamond loser. Ruffing is your best option. Because your plan for the rest of the hand depends on the outcome of the heart finesse, take it early (TIMING).

Is there any reason not to draw trumps? Yes. You might need to ruff a diamond. Dummy has no outside entries except in the trump suit. It is your only ENTRY back to the good jack of hearts for the diamond pitch.

Play of the Hand:

Cross to dummy with high trump and run the queen of hearts (first priority). If it holds or is covered, plan to ruff a diamond for an overtrick (assuming the trumps split).

Cash dummy's other high trump and then play two rounds of diamonds; if the jack of diamonds has not appeared, ruff the third round of diamonds with dummy's low trump. Return to your hand with the heart ace. Draw the remaining trump, and cash your diamond winner.

If the heart finesse loses, win the return and cash the king of spades. Unblock the ace of hearts, enter dummy with the trump, and cash the jack of hearts, pitching the diamond loser from your hand.

Note: TIMING is important in this hand. Try the heart finesse EARLY. The outcome of the finesse will affect the rest of the play. Be careful drawing all of your trumps as you may need the high trump in dummy as an ENTRY to cash the jack of hearts for a pitch of a diamond if the heart finesse should lose.
