

Trump Suit Contracts – An Overview
(April 19, 2021)

One of the most important things you can do to improve your declarer play is to get into the habit of taking as much time as you need prior to playing to trick one. The opening lead is made and dummy is tabled. Before playing to trick one, take time to analyze the hand and make a plan of action.

Concentrate on the following:

1. What do I know about the defenders' hands?
2. How many loser(s) do I have?
3. How do I eliminate the loser(s)?
4. How do I plan to play the hand?
5. Is there any reason for not drawing trumps immediately?
6. What card should I play at trick one?

Asking yourself these six questions should become routine prior to playing to trick one on any hand. Let's look at each question separately.

1. What do I know about the defenders' hands?

You know two important pieces of information—the auction and the opening lead. Other information will become available as the play of the hand ensues, i.e., defensive signals/carding, distributional information when a defender follows (or fails to follow) suit, etc.

2. How many losers do I have?

Once you have processed all the information available from the bidding and opening lead, your focus should shift to your hand and the dummy. In a NT contract, the declarer counts winners; but, in a suit contract, the declarer usually counts losers.

NOTE: The one time you might want to count winners rather than losers is if you end up playing the hand as a crossruff. In a future lesson, we will look at how best to play crossruffs.

In counting losers, you look at each suit separately beginning with the trump suit. Let's look at the following hand.

Dummy

Qxx

9x

Kxxxx

xxx

Contract: 4S

Opening Lead: King of clubs

Declarer

AKJxx

AKx

A9

xxx

Looking at first glance, it's natural to think that you have three club losers; and, the rest of the tricks belong to you. You **MUST** avoid this trap. Always take stock of your losers in each suit.

Spades = 0

Hearts = 1

Diamonds = 0

Clubs = 3

Obviously, the three club losers are unavoidable. The heart loser is avoidable. You must ruff it prior to drawing three rounds of trumps. Let's say that the opponents cash their three winners in clubs and then shift to a diamond. If the declarer thoughtlessly draws three rounds of trumps, she will end up with a heart loser she cannot "eat".

Her mistake was in counting her heart losers as zero instead of as one. She failed to consider how to avoid the heart loser until it was too late. This example is very simplistic; but, it illustrates the importance of counting losers in each suit prior to playing to trick one. Obviously, she needed to delay drawing three rounds of trumps prior to ruffing her heart loser.

In counting losers, you should always designate one hand as the **Master Hand** (the hand with trump length) and the other hand as the **Short Hand**. Note: Even if you have a 4-4 trump fit, it is important to designate which hand is the Master Hand and count losers from the standpoint of that hand.

Even though you may end up the declarer, should the dummy hold more trumps than your hand, it should be designated as the master hand. Perhaps dummy has transferred you to two hearts through the following bidding sequence: 1NT-2D-2H. She should hold at least 5 hearts; but, you may hold only two. Her hand becomes the Master Hand.

The purpose of counting losers is to make you aware of every potential loser. NOTE: You cannot make a plan to eliminate the loser(s), until you perform this all important step.

3. How do I eliminate the losers?

After you have determined the losers, you will have a better idea as to whether the hand is a lay down or if you are going to have to do a lot of work in order to make the contract.

The three basic ways to eliminate losers are:

1. By pitching on a long suit.
2. By ruffing.
3. By finessing.

These ways are listed in order of preference. Although the finesse is a powerful tool, it is best to see if you can eliminate the loser(s) by pitching or ruffing. Relying on a finesse is but a 50% chance at best. In later lessons, we will explore strategies to eliminate losers in order to optimize your chances of making the contract.

4. How do you plan to play the hand?

After you have identified your losers and explored ways to eliminate them, it is time to make your plan of action. You need to consider the following:

- a. The drawing (or not) of trumps;
- b. The knocking out of honors to set up your winners in a suit;
- c. The eliminating of the losers which you have identified;
- d. And most important, the **order** in which you need to do all of these things.

Your plan should always begin with an assessment of your contract in relation to your avoidable and unavoidable losers (ones you can do nothing about). Your main focus needs to be on how to eliminate the avoidable losers either by pitching, ruffing or finessing. Try to prioritize which loser to eliminate first. Special attention needs to be given to the timing and entries needed to accomplish your end of making your contract.

Let's look at the following example:

Dummy

xxx
9x
Q10xx
AJ9x

Declarer

KQJ105
AJx
KJxx
x

The contract is 4S. The opening lead is the king of clubs.

Losing Tricks: Spades = 1 (unavoidable)
Hearts = 2 (one is unavoidable; the second is avoidable - it can be ruffed)
Diamonds = 1 (unavoidable)
Clubs = 0

Loser Assessment: unavoidable = 3; avoidable = 1

In planning the play, the declarer must try to trump one heart in the dummy. This strategy requires losing a heart trick early prior to drawing all the trumps (TIMING).

5. Is there any reason for not drawing trumps immediately?

When to draw (or not to draw trumps) is part of the planning stage. However, it is such an important factor in the play of suit contracts that it should be given first priority in your plan of action.

The main question you need to ask yourself prior to playing a card at trick one is if **there is any reason for not drawing trumps immediately.** All of the reasons will involve **TIMING** and **ENTRIES.** The most common reasons not to draw trumps include:

1)ruffing losers in the short hand (timing).

2)playing the hand as a crossruff in which you are trying to score each trump separately (timing).

3)using the trump suit as an entry to execute a finesse, etc. (entry).

As a general rule, if you have no cards to ruff, no losers to pitch and no entry issues, you **MUST** draw all the trumps as quickly as possible. Your goal is to prevent the opponents from scoring any of their small trumps.

And finally,

6. What card should I play at Trick one?

By the time you get to this point in your analysis, the decision of which card to play to trick one should be clear.

NOTE: All of your thinking should occur prior to playing to trick one. On some hands, it can be crucial the card you play from dummy at trick one. This can be especially true if that card might be needed as a possible ENTRY later in the hand.

Let's look at the following hand which was taken from **When to Draw Trumps** by Adam Parrish.

Dummy

xxx

xx

Axx

Axxxx

Contract: 6S

Opening Lead: 3 of diamonds

Declarer

AQJ10x

Ax

KQx

KQx

Losing Tricks: Spades = 1
Hearts = 1
Diamonds = 0
Clubs = 0

Ways to eliminate losers: Spades: finesse
Hearts: pitch on clubs

Loser Assessment: Unavoidable: 0
Avoidable: 2

It might seem obvious to win the ace of diamonds and take the trump finesse. But, let's look further prior to playing to trick one. You see that you have a chance to make all 13 tricks with a successful trump finesse and a heart pitch on the clubs. But, you're in 6S, not 7S. So, your focus should be on eliminating one of the losers. Even at matchpoints this should be your main goal. You reached a good slam with only 29 HCP. So, just making the contract should get you most of the matchpoints. You will lose a lot more matchpoints if you try for the overtrick and go down.

Which loser should you try to eliminate? The trump finesse looks like a 50% proposition. But, it may be worse than that. If you win the ace of diamonds and take the spade finesse, the lead will be in your hand. If East held Kx of spades, you could cash your ace and capture his king. Otherwise, you will need to reenter dummy to take another finesse. Note that your only other entry to the dummy is the ace of clubs. But, that will block the club suit and gives up on getting a heart pitch on the long clubs in dummy.

Even if East held the king of spades, you might not be able to avoid a spade loser. If East has the Kxxx of spades, you don't have enough entries to dummy to finesse for a third time.

The setting up of clubs for a heart pitch is much more promising. Any time clubs are 3-2, you're fine. If they're 4-1, you can ruff once and set up the suit. BUT, you will need an entry to the dummy to cash the good club and pitch your losing heart. That's why you might want to think twice before playing dummy's ace of diamonds at trick one!

Enough analysis of what ifs. Is there any reason to delay drawing trumps? NO. Win the diamond lead in your hand. Play the ace of spades followed by the queen. Take East's diamond return in your hand and draw the remaining trumps. Then play on clubs. If the clubs are 4-1, ruff them good and use the ace of diamonds to enter the dummy in order to pitch your heart loser on the fifth club.

NOTE: In playing the club suit, it is best to cash the high cards in the short hand first. The last thing you want to do is BLOCK the suit!

Assignment:

For the hand below, follow the six steps as outlined at the beginning of the lesson. The opponents did not bid.

AQ6
QJ63
86
J1094

Contract: 4S

K10543
A9
AKQ10
53

Opening Lead: King of clubs

Card Combo: For fun!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

How do you play the following card combination to give yourself the best chance to make all five tricks?

J109

You are in the dummy. Assume you have an outside entry to dummy.

AK654

Normally, the finesse of the queen of diamonds would be postponed for the second round. But, in this case it is not proper to do so because playing the ace of diamonds sacrifices an important card in the dummy. And, a trick will be lost if East should hold Qxxx of diamonds. With this holding, a first-round finesse is recommended. The chances of a singleton queen in West's hand are less likely than that East holds queen fourth in the suit.

Next Week:

The Master Hand

