

Declarer Play in NT Contracts

This time, we are exploring something many players find very tricky: **Declarer play in No Trump contracts.**

Fortunately, there are some tips and techniques to greatly improve your success rate.

Let's look at how to go about things.

The fundamental message is **COUNT AND PLAN**

Your side has won the auction, and you are declarer in a NT contract. The opponents have made the opening lead, and dummy is tabled. The first thing you do is **count and plan**. Even if the opening lead happens to be a suit where dummy holds a singleton, so there is no decision to be made about what card to play, **DO NOT PLAY IT YET!!**

(That applies to dummy too- only play a card when declarer asks you to!!). **WAIT**, while you make your plan.

WHY??

- 1 Even the seemingly simplest hands take a few moments to work out your line of play.
- 2 If you start playing immediately, you will find it very hard to pause later to formulate your plan. The time to plan is **BEFORE** you play to trick 1.
- 3 Many contracts are lost because of a mistake on trick 1, which would have been avoided by making your plan first.

The first part of the plan is **How many tricks am I aiming to make?**

Well, that's just the number of tricks you've bid to make, isn't it?

NOT NECESSARILY!!!! Why is that?

Example 1: You have bid to the full extent of your hands. When dummy goes down, your contract looks tough: you need to work hard to come up with a plan that gives you the best chance of getting home. This is a very common scenario. Proper planning will be critical. **Your AIM is to make your contract.**

Example 2: Dummy looks great! It's pretty clear your contract is going to make.

Say you're in 3NT, and you can see an easy 9 tricks. The temptation here is to just play off the 9 tricks and congratulate yourself on bidding and making game. But think. When you're playing Duplicate Pairs, it's likely that most other pairs playing your hand will also be in 3NT. If everyone else makes 10, you have scored an outright bottom- you might as well have gone 1 or 2 off.

If you can see your 9 tricks, try to work out a line of play so you can make 10, without risking going off. If you can see 10, work out how to make 11. Overtricks are very important in duplicate bridge.

Try to get used to this mindset. Here, your AIM is to make with overtricks!

Example 3: Your contract looks hopeless! You might have opened a 12-point 1NT, and everyone passes. You are now declaring in 1NT, but can't see any realistic possibility of 7 tricks.

Don't let that sinking feeling dominate your thoughts. Think- if most other pairs are also playing a weak NT, the chances are that quite a few others sitting with your hand are facing the same problem. Remember why we play a weak NT - it has great pre-emptive value. We have to accept that sometimes we'll be playing a contract that has no chance to make. Your 1NT bid might have kept the opposition from bidding a part score: if they'd bid and made 2♥ or 2♠ for example, they'd make 110, or 3♥ or 3♠, 140. **In such cases, if you are vulnerable, 1 off for -100 could be a great score, but 2 off for -200 a very poor one.**

The important thing to do is to plan to maximize your tricks - don't just give up. If you can see a way to make 6 tricks, go for it.

Your **AIM can** sometimes be to go down in your contract, but by the minimum amount!

So, the first thing we've done as declarer is work out our AIM – how many tricks we are trying to make. Now let's look at the rest of our **STRUCTURED APPROACH** to planning our play of the hand.

I'm going to use a mnemonic here, to help you remember.
Plan the play with "**A T T I T U D E**"

When making your plan, think

A The **A** is for aim – how many tricks am I aiming to make?
I've already talked about how to work out our aim.

TT: the **TT** stands for top tricks.

How many tricks can I take off the top, **without losing the lead**?

It's a simple thing to count, but don't miss out that step! It's a vital part of your plan.

I: The **I** stands for **I**ncreasing your tricks over and above your Top Tricks, to reach your Aim.

How might we increase our tricks, over and above our Top Tricks?

Here are some standard ways of doing that

- **High card combinations**, eg KQx opposite Jxx will yield 2 tricks once the A is gone
- **Long suits** – can you establish a long suit to yield extra tricks? For example, A K 8 7 4 opposite 6 5 3 2 has only 2 top tricks, but will make 5 tricks if the missing cards split 2-2, or 4 tricks if 3-1, even though you're missing the Q, J, 10 and 9. In fact, **long suits are often the primary source of extra tricks in NT contracts**, but sometimes aren't very obvious.
- **Finesses**
- **A throw-in play**- conceding a trick you are going to have to lose anyway, but at the right time so that the opponent then on lead has no option but to give you an extra trick. This is usually later on in the play of the hand, once some suits are exhausted. Avoid, if you can, leading a **"frozen" suit**: that's a suit where the honours are spread one to each of the 4 hands. Whichever side first leads in a frozen suit will give a trick away, so try to force the opposition to do it.

T This **T** is for **T**hreats:

- Is there a suit where the opposition can damage you, for example if led from one hand but not the other?

For example, if there's a suit where dummy holds K x x and you have x x x in hand, you are happy for the opposition to lead that suit from one hand, but not the other. Can you see why?

If you have a finesse to do, and you have a choice of finesses or of direction in which to take a finesse, play so that the non-danger hand wins the trick if the finesse fails. Do try to think: is there a danger hand, one that I don't want to get on lead? If I need to take a finesse, can I do it so that the non-danger hand is on lead if my finesse fails?

- Another very common threat in a NT contract is the opposition having a long suit, and you only have one stop.

An essential technique here is the **HOLD-UP play**. The idea is to exhaust one opponent in that suit, so that if that opponent later wins the lead, they have none left to lead back. Say you have the Ace in that suit, but no other high cards in it. If the opposition lead that suit, do you play your Ace on the first trick in that suit, or hold up?

How can we work out when to play our Ace? ie how many times to hold up?

There's a very useful rule to help you here: the "Rule of 7"

Hold-up plays: the Rule of 7- what is it?

Subtract the total number of cards in the suit you have between yourself and dummy, and take it from 7. The answer is the number of times you should hold up.

For example: you hold x x x in hearts opposite A x x, and the opposition lead a heart. How many times should you hold up?

Note: if you have 2 stops in a suit, *and a hold up play is necessary*, you must hold up on the first round.

Back now to our mnemonic, **A T T I T U D E**

The **U** stands for **U**nhelpful distribution of opposition's cards.

Sometimes it might appear that you can run a suit, for example, holding 9 cards between yourself and dummy, but missing the J and three small ones. That will work fine if the missing cards split 2-2 or 3-1.

But sometimes you will be faced by an **U**nfortunate 4-0 split. Can you **cater** for this possibility so that you still succeed?

In your **PLAN**, imagine one hand holds all 4 missing cards:

eg if you hold A Q 9 5 4 opposite K 10 3 2, don't unthinkingly play the K first, play the A (or Q) first. This preserves a finesse position in both hands (Q 9 and K 10) against the Jack, so if either opponent shows out on the first round of the suit, you know where the Jack is, so you have a marked finesse.

Here, by careful play you can **GUARANTEE** picking up the suit without loss, even with a 4-0 split. Avoid needless risks!

But if you hold A Q 9 5 4 in hand opposite the K 8 3 2 in dummy, say, you are missing the J and the 10, so you can't pick up the suit without loss if your LHO holds all 4 cards.

So play for RHO to hold all 4, and cash the K first; you'll pick up the suit if it splits no worse than 3-1, **or** if RHO holds all 4. There was nothing you could have done to avoid 1 loser if LHO holds all 4 missing cards.

The key thought here is: **can I play so as to preserve a finesse position?**

D The **D** stands for Defence:

Think about what options the defence have to defeat you. You might have a weak suit, where the opponents can immediately cash a string of winners if they get on lead. You might be fortunate, and they didn't lead that suit on trick 1, but now they've seen dummy, and worked out what's going on, they are likely to make the killing switch as soon as they regain the lead. In such a case you mustn't take unnecessary risks. Delay losing the lead as long as you can, cashing tricks in your own long suit(s) first. You never know, that might force the opponents into a problem choice of discards, where they have to (eg) bare a King, or discard in their good suit.

If you see that a killing switch is a possibility, and can "run for home", ie take the requisite number of tricks to achieve your Aim without losing the lead, do so, and ignore trying to take more than that by, for example, attempting a finesse.

Now we've done our planning- ie worked through the **A T T I T U D**

it's time to put it into action: the **E** is for execute.

Execute your plan but remain vigilant about what happens as the play proceeds, and be prepared to change your plan if necessary.

For example:

- you might get a friendly discard, which enables you to establish a suit you otherwise couldn't have
- you might get a free trick by an opponent leading a *frozen suit*
- you might get a free finesse by an opponent, leading up to your tenace (tenace= a holding of two high non-touching cards, such as A Q, or K J)
- opponents might inadvertently establish a suit for you by cashing their high cards, leaving you a nice suit to run.

As declarer, cashing a long suit early is often helpful, as the discards your opponents make can give you useful information, or force them into discarding something they wanted to hold on to.

But take care about communications between your hand and dummy – think about your entries. There's no use establishing a long suit if the winning cards are stranded, and you can't get to them.

Playing in 1NT

It's an extremely common contract, and many players dread it, because it can seem there's so much going on, and so much to keep track of.

The same principles apply as we've just been through, but there is one additional point: **PATIENCE!**

In 1NT, it's quite likely that opponents will establish one suit, but that won't on its own defeat you, as you only need 7 tricks. Try to prevent them establishing two suits and be patient!

Avoid opening up a frozen suit, such as J x x opposite K x x.

In 1NT, you can usually afford to lose the lead, and give the opposition the problem of what to lead back.

Often they have no option but to lead a frozen suit, or to lead up to your tenace, thereby conceding an extra trick to you.

Here's an example, where you are West, declaring 1NT:

West	East	
♠Q 7 5	♠J 9 6 2	
♥A 6 3	♥K 8 4	
♦A K 9 2	♦Q J 10 7	
♣J 8 3	♣K 6	North leads 2♥.

Let's plan the play.

You recognize from the lead of the 2♥ that hearts are splitting 4:3. You have 6 top tricks, 4 diamonds and two hearts, but you must be patient rather than rushing to try to cash a 7th. Take your 6 top tricks, then lead a HEART! North can win, and cash his 4th heart, but then must lead a club or a spade, giving you your 7th trick.

If YOU lead the black suits here, you will probably take no black suit tricks. If THEY lead a black suit, you are guaranteed a trick. Can you see why?

Finally, let's think more about how to **Increase** our tricks by establishing long suits.

Long suits can be **Gold Dust!** A great source of extra tricks, but often missed by the less experienced.

If you have a suit of at least 5 or 6 cards, even if you're missing some of the high cards, those extra little cards are worth **a trick each**, once the opposition's high cards are gone.

The key things you have to consider are

1. Can you afford to lose the tricks you need to lose in the suit you're trying to establish, without the opposition using their opportunities on lead to establish a long suit of their own, and defeat you before you can cash your established winners?
2. Do you have enough entries to establish the suit AND get back to the hand with the long cards, to cash those established long cards?

If the answer is yes to both questions, you can embark on establishing the long suit.

If the answer to either is no, then establishing the long suit won't work, and you will need to find another plan.

But how do we know how many tricks we have to lose in a suit before it's established, when we're *making our plan*? Often we don't, so we need to ASSUME.

Our rule of thumb, for planning purposes, is

- If we're missing an odd number of cards, assume they split as evenly as possible, eg 5 missing cards will usually split 3-2
- If we're missing an even number of cards, assume they split unevenly, ie assume 4 missing cards will split 3-1, and 6 missing cards 4-2.

This won't always work, of course, but bridge is a percentage game. We want the balance of probabilities to be in our favour. Our plan should aim at giving us the best **chance** to succeed.

All this can be tricky to work out, especially entries, and the concept of ducking. We won't cover it in this course, but in an Advanced Lesson we explore ESTABLISHING LONG SUITS. It's often a vital technique in suit contracts as well as NT contracts. The lesson notes are on the website under Advanced Series.

In the meantime, just to whet your appetite, here is a typical example

Hand 1 ♠K 8 3	♠A 7	Hand 2 ♠K 8 3	♠A
♥A K 4 3	♥8 7	♥A K 4 3	♥8 7 6
♦A K J 9	♦6 5 4	♦A K J 9	♦6 5 4
♣K 2	♣A 7 6 5 4 3	♣K 2	♣A 7 6 5 4 3

In both cases, the contract is 3NT by West, lead J♠.

If the clubs split 3-2 (your planning assumption), because you have A and K, you only need to lose the lead once (ie give up one club trick) to establish the clubs; so you need two entries, and you have them: the two black aces. In Hand 1, you win the spade lead with the K, carefully preserving A♠, and play K♣, then over to A♣, then a 3rd club. When the clubs break 3-2, your A♠ provides the entry to cash 3 long clubs.

But look what happens in Hand 2. The spade lead knocks out an entry, so you can no longer establish the clubs. Those long clubs are now useless, so your only chance is to try the diamond finesse. After winning the opening trick with the A♠, lead a small diamond towards the J♦. If the finesse wins, use the A♣ to enter dummy and repeat the diamond finesse. With the Q♦ onside, you make 9 tricks, and a bonus 10th if the diamonds also split 3-3.

All this will take time and practice to get the hang of, so do try, every time you are declarer in a NT contract, to follow the guidelines in this lesson. The more you practise, the more straightforward and second nature it will become.

