

Declarer Play in Suit Contracts

In Lesson 11, we looked at declarer play in NT contracts. Today, we are focussing on declarer play in suit contracts. Many of the principles are similar to NT contracts, but with the extra dimension of trumps- so that short outside suits can be a great asset, allowing you to make extra trump winners (unlike in NT, where if the opponents establish a long suit they can run off a whole lot of tricks against you).

If you only take one thing away from today's lesson, it's this:

COUNT AND PLAN

Your side has won the auction, and you are declarer. 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!! WAIT**, while you assess. Even the seemingly simplest hands take a few moments to work out your plan.

If you play from dummy, and opponent follows promptly, it's near impossible to then stop and do your planning – indeed, you shouldn't, because play to any trick, once a card has been led, should be as far as possible “in tempo”. The **ONLY** exception is play after the opening lead, when planning time is normal, and accepted. Of course, you need to be flexible and change your plan if things develop in an unforeseen way, but your plan must be thought through. Many contracts fail because of a wrong play on **trick one**, for example because you've used up an entry in one hand that is essential to cash some length winners, or to play a finesse.

There's a mnemonic which I hope you will find helpful to remember the steps in planning your play. It is

ATTITUDE

and it gives a structured approach to how to go about things.

The **A** stands for **Aim** - how many tricks am I aiming to make?

This is often not as simple as just the number of tricks to make your contract exactly. Why is that?

Example 1: You have bid to the full extent of your hands. When dummy goes down, you might be a touch disappointed- you were hoping for something a bit better, or a better fit with your hand – or you might see some problems that could defeat you. Your contract looks tough: you will be trying very 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 target is clearly to make your contract. If the defence misplay and give you a gift of an overtrick, so much the better, but you can't count on it.

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

Say you're in 4♠, and you can see an easy 10 tricks.

The temptation here is to just play off the 10 tricks and congratulate yourself on bidding and making game. But think. It's likely that most other pairs playing your hand will also be in 4♠. In duplicate pairs, if everyone else makes 11 or 12, you have scored an outright bottom- you might as well have gone 4 down.

If you can see 10 tricks, try to work out a line of play so you can make 11, without risking going off. If you can see 11, work out how to make 12. Overtricks are very important in duplicate bridge.

Try to get used to this mindset. It's very different from what's required in other forms of scoring, such as rubber bridge, or IMP's scoring in teams, where overtricks are less significant.

Example 3: You might have made a sacrifice, expecting to go down, but hoping for a better score than if the opposition were playing in their contract. The number of tricks you can afford to go down is dependent on vulnerability, and whether or not you've been doubled – you need to become accustomed to working that out. Say you've bid 4♠ as a sacrifice over their 4♥, thinking that 4♥ was going to make. They **DOUBLE** you, rather than pressing on to 5♥.

If they are vulnerable, they stood to make +620 for 4♥ making exactly. If you are non-vulnerable, you can afford to go 3 down doubled, for -500, and score better than every other pair who let the opposition play and make 4♥. But 4 down would be a disaster, at -800.

But if they are non-vulnerable, they stood to make +420 for 4♥ making exactly. If you are vulnerable, you can afford to go only 1 down doubled, for -200, and score better than every other pair who let the opposition play and make 4♥. But 2 down would be a disaster, scoring -500.

Getting used to these numbers and calculations is why we like to use score sheets at every practice session, when we're playing our prepared deals.

So, the first thing we've done as declarer is work out our **AIM** – how many tricks we are trying to make.

The next step in **ATTITUDE is TT**, and it stands for **Top Tricks**. How many tricks can I take off the top, **without losing the lead?**

The next step in **ATTITUDE is I**, which stands for **I**ncreasing your tricks over and above your Top Tricks, to reach your Aim. What opportunities can you see to increase your tricks, and, crucially, if you can see options, which one entails least risk or is more probable to succeed?

Examples are

- 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? Remember, a 5-card suit can be gold dust! There's a whole lesson in the Advanced Series on establishing long suits; the notes are on the website.
- Ruffing – ruffing with a trump in the hand **shorter in trumps** will generally yield an extra trick, but ruffing with a trump in your longer trump hand won't -it's a trick you'd have won anyway.
- Finesses (of which more later!)
- 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.

The next step in **ATTITUDE is T**, which stands for **T**hreats:

- Can the defence cash some winners if they get on lead? Can I dispose of losers first, before they get a chance, so that I'm ruffing what would have been their winners?
- 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?

Now we come to the **U** in **ATTITUDE**: The **U** stands for Unhelpful distribution:

Often a key thing in a suit contract is the distribution of the missing trumps. Can you cater for a bad split? If you can, try to include it in your plan. Sometimes for example you will be missing 5 trumps, and if they split 3-2 your contract will be OK. But what if they split 4-1, or even 5-0? Can you play to cater for an adverse split and still achieve your aim?

The next step in **ATTITUDE** is **D**, which stands for Defence:

What can the defence do to defeat you? Often your plan will depend on ruffing in the short trump hand to generate extra tricks. A common tactic in defence is to draw YOUR trumps before you want to, to strip out those trumps before you can ruff with them. If you've decided to delay drawing trumps, good defenders will be alert and wonder why. If they can see one or two small trumps in dummy that they spot you're planning to use to ruff losers, then if they gain the lead, they can lead a trump and take one of them off the table. This can be critical, and sometimes leave you a trick or two short of your contract. So, can you plan to take your ruffs without losing the lead?

Now we have gone through all the steps to count and plan, and we still haven't played a card to trick 1!

Now we're ready to proceed. The **E** stands for **Execute** your plan:

But be flexible and be prepared to change plan if things develop in an unexpected direction.

To draw trumps straight away or not?

A key element of any plan in a suit contract is what to do about the trump suit.

Countless contracts have needlessly failed because declarer didn't draw trumps soon enough. Your plan will usually be to draw the opposition's trumps as soon as you can, and for want of any good reason not to, it is almost always the best approach. You don't want them trumping your winners. Your default assumption should be "I will draw trumps straight away".

Of course, there are exceptions, when you will want to do something else first, and only by counting and planning will you recognise when you need to delay drawing trumps.

Here are three key situations where we would want to delay drawing trumps, which it's important to be able to recognize:

1. We need some ruffs to **increase our Total Tricks**, and drawing trumps will leave us short. We need to use trumps in the **SHORTER** trump hand to score ruffs, and if we draw trumps, they'll be gone. (Remember that ruffing in the longer trump hand won't create any extra tricks – they are tricks you will win anyway)
2. We have some **immediate losers** we need to dispose of early; if we draw trumps and have to lose the lead in doing so, the defence will be able to cash their winners before we can get rid of them.
3. We need a trump as **an entry** to cash a long suit.

Let's look at some examples.

1(a): You need to ruff in the short trump hand

<p>♠ 7 6 ♥ Q J 8 ♦ 10 9 6 4 ♣ K Q 10 7</p>	<p>♠ J 10 5 ♥ 4 2 ♦ A K 5 3 ♣ A 6 4 3</p>	<p>♠ 9 8 3 ♥ K 10 9 7 6 ♦ Q J ♣ J 9 8</p>
<p>♠ A K Q 4 2 ♥ A 5 3 ♦ 8 7 2 ♣ 5 2</p>		

Contract 4♠ by South, lead K♣

You can count 9 tricks, but where is the 10th coming from? One chance is a 3-3 split in diamonds, but that's not a great bet, at not much more than a one in three probability. If you draw trumps straight away, that'll be your only shot. But you can manufacture a 10th trick by ruffing a heart in dummy!

Concede a heart at trick 2, win whatever the defence return, then play A♥ and ruff a heart in dummy. Now you draw trumps, and 10 tricks are in the bag.

But I hear you say, what if I just draw 2 rounds of trumps, retaining J♠ in dummy (which I'll need to later take my heart ruff), then concede the heart trick? Well, there's a risk that when the opposition are on lead with their heart, they will lead their last trump, removing your ruffing card – one down! It's an unnecessary risk you shouldn't take.

1(b): Cross ruff

<p>♠ K 10 ♥ K Q 8 5 2 ♦ K Q J 10 ♣ Q 5</p>	<p>♠ A 7 6 3 ♥ 6 ♦ A 4 3 2 ♣ A K 8 7</p>	<p>♠ Q J 5 ♥ J 10 9 ♦ 9 8 6 5 ♣ J 10 6</p>
<p>♠ 9 8 4 2 ♥ A 7 4 3 ♦ 7 ♣ 9 4 3 2</p>		

Contract 4♠ by South, lead K♦

You've reached 4♠ with only 19 HCP. You're missing the K, Q, J, and 10 of trumps, and the opposition have more points than you! You can see only 5 top tricks, so cross-ruffing, using your trumps to take tricks separately, is the only route. Win the diamond lead with your ace, and cash all your high cards except the A♠. You now have the first 4 tricks. Ruff a diamond (that's 5), ruff a heart (that's 6), ruff another diamond (that's 7), ruff another heart (that's 8), ruff another diamond (that's 9). When you try to ruff your last heart, East will over-ruff, but no matter – you have the A of trumps for your 10th trick.

Note 1: Cash your top winners *before* embarking on a cross-ruff. Otherwise, opposition will have the chance to make discards, and ruff in.

Note 2: a cross ruff is a very committal line- once you've started it there's no way back. Only do it if there's no other way.

2: Ditching losers quickly

♠ Q J 9 8 3
♥ 3
♦ A 7 6
♣ Q 7 5 4

♠ K 10 4 2
♥ A K Q
♦ 4 3 2
♣ A K 8

Contract 6♠ by West, lead K♦

You **must** win with A♦ on the first trick, as you have A of trumps to lose at some point. Your problem here is that if you try to draw trumps right away, the enemy will take the A♠, and cash their two diamond winners. You have a clear way of avoiding that – on trick two, lead over to a top heart, then cash the other two top hearts, and away go your two little diamonds. Then it's fine to draw trumps and your slam makes, losing only A♠.

3: Retaining a trump as an entry

This is the hardest to get right, where you need a trump as an entry to dummy to cash winners in a side suit; if you draw all the trumps, your winners will be stranded.

♠ Q J 7 5 2
♥ 7 3
♦ A 2
♣ A K Q 5

♠ A K 8
♥ K Q J 10
♦ 9 8 6
♣ 9 6 4

Contract 6♠ by West, lead J♣

What's your plan? Win the club lead, draw trumps, lead a heart, let them take their A♥, win the return (either a club or a diamond you can win in hand), then lead over to your winning 3 hearts. Slam made with 5 trumps, 3 hearts, 3 clubs, and a diamond. **Or is it?**

To draw trumps will take at least 3 rounds, so dummy is then out of trumps, and there is no entry to your lovely hearts except a heart from your hand. Experienced defenders will spot you have no entries to the hearts on the table, except a heart in your hand! So they will hold up – they won't take their A♥ on the first heart trick. Then you're snookered, with no way back to dummy. You must delay drawing trumps and attack the hearts first. As soon as they take their A♥, you can safely draw trumps ending in dummy, and cash your hearts.

And to finish up, let's have a look at **FINESSING**.

We're all familiar with the idea – we lead up towards high cards, hoping the opposition's high card is on our left, as here

Dummy (North) ♥ A Q J 7 6

Declarer (South) ♥ 8 4 2

We are missing 5 hearts, the K 10 9 5 and 3. We hope they split 3-2, and the K is sitting with West. We lead small towards dummy, planning to play the Q (or J) if West doesn't play the K. We return to hand in another suit, and repeat. If the K still doesn't appear, and both opposition have followed, we can cash the A on the 3rd heart trick, felling the K.

Here was the distribution

♥ A Q J 7 6
♥ K 10 5 ♥ 9 3
♥ 8 4 2

By playing the hearts this way, ie taking the finesse, we can pick up all 5 hearts without loss. It's a 50-50 shot (unless we have other clues). Half the time, the K will be where we want it ("on-side") and half the time it won't be (it will be "off-side").

It is an extremely common scenario.

Remember, if the layout is different, and our finesse loses, here East will be on lead when she wins ♥K.

How about this one:

Dummy (North) ♦ A J 7 6

Declarer (South) ♦ K 10 4 2

Here, we're missing the Q (and 4 others, the 9,8, 5 and 3). It's a double finesse position – we can play for either West or East to hold the ♦Q, by leading small towards the A J, or small towards the K 10. Which to choose?

Sometimes we'll have some clues, but most often we will decide **based on where we want the lead to be if the finesse loses.**

If we don't mind if West gets on lead, we will play small from dummy towards the K 10.

But if West is the danger hand – eg they could cash winners in a NT contract, or they could lead through our K x x in dummy in another suit, where we don't have the A, then we would lead small from hand towards ♦ A J.

Then, if the finesse loses and East wins the ♦Q, she can't hurt us with whatever she leads next.

Here's another common scenario

Dummy (North) ♣ Q 6

Declarer (South) ♣ A 5 4 2

Here, you are hoping to make two club tricks. But how?

If you lead Q, hoping the K is with East, she will cover, you will win your A, but that's it. One trick only. In fact, if you lead Q, you will make only 1 club trick wherever the K lies.

Your only chance is that the K lies with **WEST.**

You lead small towards the ♣ Q 6. If West plays the K, you play the 6 and your Q is promoted. If West plays small, you play the ♣Q, hoping the ♣K is with West.

Again, it's a 50-50 shot.

Preserving your entries when finessing:

Dummy (North) ♠ Q 5 3

Declarer (South) ♠ A J 10 9 6

You are in dummy, seeking to play the spades without loss. You have no more entries to dummy, so you can't return to repeat the finesse if it wins.

If you play small towards the A J 10, play the J (or 10) and the finesse wins, now what? You are in hand, and forlornly play the ♠A hoping the ♠K will fall. It doesn't. Drat!

Leading small here is a common mistake!!

Here, you hold J 10 and 9. You can afford to lead the ♠Q and run it if East plays small. Then if the finesse wins, you are still in dummy to repeat the finesse.

If East covers your ♠Q with the ♠K, you win your ♠A, and now your spades are all good.

