

Declarer Play

Planning the Play in Suit Contracts

1. No-Trump and Suit Contracts Compared:

A. The Basic Difference: Playing with a trump suit, Declarer can re-establish one of the fundamental techniques for taking tricks, namely, *ruffing*. This is unavailable when playing in a No-Trump contract. Ruffing allows Declarer to:

(1) Control short suits that have no high-card stoppers.

(2) Ruff losers, either to create winning tricks or to help establish long Suits.

Note: A trump contract is a double-edged sword in that the Opponents have the same ability to ruff.

B. Similarities in the Two: Each of the elementary techniques discussed in No-Trump play; i.e., the *holding up* of stoppers, *ducking*, and *unblocking* can all be employed in trump contracts as well.

(1) During the play in a trump suit contract, *the holdup* is used less commonly for interfering with the Opponents’ communication than it is for improving the timing of the play. Conserve entries whenever possible!

With **Axx** opposite **xx** and a desire to ruff the 3rd trick of the suit, hold up one round, win the second, and then trump the 3rd. If you win the first trick and continue the suit, you will need a re-entry to do the ruffing.

(2) *Ducking* remains an effective technique for establishing long suits, but it is also valuable for keeping control of shaky trump holdings.

To maintain control with **Axxx** opposite **xxxx** in the trump suit, the safest play is to duck the first trick and win the second. No matter how the suit breaks, you will still have the lead to draw the outstanding trump pieces.

(3) *Unblocking*, for the most part, serves the same purpose as in a No-Trump contract, but it often occurs earlier in the play in the quest for fast discards.

With the **King** singleton opposite **AQx**, and no outside entry, you might want to lead the **King** to the **Ace** in order to cash the **Queen** for a quick discard. Of course, you run the risk of a defensive ruff the longer you delay drawing trumps, but the potential gain from the discard will usually make it a worthwhile play.

2. The Role of Trump Cards:

A. The Ability to Trump:

(1) **Trumps as Trick-Producers:**

a) The trump suit is a *basic source of cashable tricks*. Apart from any “**sure**” winners in the trump suit, there are usually several “**possible**” long-suit winners as well.

b) Whenever there is unequal side-suit length in Declarer’s and Dummy’s hands, a *ruffing potential* exists.

With the **Axx** opposite **x** in a side-suit, you can cash the **Ace** and trump the two remaining spot cards in the hand that is now void. With **AKQx** opposite **xxx**, you can cash the three winners and trump the last spot card, if it does not set up as an additional winner should the suit divide evenly.

c) With a ruffing capacity opposite a long side-suit, it is often easy and relatively cost-free to *establish long-suit winners*. Whereas in a No-Trump contract, you might have to concede a trick or two to set up a suit, you can accomplish the same thing in a trump contract by ruffing away the losers.

With **AKxxx** opposite **xx**, when played in No-Trump, you must lose at least one trick in this suit, and very likely two, before you could hope to enjoy a long winner. In a suit contract, however, you can play the **AK**, ruff the 3rd round, or even the 4th, if necessary, to have the same chance for a long-suit winner, this time, however, *without* the loss of a trick.

(2) **Trumps as Stoppers or Controls:** Trump cards outrank the Aces of side-suits in which you are void. Accordingly, they compensate for whatever high-card stoppers you may lack to control a side-suit.

With **xxx** opposite **xx** in a No-Trump contract, you would be in desperate straits, if your Opponents were to lead the suit. In a trump contract, however, after you lose the first two tricks, you can control the suit by trumping. With a void you have first-round control of a suit, just like an **Ace**, and with a singleton you have second-round control.

(3) **Trumps as Entries:**

a) *High-card entries* - Since the trump suit is normally one of your best suits, the high cards within it frequently provide critical entries between your two hands. When these entries are in short supply, you can usually time the trump plays so as to capitalize on their availability.

If the trump suit is **AKJTx** opposite **Qxx** and the **Queen** is your only entry to a long, established side-suit, cash the **Ace** and **King** first, before leading over to the **Queen**. If the trumps divide 3-2, you will be in the right hand to run the other suit without any threat of a defensive ruff. (NOTE: the normal trump play would be to unblock the **Queen** so that you could run the **AKJT**, if the outstanding trumps divide 4-1 or 5-0.)

b) *Ruffing entries*

With **Axx** opposite **x**, once the **Ace** has been played, you can ruff twice to enter the short hand. With **AKQ** opposite **xx**, after you cash the **AK**, if you are desperate for an entry, you can then trump the **Queen**.

(4) **Trumps as Defensive Weapons:** The ability to ruff is available to your Opponents on basically the same terms as it is to you.

If you hold **Qxx** opposite **JTx** in a side-suit, you would normally expect to produce one trick with these cards. If, however, an Opponent were to lead the **AK** and a third card for his Partner to ruff, they will make the 3rd trick in the suit played instead of you.

A Trumping advantage, however, lays with Declarer owing to the fact that the trump suit is his/her chosen suit and he/she will normally have a majority of the trump cards, as well as an early opportunity to draw those held by the Opponents.

B. The Number of Trump Tricks Available:

(1) The total number of trump tricks that Declarer can win is a function of:

a) The number you can actually cash in the trump suit itself, which is equivalent, at a maximum, to the number of cards in your *longer* holding, plus

b) The number of ruffs you can take with the trumps in your *shorter* holding, before Trumps are drawn.

With **AKQJT9** opposite **xxx** as trumps, the maximum number of tricks is nine, three by ruffing with the spot cards, if possible, and six by cashing the **AKQJT9**.

(2) Ruffing with the cards in the *longer* holding does not increase the total number of trump tricks. Each one used for ruffing merely gives you one less to cash as a natural trump trick. (Exception: “*Dummy Reversal*” – Not Discussed herein)

3. Analyzing the Opening Lead:

A. Your Opponents’ Intent: In a suit contract the Opponents will not be concerned with setting up long suits, largely because any long tricks they might establish can be trumped away by Declarer. Instead, they will try to develop tricks mainly through promotion, finessing, and trumping.

(1) *By leading from strength*, their intent is to drive out Declarer’s stoppers and to promote their own honors.

(2) *By leading through strength*, their intent is to trap one or more of Declarer’s honors in a defensive finesse.

(3) *By leading from a short suit*, their intent is to get a defensive ruff.

(4) *By leading a trump*, their intent is to cut down Declarer’s ruffing power, especially in the Dummy.

(5) *By repeating leads from a long suit*, their intent is to make Declarer ruff once too often, thereby losing control of the trump suit (a forcing defense).

B. The Lead of an Honor:

(1) Just as in No-Trump, the lead of an honor implies something about the other honors that are probably held by the opening leader:

a) The lead of an Ace usually denies possession of the King (unless it is from a doubleton AK).

b) The lead of the King normally promises the Ace or the Queen with it.

c) The lead of the Queen, Jack, or Ten normally promises the next honor immediately beneath it in rank, but denies the one immediately above it.

(2) There are two major differences, however, between an honor led against a No-Trump contract and one lead against a suit contract.

a) The honor led in No-Trump is usually part of a 3-card or longer sequence (solid or broken), whereas in a suit contract it might be from a 2-card sequence or longer.

b) The honor led in No-Trump is usually from a long suit (unless it is a led in Partner's bid suit), whereas in a suit contract it can be from any length, perhaps even a singleton or a doubleton.

C. The Lead of a Small Spot Card:

(1) The principal reason why your Opponents make "4th-best" leads is to try to develop their potential tricks, before you have an opportunity to discard losers. This is the normal, attacking lead from a suit that is *not* headed by a sequence of honors. Less commonly, they might lead "4th-best", hoping to make you ruff with your longer trump holding and thus to effect a forcing defense.

(2) A spot-card lead usually denies possession of the Ace, which is not the case of a similar lead against a No-Trump contract, but could be from 3-pieces or more from a King, Queen, or Jack.

(3) The "*Rule of Eleven*" applies equally well in both suit and in No-Trump contracts, provided, of course, the opening lead is admitted to be "4th best."

D. The Lead of a Middle Spot Card: Implies any of the following, based upon Partnership agreement:

- (1) A short suit, either a singleton or a doubleton, looking for a defensive ruff,
- (2) "Top-of-nothing" from three or more cards without an honor in the suit,
- (3) "Middle-Up-Down" ("MUD") from 3-pieces, or
- (4) 2nd highest, lacking an honor at the top.

E. The Trump Lead: Contrary to popular opinion, it is generally poor advice to *only* lead trumps "*when in doubt*". The primary purpose of a trump lead is to eliminate trump cards from both the Declarer's hand, and especially from the Dummy's. A lead of a trump by the defense inures to their benefit because:

(1) The bidding might indicate some ruffing potential in the Dummy which you, as Declarer, could exploit, before trumps are drawn.

(2) The opening leader's hand might have possible, defensive winners, especially in a side-suit bid by Declarer, winners for the defense that can be trumped by Declarer, if given the chance to do so.

Suppose the opening leader holds the **AQT9x** in a side-suit bid by Declarer. A trump lead would be attractive to prevent Declarer from ruffing losers in this side-suit.

(3) The bidding might suggest that Declarer will try to cross-ruff the hand, never drawing trumps, rather, alternatively, using them individually to ruff back and forth.

In all three of these instances, from a Defender's point of view, continued trump leads might be necessary and productive in interfering with Declarer's plans. **Conclusion:** *Absent something better like leading from a strong suit of one's own, or Partner's bid suit, the lead of a trump card by the Opponents, against a suit contract, is often an excellent lead.*

Note: Defenders, however, should refrain from leading trumps from any of the following holdings, as doing so might result in the loss of a trump trick. (**Qxx, Qx, Jxx, Jx, or x**)