

Planning the Play of the Hand

Declarer’s Strategy When Playing in Suit Contracts - I

1. Counting Losers and Finding Discards:

A. General Concepts:

- (1) Planning the play in a suit contract always starts with Declarer counting the number of potential losing tricks. Once this is known, Declarer’s basic strategy for playing the hand is to plan to eliminate or avoid as many of these losers as possible.
- (2) The three most common ways to eliminate losers are by (a) *ruffing*, (b) *finessing*, and (c) *discarding*. Ruffing and finessing take place in the normal course of suit development similar to that seen in playing a hand in No-Trump. Discarding, on the other hand, uses the principle of cashing winners in a side suit of unequal length.

B. Discarding Methods:

(1) Discarding by Cashing Established Winners:

With **AKQJT** opposite **xx** in a side suit, after the trumps are drawn and the **Ace** and **King** are played, Declarer can get three discards on the **QJT**. With **AKQ** opposite **xxx**, however, you have equal length and thus no discard opportunity.

(2) Discarding by Promoting Winners:

With **KQx** opposite **Jx**, drive out the **Ace**, by playing the **Jack**. Later, cashing the **King** and **Queen**, will allow one discard.

(3) Discarding by Finessing:

With **AQJ** opposite **xx**, finesse the **Queen**. If it wins, repeat the finesse and cash the **Ace** for a discard; if it loses, cash the **Ace** and **Jack** later for the same discard.

With **AQx** opposite **x**, you have a no-loser suit, but if you need a fast discard, finesse the **Queen**, planning to pitch a loser on the **Ace**, whether or not the finesse works.

(4) Discarding on Long-Suit Winners:

With **AKxxx** opposite **x**, you can cash the **AK** for one discard, planning to ruff the next two leads. If the suit divides 4-3, you will have a long-suit winner and one more discard.

C. The Pitfall in Discarding:

If you try to cash winners before the Opponents' trumps are drawn, you run the risk of a defensive ruff. As a result, instead of gaining a trick by discarding, you might lose one of your winners. The longer the side-suit holding that you try to cash, the greater the chance the Opponents will ruff.

2. Managing the Trump Suit:

A. When Your Trump Situation is Favorable:

(1) Whenever you have ample trumps, relative to what you need them to do, such as pulling trumps, ruffing, and controlling side suits, your trump situation is said to be "*favorable*."

With as much as **AKQxxx** opposite **JTxxx** for your trumps, you can normally draw the outstanding ones and still have plenty left for all other purposes. With as little as **Jxxx** opposite **xxxx**, if all your side suits are well taken care of, likewise, your trump situation may still be favorable.

The quality of your trump holding is not the main criterion for judging favorability. Rather, it is the total number of trumps you have, compared to your plans for using them.

(2) Under these circumstances, as soon as you are able to draw trumps, do so and then set about establishing your side-suit winners.

B. When Your Trump Situation is Unfavorable:

(1) Whenever you have a trump shortage, relative to your needs, which would be aggravated by a premature drawing of trumps, your situation is said to be "*unfavorable*."

With **Axxx** opposite **Kxx** for your trump suit and lots of work to be done in the side suits (e.g., ruffing losers, driving out Aces, establishing long-suit winners, etc.), your trump situation is rather precarious. If you attempt to draw the Opponents' trumps and then attempt your side-suit work, you are likely to lose control of the hand.

(2) Under these circumstances, you will normally have to postpone, or possibly forego drawing the trumps, either until you have established one or more of your side suits or until you have made the necessary plays to make your trump situation more favorable.

3. Plans for Adverse Trump Circumstances:

A. Overcoming a Forcing Defense: When the Opponents force you to ruff repeatedly with your longer trump holding, they are hoping that your trump situation will become so unfavorable that ultimately you will lose control of the hand. If they embark on this type of defense and you are duly threatened, you have two ways to combat their forcing attack.

(1) **Refuse to Ruff:** Instead of trumping, discard an unavoidable loser. Preserve your longer trump holding and, if possible, wait for the other hand with the fewer trumps to become void in the Opponents' suit and to assume the responsibility for ruffing.

Suppose you have **xx** opposite **xxx** in a side-suit that the Opponents lead, with the doubleton being in the same hand as your longer trump holding. If by trumping the third lead you would weaken your trump situation beyond recovery, take a discard instead. If the Opponents persist in the suit, leading a fourth round, you can now take the ruff in the hand with the shorter trump holding.

(2) **Accept the Force by Ruffing:** Even if the forcing defense causes you to give up control of the trump suit with your longer holding, you can still profit from the situation.

a) You might continue to ruff in both hands ("*cross-ruff*") and never draw the Opponents' trumps.

b) You might draw the outstanding trumps with the cards in what was originally your shorter trump holding ("*Dummy Reversal*").

B. Overcoming a Short-Suit Lead: When the Opponents hope to win ruffing tricks by leading a singleton or a doubleton, your best counterattack is to draw their trumps as quickly as possible.

C. Overcoming a Trump Lead: If the Opponents intend to play trumps whenever they are on lead, and if such a defense will prevent you from trumping some losers, you must switch your plans for the hand. Normally, the most promising alternative will be to look for discards instead. Toward that end, your best chance will usually come from the development of long-suit winners. While working on the side suits, frequently you can ignore the drawing of the Opponents' trumps, since by their defense, they will be drawing them for you.