

## BRIDGE – INTERMEDIATE LESSONS II – 05

### Planning the Play of the Hand

#### Avoiding Common Declarer Playing Mistakes

Many common playing errors come from ingrained bad habits. Some come from remembering a previous success when using a low percentage strategy, which, when tried again, oft times, fails. Others are learned by listening to poor advice from Players who share unsound, unproven and, occasionally, erroneous advice. Many times you even hear experienced Players offering advice that will be taken up by a less-experienced Player who assumes that this advice is always sound. You may have heard some of these offerings: “*Always lead top of Partner’s suit,*” or “*Never lead away from a King or an Ace,*” or “*Always lead through strength.*” While there may be specific situations where these bits of advice are worth utilizing, they are not always applicable, and they can often cause a compromised result during the play when certain extenuating circumstances are present. Card-playing mistakes are more difficult to recover from than bidding mistakes. One poor card-playing error may prove to be crucial in maximizing or minimizing the results for either the Declarer or the Defenders.

**Mistakes in Declarer Play:** In Duplicate Bridge, the number of tricks scored is extremely important. One slip by Declarer can give the Opponents an extra trick to which they would otherwise not be entitled, cause a contract to be unfulfilled, or cause an otherwise, available, overtrick to be lost, any of the afore-mentioned results leaving Declarer with a less-than-available, match-point score.

**a. Playing Too Quickly to the First Trick:** Before playing a card from the Dummy, Declarer should spend a few seconds planning his/her play and considering the options. Declarer should first consider an Opponent’s opening lead and the reason behind its having been chosen to have been led, work out a strategy for the overall play of the hand, and decide where you want to win the first trick, in the Dummy or in Declarer’s hand.

**b. Playing High From the Dummy on the First Trick:** When an honor card is led on the opening lead, you may be tempted to play any higher honor held in the Dummy’s hand to try and win the first trick. However, usually a Defender does not lead away from an honor when holding the Ace or the King, so you know your right-hand Opponent is likely to hold the Ace or the King in the suit led. You should be wary of playing an honor from the Dummy on the first trick.

<u>North</u>	You are South, Declarer, in a <b>4H</b> contract.
<u>KT42</u>	West leads the <b>SQ</b> . Do <b>not</b> play Dummy’s <b>SK</b> .
	Instead, play low hoping the Ace is singleton in
<u>South</u>	East’s hand, and, thus, has to be played anyway.
<u>97</u>	

All Defenders know that in most situations when you are playing second to a trick you usually play second-hand low. Similarly when you are the Declarer the most common instruction you give to the Dummy (who is playing second to the opening trick) is usually “*play low.*”

The best strategy in most hands is to let the Opponent's lead come round to your own hand to try and win the trick with a lower card in your own hand. When you are the Declarer you enjoy the advantage of playing last to the first trick and you may be able to win the first trick cheaply in your hand.

It is especially important to play second hand low when you have two or three honors in the suit led which are divided between the Declarer's and the Dummy's hands.

<u>North</u> J83	You are South, Declarer, in a <b>4H</b> contract. West leads the <b>S2</b> . Play the <b>3</b> , low from the Dummy. If West plays the <b>SK</b> you win it with the <b>SA</b> . Later the Opponents may win your <b>ST</b> with their <b>SQ</b> , but then you will win the third round with North's <b>SJ</b> . Note that if you play the <b>SJ</b> on the first trick
<u>South</u> AT7	You will still have to play the <b>SA</b> on West's <b>SK</b> , and you end up with only one Spade trick.

Even when you have very little chance of winning in your own hand you should usually play low from the Dummy. The Defender playing third to the trick may well play a low card you can take or may instead play an unnecessarily high card that will later promote one of your honors into a trick.

<u>North</u> Q53	You are South, Declarer, in a <b>4H</b> contract. West leads the <b>S6</b> . Play the <b>S3</b> , low from the Dummy. East may win this first Trick with the <b>SA</b> and then play back to West's <b>SK</b> .
<u>South</u> 742	Your <b>SQ</b> will now win a trick.

There are many exceptions to playing low from the Dummy at the first trick. For example: (1) When the Dummy has a sequence in the suit led you should play an honor from the Dummy's sequence. (2) Another common situation is when you are playing in a Trump contract, the Dummy has the Ace of the outside suit led, and you have a singleton. You should obviously win the Dummy's Ace. (3) Maybe you suspect that the opening lead is a singleton and you need to win the Dummy's Ace in order to draw Trumps so that your Opponents don't start trumping the suit led. Before you play high from the Dummy, however, consider whether it is one of these exceptions where you need to play high. *If you are not sure -play low!*

**c. Avoiding Weak Suits:** As part of your playing strategy, you should not worry and be dissuaded from attacking suits with missing honor cards. (1) If you are playing in a Suit contract and you have weak Trumps, you should usually lead Trumps as soon as you gain the lead. With weak Trumps your high-card strength is in the other suits. It may be unwise to lead these high cards while your Opponents still have Trumps they can use to ruff these high cards. (2) In a No-Trump contract you should usually develop length tricks from your long suit(s) even if you have to lose high-card tricks to your Opponents when leading the suits you need to establish.

<u>North</u> AJ2 AK43 J65 Q52	You are South, Declarer in a <b>3-NT</b> contract. West leads the <b>S6</b> . Win trick one with the <b>SA</b> . Lead your long suit, Diamonds, and continue to do so at every opportunity. You will eventually establish length tricks in Diamonds.
<u>South</u> KQ4 97 98742 AK3	

Note: You have only eight tricks, here, and a Diamond trick is needed to make the contract.

**d. Forgetting to Unblock Whenever Necessary:** Unblock is a technique that the Declarer often employs when he/she has a choice of leading or winning a high card in either the Dummy's hand or the Declarer's hand. Unblocking requires one to first play the high cards from the hand with fewer cards in the suit **so that the last card in the suit in the hand with fewer cards is won by the hand that has more cards to play.**

North      You are North, Declarer, in a No-Trump contract. In this  
AQ9842      long suit, be sure to win the first trick in the South  
hand so that you can continue playing the suit in the  
South      North hand without having to waste an entry from another suit,  
Even assuming one is present, in order to return to  
K7            North's long suit, while preserving an entry from later work.

**e. Leading a Card From the Wrong Hand:** When you hold a suit combination with honor strength opposite small cards, you should always lead from the hand with the small cards towards the hand with the honor strength.

North      You are South, Declarer, in a Spade contract with your  
743            Spade holdings as shown. When drawing Trump, lead  
from the weaker hand, North, in this case, towards the **KQ**.  
South      If East plays low, and the Queen wins, cross back to the  
KQT85      North hand and play once more towards the King.

Finesse attempts also depend upon leading from the weaker hand.

North      If you are missing a card, the King in this example.  
AQ863      Mentally place it in the hand where you would like it to be,  
and play as if it were there. Play the **Jack** from the weaker hand  
and let it ride, playing the **3** from the North hand. If it wins,  
proceed with this "**Continuing Finesse.**" by next playing the **10**.  
South        
JT4

**f. Leading From an Unsupported Honor:** When finessing, always lead an honor card *only with* supporting honors, and *usually only when* one hand has limited entries, i.e. that hand may not be able to continue leading low cards as it cannot regain the lead. Many Players lead unsupported Jacks intending to finesse. If a Jack is unsupported, a Defender would, and should, cover the Jack hoping to promote the Ten for the defense. As Declarer, if you have an unsupported Jack, the correct play is to win the Ace and King and play for the Queen to fall.

North      Do not lead the Jack, here. Rather just win the Ace and  
AK53      then the King, hoping that the Queen will fall. Alternatively,  
If you feel that the Queen is marked to be in East's hand, and  
you need to preserve entries, play low towards the Jack.  
South        
J642

**g. Stripping Either Hand of All the High Cards Too Early in the Play of the Hand:** Many strategies in Declarer play require a suit to be led from a specific hand. If you take all the high cards from either your own hand or the Dummy early in the play, then you may find you cannot lead from that hand later in the play. If one hand has few high cards, or entries, you should make sure you preserve those entries for the strategies which require a lead from a specific hand.

North  
AKQ94 A7 98 AQJ3

South  
J52 J863 A65 852

Declarer is in a contract of 4-Spades. The lead is the **DK**. Take the **DA** at trick one and immediately finesse the Clubs. If it wins, return to the south hand with the **SJ** and finesse the Diamonds once again. Note that if you had played three rounds of Spades first, you would not have enough high cards in South's hand to enable you to take the Club finesse twice.

**h. Loss of Entries to the Hand Containing Your Long Suits:** It is essential to maintain honors in other suits in the hand with the longer holding of a long suit. These high cards in other suits are the entries and are a means of regaining the lead in the hand with the length tricks if the lead is lost to the Opponents during the play of the long suit you are attempting to establish. Entries are vital so the suit can be continued when the lead is regained.

North  
A82 AK43 75 AK42

South  
K4 97 KQJT32 973

You are in a final contract of **3-NT**. The lead is the **SQ**. Your long suit is obviously Diamonds. Win trick one with North's **SA** in order to keep South's **SK** as an eventual entry to the five available Diamond tricks, once the Opponent's have taken their **DA**.

**i. Ignoring the "Danger" Hand:** Oft times when a two-way finesse is available, one of the Opponent's is a possible, potential danger to you if he/she were to gain the lead. As Declarer it is important to identify which Opponent is the "*dangerous*" one and take the needed finesse in the direction so that it does *not* lose to the "*danger*" hand. This is important to do in this situation, even if the bidding tends to favor the finesse in the opposite direction.

North  
982 KJ87 AK5 AK4

South  
K4 AT54 Q732 Q65

You are in a final contract of **3-NT**. The lead is the **DT**. You are missing the Heart Queen and have a 2-way finesse possible in order to trap it. Without regard for any bidding considerations, Declarer must recognize that East is the "*danger*" hand with regards to the Spade suit. If East were to gain the lead and lead the **SQ** through your **SK**, and if it were to lose, the contract might be in jeopardy. You must plan to take the finesse from the North hand towards the **Heart-AT** combination. If it were to lose and West takes the **HQ**, a Spade switch towards your **SK** cannot hurt you even if East were to hold the **SA**.

**j. Failure to Provide For the Ability to Establish the Means For Promotion Through Length When Missing an Entry to the Hand Containing the Long Suit:** When attempting to run a long suit in a hand which holds no outside entries, it is oft times necessary to give up a trick in that suit, at first, assuming that a trick must be forfeited anyway, in order to get the benefits of the tricks later established through length.

North  
AK5432 987 43 72

South  
76 AK54 AK6 AK85

You, South, as Declarer, are playing in **3-NT**. After taking the lead of a Diamond with the **DA**, you count your quick tricks as eight, two in each of the four suits. You must get your extra trick(s) from the Spade suit and the Opponents hold 5-pieces. Your only hope is that they split 3-2, the statistically expected split, but you must give up a Spade trick first, since you have no outside entries to North's Spade suit. If you were to take the **SA** and **SK** first and give up the third Spade trick to the Opponents, you could not continue to glean the three additional Spade tricks which would have become available had you given up a Spade trick initially.

**k. Failure to Break Up the Opponent's Communication with a "Hold-Up" According to the "Rule of 7" When Lacking but One Stopper in the Suit Led by the Opponents:**

When playing in a No-Trump contract and holding only an Ace in the suit led by the Opponents, Declarer, when using "*The Rule of 7*," can try to break the communication between the Opponents, attempting to limit the number of tricks taken by the Opponents in this suit guarded only by the Ace. The primary purpose of this holdup is to give as many tricks to the Opponents as needed to exhaust all the cards in the suit from one of their hands. If that hand then regains the lead, later in the play, it will not be able to put the Partner on lead to cash its tricks in the suit in which Declarer is now void of any additional stoppers. This Rule is only applicable when playing in a **3-NT** contract and under circumstances where the Declarer cannot maximize his/her winning tricks by otherwise immediately taking winners.

**"The "Rule of 7":** If the Declarer subtracts from 7 (seven) the total number of cards in the suit in his own hand and the Dummy, the result is the number of times Declarer should hold up with his/her Ace when the Ace is the only stopper in the suit led against a No-Trump contract.

<u>North</u> 42	In this example, If South holds up twice (7-5) taking his/her Ace on the third round of play of the suit, East is now stripped of any cards in the suit with which to lead back to West. Assuming West has no other entries, East cannot get to West's hand, and E-W are held to two tricks in the suit instead of four. Had South taken the Ace immediately and not held up, West would take four tricks in the suit, first led.
<u>West</u> KQJ73	<u>East</u> T65
<u>South</u> A98	

**l. Drawing the Winning, Outstanding 13<sup>th</sup> Trump From an Opponent:**

Occasionally, when drawing Trumps, Declarer finds one last piece (the 13<sup>th</sup> Trump) outstanding, and it is a high Trump, usually the Queen. Leave it alone and go about your Declarer play options letting the Defender take his/her top Trump card whenever he/she chooses. Do not seek to remove it for there is no reason to expend two of your Trumps to rid one of theirs which is a top Trump card anyway. This is the so-called "*Rule of 1*."