

Playing the Hand

Karen Walker's Online Notes

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Declarer Play I -- Forming a Plan

A good declarer relies on a variety of skills, strategies and techniques to help him make his contracts. One of the most basic is knowing how to handle common card combinations. You also need some knowledge of how long suits are likely to divide in the opponents' hands, and you need to learn how to detect and use clues from the opponents' bidding and play.

The most important of all declarer-play skills, though, is the ability to look at the entire hand -- all 13 tricks -- and develop an overall plan for making your contract. You should never just cash tricks randomly and hope you'll know what to do later -- ideally, you want to have a reason for every lead and play. Here are some basic guidelines for how to form your plan for suit and notrump contracts:

Playing Suit Contracts

1) Count your *losers* as soon as dummy comes down. If you have a 5-3 or a 6-2 fit, focus your counting on the hand with the longer trumps. If you have too many losers to make your contract, don't give up. There are a number of plays you can use to turn losers into winners:

- **Finessing** to trap the opponents' honors. (See [The Finesse](#) for how to handle some common card combinations.)
- **Developing long-suit winners** in a side suit to pitch losers in other suits. (See [Establishing and Cashing Tricks](#).)
- **Trumping** if one hand is short in a suit.

2) Make a plan for which of these plays you will use to develop extra tricks in each suit.

3) Decide which suits you'll attack, and in what order. On many (but not all) hands, you'll want to exploit your advantage in the trump suit by leading trumps first -- your plan will be to take all the opponents' trumps away and still have trumps remaining in your and/or dummy's hands to handle your losers. To be sure that this will be the right plan, count your losers first, then try counting *winners* (honors and potential long-suit tricks) in your outside suits. Add these winners to your tricks in the trump suit to determine whether or not you have enough "natural" tricks to make your contract.

If you DO have enough "natural" winners to make your contract, lead trumps right away. Plan to collect all the opponents' trumps, even if you have to lose the lead to do so. This will make it possible for you to cash your outside winners without worrying that an opponent will trump one of your good tricks.

- **Always count the opponents' trumps** as you lead the suit to keep track of how many they still have after each trick. One easy counting technique is to mentally start with the number of trumps in your two hands, then count "up" as you see each trump from an opponent's hand. For example, if you have an 8-card fit, you start with the number 8 -- if both opponents follow to your first trump lead, you mentally count 9-10. When you get to 13, you have all their trumps and you should stop leading them. For more tips on how to keep track of outstanding cards in a suit, see [Developing Your Counting Skills](#).
- Think about how many trumps the opponents started with and try to estimate in advance how many times you'll have to lead the suit to draw all their cards. If you have an 8-card fit, you'll have to lead trumps at least three times (if the opponents' cards break 3-2). If you have a 9-card fit, you'll need only two leads if the missing cards break 2-2, or three leads if they break 3-1.
- You can stop leading trumps if there's only one outstanding and it's a winner -- for example, you've drawn four of the opponents' trumps with your ace-king and one opponent is now left with the good queen. In this case, you usually won't want to use two of your trumps to get his one, so you can begin leading other suits and let the opponent score the trump queen whenever he wants.

If you **DON'T** have enough "natural" winners to make your contract, you'll usually want to postpone leading trumps. This may depend on your estimate of how many leads it would take to draw trumps and whether these leads would remove all the trumps from your hand or dummy's.

- For example, if you have 5 trumps in your hand and dummy has 3, it will take at least three leads to collect all the opponents' trumps. If you need to use dummy's trumps to take care of one or more of your hand's losers, you must set that up *before* you lead trumps. This may involve giving up a trick or two so you can run dummy out of the suit you need to trump. When you've finished using dummy's trumps in this way, you can then lead trumps.
- On other hands, you may need to try to score *all* of your trumps separately. In this case, your plan will be to play a *cross-ruff*, by trumping outside suits in both your hand and dummy's. Here's an example:

<p>(Dummy) ♠A842 ♥KJ93 ♦AJ65 ♣3 ♠653 ♥Q1084 ♦4 ♣A9752</p>	<p>You're in a 2H contract and the opening lead is the spade queen. You have only three obvious losers (two spades and one heart). When you count actual <i>winners</i>, though, you have only six -- three natural trump tricks and the three aces. None of the outside suits offers a chance to develop quick natural winners, so you'll have to find extra tricks from the trump suit.</p> <p>Since you need to score trumps separately, <i>don't</i> lead hearts. Instead, play a cross-ruff. Win the spade ace, cash dummy's diamond ace, and lead a small diamond, trumping it in your hand. Now cash your club ace and trump a club in dummy. Continue trumping diamonds in your hand and clubs in dummy. Eventually, an opponent will be able to over-ruff with the heart ace and lead another heart to stop the cross-ruff. By then, though, you'll have scored the extra trump tricks you needed, and you should finish with at least 8 tricks.</p>
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4) *After* you've made best use of your trumps -- by trumping losers and/or drawing trumps -- plan to attack your longest side-suit fit next. This is usually the suit that offers the greatest number of natural tricks. As you lead the suit, count the opponents' cards so you'll know when your small cards in the suit become winners.

5) If you have shorter suits with top tricks that can be taken at any time, plan to use these tricks as entries to get back and forth between your hand and dummy's. If you don't need them for entries, then plan to cash these tricks *last*.

In general, don't be afraid to lose tricks and give the opponents the lead. You'll often set up extra tricks for yourself by forcing the opponents to win their tricks early in the hand.

Playing Notrump Contracts

1) Count your *winners* as soon as dummy puts his hand down. Don't play a card until you've formed a plan for making your contract.

2) If you don't have enough top winners to make your contract, make a plan to create more winners. You have two main ways to develop extra tricks:

- **Finessing** to trap the opponents' honors.
- **Developing long-suit winners**, which may require letting the defenders win early tricks.

3) Decide which suit offers the greatest number of potential tricks and lead it first. In most cases, this will be your *longest* fit. Don't be afraid to give the opponents their tricks in your long suit if you can set up tricks for yourself by doing so.

- Before you lead the suit, **make a plan** for how you'll set up and cash its tricks. Decide which hand you want to lead from first, how you will "unblock" your honors, and whether or not you may be able to trap missing honors with one or more finesses (see the lessons on [Establishing and Cashing Tricks](#) and [The Finesse](#)).
- **Count the opponents' cards** as you lead your long suit. Keep track of the number of cards they still have so you'll know if and when your small cards are winners. Remember that the 13th card of a suit, even if it's a deuce, is always a trick in notrump. See [Developing Your Counting Skills](#) for an overview of counting techniques.

4) Cash winners in your short suits *last*. Don't set up the opponents' small cards in these suits by cashing your tricks too early.

In general, be cautious about leading the suit the opponents chose for the opening lead. At least one opponent has length in that suit, so don't set up his winners for him. They opponents will usually attack that suit again when they get the lead.

Declarer Play II -- Establishing and Cashing Tricks

Your first step as declarer is deciding on an overall plan for making your contract (see the declarer-play lesson on [Forming a Plan](#)). To develop and carry out that plan, you need some basic knowledge about the different techniques that can be used to establish tricks. One play you'll need to use frequently is the *finesse*, which involves trapping the opponents' honors (see the lesson on [The Finesse](#)). Other techniques include building your natural honor tricks and setting up your long suits. Here's a basic overview of these declarer-play techniques and some tips on how to cash the tricks you set up:

Building Natural Tricks

One of your main sources of tricks is in suits where you have honors. Some holdings -- aces, or AK and AKQ combinations -- provide sure tricks that can be cashed without giving up the lead. On most hands, though, you'll also need tricks from suits that *don't* have all the top honors. To turn these suits' potential tricks into sure tricks, you have to do some work.

One of the most common ways to build tricks through power is to drive out the opponents' aces and kings (and sometimes queens). When you form your plan, identify which honor combinations and suits offer the greatest number of potential tricks. Decide how and when you'll lead these suits, and don't be afraid to lose the lead. Here are some simple examples:

- **KQJ 432** -- This combination is one loser and two winners. To actually cash your two tricks, though, you have to get the ace out of the way. The opponents won't usually be anxious to help. You'll have to lead this suit yourself and force them to take their ace.
- **J10984 7653** -- This suit has at least two potential winners, but to score them, you must be willing to give up the lead three times. Note that you'll win *three* tricks if the missing cards divide 2-2.

Developing Long-Suit Winners

Another way to establish tricks is by setting up your long suits. Small cards in a long suit will often become winners when the opponents have no more cards in that suit. The chance that a long suit will provide extra winners will often depend on how the opponents' cards are divided. For example:

- **AKQ32 654** -- This suit will provide five tricks if all the opponents' cards drop under the AKQ. The missing cards must be divided 3-2 for you to win five tricks. What if the cards divide 4-1? If this is a side suit in a trump contract, you can trump the 2 to draw the last outstanding card and make your 3 a winner. If you're in notrump, you may want to give the opponents the fourth trick so you can win the fifth.
- **AK876 54** -- In notrump, this suit can provide three or four tricks, but only if you let the opponents win a trick or two. If the missing cards break 3-3, you can cash AK and lead the 6, letting the opponents win the trick. This will establish dummy's 87 for two more tricks. If the missing cards instead break 4-2, you'll have to lose two tricks to establish the 8.

If this is a side suit in a trump contract, you may be able to set up three or four tricks without losing any. Cash the ace-king, then trump dummy's 6. If the suit divides 3-3, you've created two more tricks. If the suit divides 4-2, you'll have to trump *two* of dummy's small cards to set up the third.

When you try to count winners in a long suit, you won't always know exactly how many tricks it will provide. You can make a good guess, though, if you know how the missing cards are *likely* to divide in the opponents' hands. See [Declarer Play: Simple Odds](#) for a summary of the probabilities of various suit breaks.

When leading long suits, be sure you count the opponents' cards as they play to each trick. You'll need to keep track of how many cards are outstanding to determine whether or not your cards are winners. For tips on how to count cards, see [Developing Your Counting Skills](#).

Unblocking plays

With some combinations, you must plan your plays so that once you establish your suit, the lead will be in the correct hand. The order of your leads can be critical if one hand has more cards in the suit than the other. Whether you're building natural honor tricks or trying to establish a long suit, you will often need to plan to *unblock* the suit to be sure you can cash all the tricks you set up.

If you're leading a suit that's *unevenly divided* between your hand and dummy's, **play the high cards from the short suit first**. Stated another way, plan your leads so the hand with the long suit is winning the trick when you are playing the last card from the hand with the short suit. Here are some examples:

- **QJ102 K3** -- With this combination, you'll have three winners after you force out the ace. Attack this suit by playing the king on the first trick (high card from the short suit). Now you can lead the 3 over to the QJ10 and continue leading the suit.
- **AKJ32 Q4** -- You should also unblock when you're cashing sure tricks. Here, win the first trick with the queen, then lead the 4 over to the AKJ3. If you instead lead the ace first, then low to the queen, the suit is blocked -- you'll have three good tricks left in the long suit, but no easy way to get to them.

Declarer Play III -- The Finesse

Some suit combinations allow you to create extra tricks by capturing the opponent's honors. You can do this by trying a *finesse* in a suit where you have one or more, but not all, of the high honors. When you finesse, you play the suit as if a certain opponent had one or more of the honors you're missing.

To run a finesse, first try to visualize where you need a missing honor to be. Then lead the suit *through* the opponent you hope has the honor (arrange for him to be *second* to play to the trick). Depending on which card he plays, choose a card from the third hand (yours or dummy's) that isn't the highest card in the suit, but which will win if second-hand has the honor you're trying to trap.

Keep in mind that your opponents will usually follow two defensive card-play rules:

- **Second-hand low** -- If you lead a small card from your hand or dummy, the next hand to play to the trick (your opponent) will play a low card from most holdings.
- **Cover an honor with an honor** -- If you lead an honor from your hand or dummy, the next hand to play to the trick will usually cover with a higher honor if he has one.

Finding queens:

- **If you have 8 or fewer total cards in a suit**, you should finesse to trap a missing queen. A queen will *not* usually drop if you cash ace-king.
- **If you have 9+ cards in a suit**, you should usually play for the drop instead of finessing. Since the defenders have only 4 cards in the suit, their queen is likely to fall if you cash ace-king.

Finding kings:

- **If you have 10 or fewer cards in a suit**, you should try a finesse to trap a missing king. A king will *not* usually fall under the ace unless you have an 11-card fit.

For a summary of the probabilities of winning a finesse, see [Declarer Play: Simple Odds](#).

Common Suit Combinations -- How to finesse

(DUMMY) AQ5 432 (YOU)	With this combination, you have one winner and two losers <i>unless</i> your left-hand opponent (LHO) holds the king. Lead the 2 from your hand and, if LHO follows with a low card, play dummy's queen. This type of simple finesse will win 50% of the time.
K32 654	You can also finesse for an ace. Play LHO for that card by leading from your hand. If LHO follows low -- and he almost always will when he holds the ace -- play dummy's king. If your right-hand opponent (RHO) has the ace, you never had a chance to win a trick in this suit.
A432 QJ109	If LHO has the king, a finesse wins four tricks. Lead the queen and if LHO plays low, "let it ride" by playing low from dummy. If the queen wins, repeat the finesse by leading the jack.
AJ32 K654	In an 8-card fit, the queen will not usually fall if you cash ace-king, so plan to finesse LHO for the queen. Cash the king first (in case the queen is singleton), then lead toward the AJ3 left in dummy. If LHO plays low, play the jack. This line of play will win slightly more than 50% of the time.

<p>AJ32 K1054</p>	<p>This suit offers a two-way finesse because you hold the jack <i>and</i> ten. Decide (or guess) which defender is more likely to hold the queen. If it's LHO, play the suit by cashing the king and then leading toward the AJ3, playing the jack if LHO follows low. If you think RHO has the queen, cash the ace, then lead toward the K105.</p>
<p>A432 J1098</p>	<p>You can try a double finesse if you're missing two honors. Here, you hope to lose only one trick by playing LHO for one or both honors. Lead the jack. If LHO plays low, play low from dummy and let RHO win his queen or king. You can now finesse LHO for the remaining honor by running the 10. This play will win three tricks 75% of the time.</p>
<p>AQ32 10987</p>	<p>This is a double finesse for the jack and king. Lead the 10 and let it ride, then repeat by leading the 9. If LHO holds both king and jack, you'll win four tricks. If he has either one of these honors, you'll win three tricks.</p>
<p>K432 J1098</p>	<p>This is another double finesse, but it offers an extra trick only if LHO has the queen. Lead the jack and let it ride. If this wins, or if RHO wins the ace, you'll know you've trapped LHO's queen. Repeat the finesse by leading the ten and letting it ride. This play will win three tricks 50% of the time.</p>
<p>A432 Q765</p>	<p>Since you don't have the jack to back up the queen, you can't trap the king if LHO has it. (If you lead the queen, LHO will "cover an honor with an honor" to force the ace and you'll lose three tricks to the J109.) Instead, you must hope RHO has the king and will win it as you play small cards. Cash dummy's ace, then lead the 2 towards your Q76. If RHO plays low, play the queen. (Note that RHO won't always "fly" with his king, especially if this is the trump suit).</p>
<p>A432 Q1065</p>	<p>This is similar to the combination above, but holding the 10 gives you another option. If you think RHO has the king (because of a clue from the bidding or previous tricks), play the suit as above -- cash the ace and lead the 2 toward your Q106, playing the queen if RHO follows low.</p> <p>If you instead think that LHO has the king, you can finesse RHO for the jack. Cash the ace and lead toward your Q106, playing the ten. If in doubt, choose this option (ace, then low to the 10); this will succeed when RHO holds Jxx <i>or</i> KJxx.</p>
<p>A432 Q1098</p>	<p>You have the same honors as in the previous two examples, but the "solid" 1098 allows you to run another type of double finesse. The best way to play this suit for three winners is to lead the queen. If LHO covers with his king, you'll win the ace and lose only one trick to the jack. If LHO plays low on your queen, play low from dummy. If RHO wins the queen with the king, you'll take a second finesse -- play LHO for the jack by leading the 10 towards the A43 and letting it ride. Like other double finesses, this line of play will succeed 75% of the time.</p>

Note: For simplicity, all of the above examples show combinations where you and dummy have equal length in the suit. Most of the recommendations still apply if you have unequal suit lengths and/or if the "spot" cards are in different hands. For example, in the last combination above (A432 opposite Q1098), you would try the same double finesse if the cards were A43 opposite Q10982, or A983 opposite Q104, or even A102 opposite Q93.

For more tips on declarer play, see the lessons on [Forming a Plan](#) and [Establishing and Cashing Tricks](#).

Playing the Odds

When you're declaring a bridge hand, it's beneficial to know some simple odds about the chances for favorable suit breaks and finesses. This knowledge will help you estimate the potential number of tricks you can take in a specific suit combination.

Knowing the odds will also help you decide which overall line of play you should take to make your contract. For example, if you have to choose between playing for a 7-card side suit to break 3-3 or taking a successful finesse, you'll know that the finesse is a better bet (50%) than the suit break (36%).

Odds of suit breaks:

In general: An **ODD** number of missing cards will tend to break **evenly** -- if you are missing 5 cards in a suit, they will divide 3-2 more often than 4-1.

An **EVEN** number of missing cards will tend to break **UNEVENLY** -- if you are missing 6 cards in a suit, they will divide 4-2 more often than 3-3.

If you have a combined fit of 7 cards in a suit (your opponents have 6):

3-3 break = 36%

4-2 = 48%

5-1 = 15%

6-0 = 1%

You have 8, they have 5:

3-2 = 68%

4-1 = 28%

5-0 = 4%

You have 9, they have 4:

2-2 = 40%

3-1 = 50%

4-0 = 10%

You have 10, they have 3:

2-1 = 78%

3-0 = 22%

Finding honors:

Your expected percentage of success when you need:

One finesse = 50%

One of two finesses = 75%

Two of two finesses = 25%

At least two of three finesses = 50%

Cards Missing	Break	%
2	1-1	52.0
	2-0	48.0
3	2-1	78.0
	3-0	22.0
4	3-1	49.7
	2-2	40.7
	4-0	9.6
5	3-2	67.8
	4-1	28.3
	5-0	3.9
6	4-2	48.5
	3-3	35.5
	5-1	14.5
	6-0	1.5
7	4-3	62.2
	5-2	30.5
	6-1	6.8
	7-0	0.5
8	5-3	47.1
	4-4	32.7
	6-2	17.1
	7-1	2.9
	8-0	0.2

The presence of spot cards (10's and 9's) will often increase your odds of finding or dropping honors:

AKQ10 opposite **xxx** = 61% chance of 3 tricks (because when the suit breaks 4-2 or 5-1, the jack may drop singleton or doubleton).

AJ98 opposite **xxx** = 38% chance of 3 tricks (finesse the 9 first, which wins when K10, Q10 or KQ10 are onside).