

Declaring a Hand (Part 1)

Over the last few months, we've talked about a lot of different topics that you'll face as a declarer: finesses, crossruffs, danger hands, etc. While there are a lot more items we can and will discuss, I thought it might be useful to take a step back for a few weeks and talk more generally about how you should approach declaring a hand. For many players, declaring a hand, especially No Trump, can be a very stressful part of the game. Hopefully, this series of lectures will help alleviate some of that anxiety,

The first thing you should do is make a plan. On many hands, you can at least start this process BEFORE the opponents have led. Consider this bidding sequence:

North	South
1♥	1♠
2♣	3NT
All Pass	

The declarer, South, has a pretty good idea of dummy's hand: 5+ ♥, 4+ ♣, not 4 ♠ since no support and 12 - 17 points since no jump shift. She's also likely to get a ♦ lead since that's the only unbid suit. Armed with that information, you can start thinking about how you're going to attack the hand to make your 9 tricks. You may have to adjust your thinking once you see the lead and dummy. But, by doing this work first, you can help alleviate some of the nervous energy that derails many advancing players.

Doing this first step will also help alert you to many unusual leads. Let's go back to that previous hand. As indicated, we're expecting a ♦ lead based on the bidding. So, what does it mean if West leads a ♥? or a ♠? First, it often means that West had a problem holding in ♦. Imagine you're in West's seat holding ♦ A K 7 6 5. Then, you're leading a diamond. What about ♦ 6 5? You're probably still leading a ♦ hoping to hit partner's strength. But, what if you've got ♦ K 6 5 or ♦ A Q 2? Now, you might worry about giving declarer an extra trick, so you find another suit to lead. Second, the lead says something about that opponent's holding in that suit. If the lead is a honor card, then you can expect it to be from something like ♥ Q J 10 8 5 or stronger. Essentially, to make this lead, the opponent needs to be pretty sure that they're not giving away a trick by leading a suit you've announced length in. Something like ♥ K J 7 6 or even ♥ A 8 6 5 2 isn't going to cut it. If the lead is a low card, then there's a good chance it's a singleton, especially in a suit contract. To see this, again ask yourself: when would I lead low to opponent's suit? Would I lead from ♥ 10 8

6 5 2 or even ♥ J 10 8 6 5 2? No way! That's just asking for trouble. It's much more likely I'm trying to find partner's ♥ A so she can give me a ruff.

Now, dummy comes down and we're able to finalize our plan. In particular, at this juncture, we can place our goal into one of three categories of hands:

1. Make the contract at all cost
2. Make a specific number of tricks
3. Make as many tricks as you can

Let's first notice what's not on this list. We're not asking questions like: "Where was the hand you bid partner?" You can ask that question at the bar after the game, but now it will just take your focus of the task at hand. How about "Geez, we should be in 6, not 4." or "How are we not in game?" Again, those thoughts will just distract you from the task at hand: playing the contract you're in!

So, how do we decide which group this hand is in? And, once we have, how does that affect how we approach the hand? Let's take each group separately. The first group usually comes down to one of these situations:

1. You're playing at IMPs
2. You bid a slam
3. You were doubled in a contract you bid to make, as opposed to a preempt
4. You've stretched to an unusual contract

We've talked about the first one before: with IMPs scoring, there is little benefit from overtricks and a HUGE penalty for going down. So, you should focus on maximizing your chances of making the contract. It's a similar idea with the next two. If you bid a slam or get doubled, you're likely to be in the minority: many advancing players will avoid bidding slams unless it's absolutely going to make. As a result, if you make, you'll get a top score. Fail and you'll get a bottom. Over and undertricks aren't likely to make much of a difference. Finally, there are occasions where we stretch to a contract. Consider these hands:

West

♠ 8 5 3 2

♥ A 7 4

♦ Q 4

♣ A J 5 2

East

♠ K Q 10 7 4

♥ K 6

♦ A 3 2

♣ 10 9 7

Maybe East falls in love with his ♠10 and raises West's 3♠ bid to game. Maybe West treats his two Aces and four card support as a game forcing bid. Either way, you end up in 4♠ with only 23 HCP. Since you're not likely to have a lot of company there, we're back in the same situation: how well you do will be almost entirely driven by whether or not you make your contract.

So, what about the second category? That tends to come up in one of these situations:

1. You've taken the low road on a hand, essentially the opposite of #4 above
2. You had to decide between two possible contracts

For #1, consider the previous hand, but with an extra K in one of the hands. Now, the two hands have 26 HCP between them. So, if you're only in 3♠, you're not going to have a lot of company. In that case, you should play the hand assuming that it makes exactly 9 tricks. Because, if it makes 10 tricks, you've already lost to all the pairs that build the normal 4♠. On the other hand, if it only makes 9 tricks, you get a top board. A similar logic applies if you were deciding between 3 NT and 4♠. If you pick 3 NT, then you need to think about what happens if 4♠ makes. In that case, you'll get a bad board if you only take 9 tricks even though you'll make the contract. In that case, you should plan on taking 10 tricks. On the other hand, if it looks like 4♠ is going down, just focus on making your contract.

The final option applies to everything else. In particular, it applies to most partial scores, preempts, sacrifices and "oopsy daisy" bids. For those of you not familiar with that final one, that's what I call being in 6♥ with ♥A 10 7 opposite your robot partner's ♥K 8 2. There's no point rehashing what went wrong here. So, just play the hand quickly and move onto the next board.

Next week we'll get into some of the approaches to achieve these results. So, for now, we'll just focus on a simple example of how this setup can change our approach to a hand. Let's assume we're declaring a ♠ contract and that we have exactly 5 tricks in the other suits. How should we approach this trump suit? If we're in 4♠, then the approach is simple: lead the ♠10 from dummy to finesse East. If it wins, repeat the finesse as often as necessary. If we're lucky, we'll score all 5 trump. That's the same play we would make if we're simply trying to maximize our tricks. But, what if we ended up in an anti-field 3♠? Now, we should assume that the finesse ISN'T going to work! In that case, our best approach is to lead low from dummy to our ♠A. As long as spades aren't 5-0, we'll take 4 trump tricks regardless of who has the K. This approach also has the advantage of reducing the chances that the opponents can get a ruff.

North

♠ 10 5 2

South

♠ A Q J 7 4

Quick Quiz

North

1♠

2♥

All Pass

South

2♣

3NT

Assume the above bidding for each of these hands. Without seeing dummy, how do you expect to play the hand?

South

- a. ♠74 ♥87 ♦K4 ♣AKQ10973
- b. ♠K4 ♥873 ♦AQ6 ♣AJ1097
- c. ♠4 ♥K73 ♦KQ6 ♣AJ1097

On each of these hands, East opens 1♥ and ends up in 4♥. What should East's trick target be for each set of hands?

a.

West

♠8532

♥A74

♦Q4

♣AJ52

East

♠10

♥KQJ86

♦A32

♣K1097

b.

West

♠AQ32

♥A74

♦Q64

♣J52

East

♠109

♥KQJ86

♦AK2

♣K109

c.

West

♠ A 7 3 2

♥ A 7 4

♦ Q 6 4

♣ 8 5 2

East

♠ 10 9

♥ K Q J 8 6

♦ A 7 2

♣ K 10 9

d.

West

♠ A 7 3 2

♥ A 7 5 4

♦ Q 6 5 4

♣ 8

East

♠ 10 9

♥ K Q J 8 6

♦ A 7 2

♣ K 10 9

e.

West

♠ A 7 3 2

♥ A 7 5 4

♦ K 6 5 4

♣ 8

East

♠ 10

♥ K Q J 8 6

♦ A 7 2

♣ A 10 9 7