

# Declaring a Hand

## Part 2: Making a Plan

Once we've decided what our goal is on a particular hand, we need to make a plan to achieve that goal. For this discussion, we're going to be assuming that there is some doubt about what you should do. In general, if you can count 13 tricks, it's not about the play! When there is some doubt, we're generally going to take one of three routes to establish the additional tricks we're looking for:

1. Try a finesse or two (or three or...)
2. Ruff some losers
3. Establish a long side suit

While these aren't mutually exclusive (e.g. establishing a side suit often involves either a finesse or a ruff), we will look at them separately in today's lesson. But, before we get there, we need to discuss a few key concepts:

1. Stoppers
2. Entries
3. Losers

To help set this part of the discussion up, assume Dummy has Q J 10 8 7 2 in a side suit. How many tricks do you expect to take in this contract? The knee-jerk reaction is likely to be 4: knock out, or play, the Ace and King. Then, cash Dummy's 4 remaining cards. But, what if you're in a suit contract and the play goes Ace, King, ruff? Now, you can only get 3 tricks. Or, what if you knock out the Ace and King, but you can't get back to Dummy to cash the other winners? In that case, this suit produces 0 (!) winners for you. So, it's not enough to look at the suit in isolation: we need to understand how it fits into our whole plan for this hand. Keep that in mind as we discuss these key points.

## Stoppers

In general, declaring a hand is a race: you're trying to establish your tricks before the opponents are able to establish theirs. Since we won the bidding, we will typically have more of the HCP. In that case, we will often be able to use those high cards to stop, or at least slow down, the opponent's attempts. Another benefit we usually have is trump: if we can't win a trick with a high card, we may be able to use our extra trump length to stop the opponent's from running their winners. However, you need to be careful though when counting trump as "stoppers". First, if you're using trumps as stoppers, then you need to be careful about drawing trump. I've seen far too many novice players "plan" on using Dummy's trumps only to find out that a bad trump split ruined their plans. Second, be extremely careful if the trump you're planning on using and high. Consider the following Dummy holding in a 4♠ contract:

♠ K Q J  
♥ Void

You can definitely ruff up to 3 ♥ in your hand with Dummy's trump. But, you need to be careful that this doesn't simply trade a ♥ loser for a trump one.

With high cards, the number of stoppers you have in a suit is the answer to the question: "How many times can the opponent's lead that suit before I lose control?" Sometimes the answer will be easy: if you have the Ace and King and 3 little between your hand and the Dummy, then you have 2 Stoppers. If you have the King, Queen and Jack, then you have two Stoppers, as well: the opponent's Ace gets covers one of your honors, but that still leaves you with two additional winners. Sometimes, it will depend on which opponent leads the suit. Consider having the A Q x opposite 2 little. If you're LHO leads the suit, then you have 2 Stoppers: you will either win the Queen on the first trick or cover's RHO's King, which will establish your Queen as a second Stopper. But, if RHO leads the suit, you may only have

1, depending on which opponent holds the King.<sup>1</sup> As a result, people often refer to this as 1 ½ Stoppers. A good declarer will do this calculation for each of her short side suits after taking into account the lead. Whatever the smallest number is, that's the number of times you can lose the lead when setting up your tricks. To see this in action, consider these two pairs of hands on a ♠ lead to 3NT:

#### Hand 1

♠ A 9 6	♠ K Q 2
♥ A J 3 2	♥ 8 6
♦ 7 5 2	♦ A 8
♣ A 4 3	♣ Q J 10 8 7 2

#### Hand 2

♠ A 9 6	♠ K Q 2
♥ A J 3 2	♥ K 6
♦ 7 5 2	♦ J 8
♣ A 4 3	♣ Q J 10 8 7 2

In both cases, we'll win the ♠ lead with one of our high . So, that will leave us with two more Stoppers in that suit. The difference is in the red suits. In Hand 1, we have a Stopper in each suit. That means we can afford to lose a ♣ without threatening the contract. On the other hand, in Hand 2, ♦ are wide open. We may get lucky: LHO may not lead one if he wins the King of ♣, but we should do everything possible avoid finding out.

#### Entries

Setting up winners is only the first step. We also need to be able to get to them for the effort to matter. That's where Entries come in. These could be high cards. They could be trump. Either way, we

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<sup>1</sup> In this case, RHO is called the "danger hand" since his lead causes you more problems. We will discuss this concept in more details in our next lesson.

need them to be available when we're ready to implement our plan. This means that figuring out Entries really has two parts: 1. Figuring out how many Entries we have and 2. Ensuring that they'll be there when we need them. To see this in action, let's consider 3 card combinations:

Combination #1

♠ A 9 6

♠ K Q 2

Combination #2

♠ A 9 6

♠ K Q

Combination #3

♠ A 9

♠ K Q 2

In all three of these, I can use ♠ to get to Dummy twice. But, there's quite a difference in when and how I can get there. The first combination is the most flexible: I can take my 3 tricks in any order between the two hands. In the second case, I need to use Dummy's Entries on the first 2 tricks. Otherwise, I'll turn my 3 ♠ tricks into 2! In the third situation, we can get to Dummy twice, but we'll need the opponent's help for the second one.

So, how do we incorporate this information into our plan? Let's consider the following card combination:

♠ A J 10 7 6

♠ K 3 2

In a vacuum, the best approach to this holding is the following approach:

- Cash Dummy's King
- Finesse the Jack in hand
- If LHO shows out, return to Dummy and repeat the finesse

With that approach, you can pick up the following combinations: 1. RHO holds any 4 cards or 2. RHO holds Q X X, Q X or Q. That's, roughly, a 50% chance of taking 5 tricks and nearly 100% chance of taking 4. But, watch what happens when we change this up a bit. For example, what if Dummy's King is our only Entry? In that case, we can't get back to Dummy for the second finesse, which means we won't be able to pick up RHO's Q X X X. That may not seem like much, but it's actually a pretty big drop off: that holding represents about 25% of the holdings we can pick up with the first approach.

What if we go a little further afield? For example, what if our target tells us to target making exactly 4 tricks in the suit? Remembering back, that might happen if we were deciding between 3 and 4♠, but settled for the part score contract. In that case, if we identify 5 tricks outside trump, then landing 5 trump tricks will get us to 10... and a bad board! So, what if we assume that the normal approach ISN'T going to work (i.e. LHO has Queen)? In that case, the best play may seem a little counterintuitive:

- Cash the Ace in your Hand(!)
- Lead the Jack towards Dummy
- Cash Dummy's King

You won't be able to pick up LHO's Q X X X, but it will likely earn you a top, or some extra IMPs, for the rest of the time they hold the Queen.

### Losers

It's a natural by-product of this type of competition: sometimes you won't be able to stop your opponents. In those cases, it can be useful to know how many tricks they'll be able to rattle off. For this calculation, you should include both the ones they'll be able to get setting up TEHIR long suit plus any you had to give up along the way. However, you typically will only need to assume that they set up 1 side suit. Consider the following setup:

♥ K Q J  
♦ 7 5  
♣ 4 3

♥ 8 6  
♦ A Q J  
♣ Q J 10 8 7 2

If LHO opponent starts with a red card, then the opponents will be able to hold you to one Stopper in that suit, assuming RHO has the King of ♦. In that case, we can expect to lose up to 6 tricks: 2♣, 3 in the suit led<sup>2</sup> and 1 in the other red suit before Dummy's ♣, can be fully established. However, they won't be able to knock out our Stoppers in BOTH suits, so we shouldn't count 3 Losers in both red suits if we take this approach. But, if 6 tricks is more than we can afford to lose, then we'll need to take a different approach.

### Bringing it Together

Now that we have this background, let's put it all together for few examples.

#### Example #1: 6 NT, ♠ Lead

♠ A 9 2  
♥ A Q J  
♦ A J 10  
♣ A K 7 2

♠ K Q  
♥ 10 8 7 6 2  
♦ Q 9 8 6 2  
♣ 8

We have plenty of Stoppers in all 4 suits and no clear Losers. Since our goal is taking 12 tricks, we need to come up with 7 in the red suits. That means we need to find at least one of the Kings onside. The issue is Entries: we only have 2 into Dummy, one of which we're going to use now. And, if our first Finesse loses, LHO can return a ♠ which will remove Dummy's 2<sup>nd</sup> Entry before we can establish Dummy's length tricks. So, how do we proceed? We improvise! The normal play would be to lead

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<sup>2</sup> With 8 cards between the opponents' hands, a 5-3 split is more likely than a 4-4 split. That's why we should expect to lose 3 tricks in that suit.

Dummy's Q♦ at trick 2. If RHO has the K♦, then this approach will let us stay in Dummy to repeat the Finesse. But, if LHO has it instead, then the expected ♠ will doom the contract. Instead, we should lead a low ♦! Now, if LHO wins the K♦, we can overtake our J♦ with Dummy's Q♦ to create an unexpected 3<sup>rd</sup> entry which we can use to both cash Dummy's long ♦ and Finesse twice in ♥.

Example #2: 4♠X, ♥ Lead

♠ Q J 10 9 2	♠ 8 6 4 3
♥ Void	♥ 10 8 7 6 4 2
♦ A K 7 5	♦ 9 8 6
♣ 10 8 7 2	♣ Void

We've made a good preempt, even with the Double. So, our goal is to minimize the damage by taking as many tricks as possible. We have more Losers, at least 2♠ and 1♦, than winners. But we've got plenty of Stoppers and Entries due to the contract, and the unfortunate lead. But, we need to be careful, especially in ♥: if one of the opponents can ruff in high, they'll have a chance to remedy the opening lead mistake by drawing our trump. Given that, here's the best approach:

- Ruff the lead in hand
- Ruff a ♣ in Dummy
- Lead a ♦ back to hand
- Repeat the last two steps
- Ruff a 3<sup>rd</sup> ♣ in Dummy
- Only now, ruff a 2<sup>nd</sup> ♥ in hand

If all that works, which is quite likely, you'll have won the first 7 tricks: 2♦ in hand, 2♥ ruffs in hand and 3♣ ruffs in Dummy. Plus, you still are going to get at least 2 more trump tricks since you have Q J 10 in

hand and the 8 in Dummy, which you're going to use to ruff a ♣ on the next trick. The opponents can overruff 2 of these, but that'll mean you get 2 of them for a total of 9 tricks. Not bad for a combined 9 points!

### Example #3:

In all of these, Dummy has the holding we discussed at the beginning: ♣QJ 10 8 7 2 in a NT contract.

The question comes down to how to attack this suit given the other information.

*Option A:* Two little in hand, plenty of Stoppers and no issues with Entries or Losers

In this case, your best approach is to lead from hand twice. This caters to the possibility that ♣ are 4-1 with LHO holding at least one of the Ace, King or 9. (Note: If they're 3-2, then any approach will work. If they're 5-0, then NO approach will work.)

*Option B:* A X X in hand, plenty of Stoppers and no issues with Entries or Losers; need 6 tricks

In this case, you only have one hope: hope RHO has the King. That means, we need to get to Dummy and lead the Q♣. If that works, we repeat with the J♣.

*Option C:* A X X in hand, but only 2 Entries to Dummy one of which happens at trick 1; need 5 tricks at IMPs

In this case, you're trying to make your safest play to make the contract. So, consider what happens if you lead the Q♣ at trick 1, but LHO opponent ducks holding ♣K X! Since you "know" that the Finesse is working, you try it again. When your surprise wears off at losing that trick, you're going to be really upset about going down 3 in an ice-cold contract! How? Go back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> trick: the opponents only have 2♣ left. Since you can afford to lose one trick, you better off with the 100% play: lead a low ♣ from



Dummy to your Ace and then return your final ♣. Yes, this loses an unnecessary trick in the most likely case (i.e. that RHO has K X X). But, it's worth it at this scoring to get 100% certainty.

Quick side note: you're probably thinking something along the lines of: "No way in HELL is LHO ducking that first trick holding K X!" Just remember, the opponents have most of the same information you do: which scoring method?, what's the contract?, how competitive was the auction? So, they often have a pretty good idea of what your needs are. Since their goals are the exact opposite (e.g. if your goal is to get 12 tricks, their goal is to get 2), they are often incentivized to take the same sort of risks. In this case, an opponent that sees you only need 5 ♣ tricks to make your contract might take a daring gamble to try and set you. Teach them not to mess around with you!

*Option C:* A X in hand, but only 1 Entry to Dummy; need 5 tricks

In this case, good defense will doom you if you try for 6 tricks! Specifically, if you use your entry to Dummy to finesse the King of ♣, then a good RHO can hold you to 2 tricks by simply ducking the Queen. Instead, you should get to your hand and lead your Ace and then little ♣. This will let you continue leading ♣ from Dummy to force out the opponent's King. Once you do that, you can use Dummy's lone Entry to cash the rest of the ♣ winners.