

Ruff vs. Draw

When declaring a hand with trump, one of the key decisions you'll need to make is how to handle the trump suit. Often, you'll have enough strength and length in trump that you can draw your opponents' trump and avoid any unwanted ruffs. Other times, though, you're better off crossruffing the hand so you can score your trump separately. But, how do you decide which is better? Today's lesson will give you a few key things to look for in deciding.

First, it's important to note that there are really three ways to play hands in which there's a trump suit. In the third way, only one hand, usually dummy, ruffs while there are still trump out. About the only difference between this approach and a full crossruff is that you can use trump to get back to the hand giving the ruffs. In a full crossruff, this might cost you a trick. But, since most of the considerations are the same, we'll generally lump these into the crossruff category.

First consideration:

How many tricks do I need from the trump suit?

Impact:

The more tricks we need, the more likely we are to need to crossruff.

Say we're in 4♥, so we need ten total tricks. If we have an A and AK in two outside suits, and no other source of tricks, then we need to get seven trump tricks. That's going to be difficult if we draw trump first. On the other hand, if we have all three outside aces and two kings, then we only need five trump tricks. That makes drawing trump much more attractive. It's worth noting that the level of the contract impacts this calculation: If we were in 6♥ in the second case, we would be back to needing seven trump tricks, which would again suggest a crossruff.

Second consideration:

Are our outside tricks fast or slow?

Impact:

Having fast tricks, like As or AKs in outside suits, suggests crossruffing. Having slow tricks, like KQJx or QJ10xx, suggests drawing trump.

The reason for this rule is the defense reaction to a crossruff. Specifically, if they realize you're trying to crossruff the hand, they should lead a trump every time they can. That has the effect of converting two trump that you would like to score separately into a single trick. As a result, that's often referred to as "defenders drawing trump" or as "2 for 1" since one of their trump can draw two of yours. If you've got to give up the lead a few times, like when establishing a suit headed by QJ10xx, that gives the opponents several chances to make the right lead.

Third consideration:

How are the outside suits distributed?

Impact:

The more unequal they are, the easier and more fruitful a crossruff can be. Evenly split suits suggest drawing trump.

Assume you're in a **♦** contract. Consider these three possible holdings in the majors:

<p>North</p> <p>♠ A 8 7 6</p> <p>♥ 8</p>	<p>North</p> <p>♠ A K 4</p> <p>♥ 8 7</p>	<p>North</p> <p>♠ A Q 4</p> <p>♥ K Q 3</p>
<p>South</p> <p>♠ 9</p> <p>♥ A 6 4 2</p>	<p>South</p> <p>♠ 7 3</p> <p>♥ A K 4</p>	<p>South</p> <p>♠ K 8</p> <p>♥ A 10</p>

In all three cases, we have five cards in each suit between the two hands. But, in the first hand, we might be able to score as many as six ruffs: ruff three ♠s in the South hand, after cashing the A, and ruff three ♥s in the North hand, again after cashing the A. By comparison, the second hand only allows for two ruffs -- one in each hand. And, in the third case, no ruffs are needed because we have three winners in each suit.

Fourth consideration:

How strong are the trump in the hand that's going to be ruffing?

Impact:

When ruffing, we'd prefer to have higher trump, since that will make the tragic outcome of an overruff less likely.

Consider these three possible trump holdings:

North	North	North
A Q 8 7 6	7 6 3 2	10 8 7 4 2
South	South	South
K J 10 9	A K Q J 10	9 6 5 3

In all three cases, we have nine trumps between the two hands, but with very different strength. Specifically, in the first hand, we can score all nine of our trump vis a crossruff and the opponents won't be able to overruff. In the second case, South can ruff freely, but needs to watch out for East overruffing North's low trump. Finally, in the third case, we likely best off drawing trump to avoid the **opponents** getting a crossruff going!

Fifth consideration:

Did the bidding tip you off to an overruff situation?

Impact:

When the opponents get in the bidding, it can often alert you to potential shortness in one of the hands. If this shortness is in front of your shortness (e.g. LHO and dummy are both short in the same suit), then a crossruff can be quite successful. If they're reversed (e.g. you and LHO are both short in a suit), then you're very likely to get overruffed.

Assume West opens 2♠ and you end up in 4♥. Consider these possible ♠ holdings:

North

♠ A 8 7 6

North

♠ 4

South

♠ 9

South

♠ A 10 7 3

Based on the bidding, we know that West has 6+ ♠s, so East has at most two in each of these situations. In the first case, this is great news! We can take the A on the first ♠ trick. Then, we can ruff the other three. Whenever East shows out, she's welcome to ruff. But, that gives us a chance to overruff! If East doesn't ruff, we can get away with ruffing low. In the second example, the tables are turned. Now, when East shows out, she's over ruffing dummy. This makes a crossruff much more dangerous.

Quick Quiz

In a ♠ contract, rank these from best to worst for crossruffing

North

♠ A Q J 6 4

♥ 8

♦ J 10 4

♣ A K 5 2

North

♠ A K Q 9 8

♥ 8

♦ A 6

♣ 7 6 5 4 2

North

♠ K 9 7 6 4

♥ A Q 3

♦ 6 5

♣ K Q 2

North

♠ 10 9 7 6 4

♥ A Q 3

♦ Void

♣ K Q 6 5 2

South

♠ K 10 8 7

♥ A 6 4 2

♦ 8 7 6 5

♣ 3

South

♠ J 10 7 6

♥ A K J 6 4

♦ 10 4 3 2

♣ Void

South

♠ Q 8 5 2

♥ K 5

♦ A J 10

♣ A 8 7 3

South

♠ Q 8 5 2

♥ K 5

♦ J 10 4

♣ A 8 7 3

As usual, you've aggressively bid yourself up to 6♠ with this holding. Do you draw trump or crossruff on a ♣ lead?

North

♠ K 6 5 2

♥ Q 4 3 2

♦ 4

♣ K Q 5 2

South

♠ A Q J 7 4 3

♥ A K

♦ K 7 6 3 2

♣ Void

What about on a ♦ lead?

What about on a ♥ or ♠ lead?