

Hold-Up Plays in NT Contracts

Hold-up plays are most often used when you're playing a NT contract and have only one stopper in LHO's led suit. You want to play your stopper at the best possible time to interrupt opponents' communication. For example, in the deal below, the contract is 3NT and West leads the ♥6. The full deal is:

North	
♠ K742	
♥ 75	
♦ AQJ63	
♣ 75	
West	East
♠ 106	♠ QJ95
♥ K10862	♥ QJ9
♦ 98	♦ K75
♣ Q1084	♣ 963
South	
♠ A83	
♥ A43	
♦ 1042	
♣ AKJ2	

You have 6 quick tricks - two clubs, one diamond, one heart, and two spades, and you can develop 3 more tricks in diamonds. But, you need to take the diamond finesse to set up those diamond tricks, and you need to take your 9 tricks before the opponents can take their diamond tricks. If you win the first trick with the ♥A, when you lose the diamond finesse, East will lead back another heart, and the opponents will take 4 heart tricks and the ♦K - down one. You'll get the same result if you duck the first trick and take your ♥A on the second trick. But if you hold up your ♥A until the third trick, when East gets in with the ♦K, he won't be able to get back to West before you can cash your 9 tricks - making 3NT. Note: Your play protects against the possibility that West has five hearts. But if you hold up and East does have a fourth heart to return, the suit is splitting 4-4 and the defenders can still take only 4 tricks - three hearts and the ♦K.

Sometimes you need to hold up even when you have two stoppers in an opponents' long suit. In the deal below, West leads the ♥6 against 3NT.

North

♠ 643

♥ K42

♦ A3

♣ QJ1086

West

♠ 975

♥ Q10765

♦ J108

♣ K5

East

♠ J1082

♥ J9

♦ 96542

♣ A2

South

♠ AKQ

♥ A83

♦ KQ7

♣ 9743

It looks like you have an easy 3NT here. After you force out the ♣A and ♣K, you have three clubs, three diamonds, two hearts, and three spades, making 5. But look what happens if you win the first heart trick. You must set up clubs to make your contract, so you lead a top club. East wins the first round with the ♣A and returns a heart. West wins and drives out your last heart stopper. Now when West gets in with the ♣K, she cashes her three winning hearts - down one. If, however, you hold up and let East take the first heart trick, then win the second heart lead, when East wins the ♣A, she doesn't have a heart to return, so you can retain your heart stopper while you knock out West's ♣K.

Sometimes, however, you shouldn't hold up at all. In the deal below, West leads the ♠2 against your 3NT contract.

North	
♠ Q3	
♥ 73	
♦ K10842	
♣ AJ108	
West	East
♠ J1072	♠ K954
♥ K86	♥ QJ10952
♦ 975	♦ A
♣ 642	♣ 97
South	
♠ A86	
♥ A4	
♦ QJ63	
♣ KQ53	

Because West has led the ♠2, you're pretty sure he has only four spades, which means when the opponents get in with the ♦A, you'll lose three spades in addition to the ♦A - making 3NT. But what if you duck the spade lead and West shifts to a heart? Now, when the opponents get in with the ♦A, they can take five hearts and the ♦A - down two. Don't hold up if opponents have a more dangerous lead they might shift to.

Quick Quiz

The contract is 3NT in the South. West leads the ♠K. What do you play from the South hand? Why?

North

♠ 6

♥ A863

♦ KQ86

♣ K542

South

♠ AJ7

♥ KQ2

♦ J1042

♣ A83

The contract is 3NT in the South. West leads the ♠4. What do you play from dummy? East plays the ♠Q. What do you play from your hand? Why?

North

♠ 103

♥ K53

♦ AJ108

♣ KJ108

South

♠ AJ7

♥ QJ102

♦ KQ9

♣ A93

Hold-Up Plays in NT Contracts Answer Sheet

The contract is 3NT in the South. West leads the ♠K. What do you play from the South hand? ♠7

North

♠6

♥A863

♦KQ86

♣K542

South

♠AJ7

♥KQ2

♦J1042

The contract is 3NT in the South. West leads the ♠4. What do you play from dummy?

East plays the ♠Q. What do you play from your hand?

♠3, ♠A

North

♠103

♥K53

♦AJ108

♣KJ108

South

♠AJ7

♥QJ102

♦KQ9

♣A93