Strips, Squeezes and Endplays...Oh my!

One of the most satisfying plays as a declarer is forcing the opponents to give you an extra trick. Both squeezes and endplays fit into this category. When players are first introduced to these concepts, they usually think two things: First, that is very COOL! And, second, I could never pull that off at the table! Hopefully, tonight's lesson will help demystify these ideas and help you find some extra tricks.

The most important lesson about both squeezes and endplays is that they DON'T come up very often. You may only see one once every few games. So, don't assume that every hand is a chance for a squeeze or an endplay. That being said, properly executing either is likely to get you a top board, since many players will either fail to notice or fail to take advantage of the opportunity when it arises. So, what are the conditions you're looking for? First, it's much easier to have one of these opportunities in a suit contract than in No Trump. Why, you might ask? Consider the hand below:

West	**East**
♠A K J 3 2	♠Q 10 9 6 4
♥K 4	♥A 6
♦A 9 7	♦K J 10
♣7 6 2	♣A K 3

If we're playing in 6♠, we can guarantee the contract if we can make the opponents either lead a ♦ or give us a ruff-and-sluff. However, at 6 NT, that probably won't work: when the opponents win a trick, they don't have to lead a ♦ because there's no ruff-and-sluff potential. You may still be able to pull it off, but it will require counting out the ENTIRE hand, so I would avoid trying it for now.

Following up on the ruff-and-sluff idea, the second thing we want in the hand is trump left in both declarer and dummy's hand. Specifically, if we're forced to use all of dummy's or declarer's trump, then the opponents can safely lead another suit to break things up. Finally, we want the hands to be relatively even. Specifically, we're trying to take away the opponents' safe exit cards, thereby setting up a potential ruff-and-sluff. Also, it's much easier to clear up a suit when the two hands have the same number of cards.

Once we're decided that the conditions are right, our first step is to **strip** the hand. The idea of a **strip** is to eliminate all the opponents' safe discards. Let's go back to the earlier hand.

West	**East**
♠A K J 3 2	♠Q 10 9 6 4
♥K 4	♥A 6
♦A 9 7	♦K J 10
♣7 6 2	♣A K 3

We know we're going to lose a ♣ trick: there's no place for either hand to discard their third ♣. But, if we play it right, we can make the winner of that trick give us the magic twelfth trick. Here's how we do it:

1. Win the first trick.
2. Draw trump. Let's assume a worst case split of 3-0.
3. Get rid of the remaining high cards in ♥s and ♣s.

If you do all that, then you'll be left with the following cards:

West	**East**
♠J 2	♠10 9
♥Void	♥Void
♦A 9 7	♦K J 10
♣2	♣3

When we lead the last ♣, the opponents are stuck! If they lead a ♥ or ♣, we can ruff in west and discard a ♦ from East. Magically, there's no more need to guess in ♦! On the other hand, if they lead a ♦, then there's no need to guess: the free finesse gives you your twelfth trick!

This is an example of an **endplay**: the opponents gain the lead and then have to give you an extra trick. In general, the conditions we discussed above are the only requirements for an **endplay**. **Squeezes**, on the other hand, need some additional conditions. As a result, **endplays** come up much more often. In fact, **endplays** don't even need to be at the end of the hand!

Let's change up the previous hand a bit:

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

In this case, we're only in 4♠. We have 10 obvious tricks: Five ♠s, one ♣ and two tricks each in ♥s and ♦s. It looks like we need to decide whether to attack ♥s or ♦s to get an extra trick. Which should we go after first? How about neither? We can follow the same basic approach as in the previous hand: Win the ♣ lead, draw trump and lead a losing ♣.

West	East
♠J 2	♠10 9
♥K J 4	♥A 10 5
♦A 9 3	♦K J 10
♣2	♣3

At this point, the defense is in the same position: they can either give us a ruff-and-sluff in ♣s or give us a free finesse in one of the red suits. Either way, we eliminate a guess for our 11th trick. We can then take a finesse in the other suit to try and make 12 tricks. Not bad!

A **squeeze** is pretty similar to an **endplay**, but there are some key differences. While there are many different types of **squeezes**, they all come down to the same basic idea: forcing the defenders to choose between losing discards. We're not talking about making the defenders make a mistake. Instead, we're talking about forcing the defenders to choose between losing options. Consider the following three-card ending with the lead in West's hand:

West	East
♠2	♠A 9
♥A	♥Void
♦Void	♦7
♣2	♣Void

Let's assume that North has two ♠s and the top ♦. Further, South can't protect either of those suits. Then, what is North to discard on the ♥A lead? If he pitches a ♠, you discard a ♦ from dummy and claim 2 ♠ tricks. On the other hand, if he pitches his winning ♦, you toss dummy's low ♠ and claim the last two tricks, as well. So, North is **squeezed**.

What are the conditions we need to set up a **squeeze**? First, a **squeeze** is about forcing one or both defenders to hold onto more cards than they have slots left (e.g. in the above case, North needs to hold onto three cards, but only has two slots left). So, a squeeze always happens at the end of the hand. Second, we can only pick up one trick through a **squeeze**. So, we need to have only one loser left when we execute it. For example, in the above example, if we had four cards when we led the ♥A, North could still hold onto his three stopper cards, so no **squeeze**. This will sometimes force us to lose a trick earlier in the hand, which is called **rectifying the count**. Third, the defender being **squeezed** must discard BEFORE the danger hand. For example, if South was the one protecting these suits in our example, there would be no **squeeze**: she would just discard whichever suit we toss from dummy and collect the 13th trick. Finally, while we don't need *exactly* even length between the two hands, we do need to keep communication between the hands for a **squeeze** to work. In our example above, this makes the ♠2 a key card: without it, we can't get to dummy to cash the good tricks.

So, let's look at a few examples of a **squeeze** in action. In this first hand, we're in 7NT. Along the way, North bid 2NT indicating 5–5 or longer in the minors.

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

To begin with, we have 12 tricks: four in each major and two in each minor. Without the bid, we'd be playing on a hope and a prayer. But, with North's bid, we have a clear plan: run our major suit winners and **squeeze** North to unprotect one of the minors. Given North's announced distribution, South can't have more than two cards in either minor, so she's no help. That just leaves the play. Specifically, we need to get to this five-card ending:

West	**East**
♠Void	♠Void
♥Void	♥Void
♦A 9	♦K 8 7
♣7 6 2	♣A K

All we need to do is track how many cards North keeps in each suit. If he has 3+ ♦s left, then we can cash dummy's two club winners, the ♦K and ♦A and the ♣7 is our 13th trick. On the other hand, if he keeps long ♣s, we just reverse the order of the ♦'s so we end up in dummy to cash the ♦7 as our 13th trick.

In our second example, we're only in 3NT and North made the same 2 NT bid. We're going to make the contract since we have nine tricks off the top: four ♠s, two cards in each minor and one ♥.

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

Given North's bid, it's very unlikely that we'll get a 3-3 ♥ split to get an extra trick there. So, it's down to the minors. Ideally, we could get to the same 5-card ending as in the previous example to **squeeze** North. But we need to get there without exposing ourselves to South running a bunch of ♥s. The key is to lose our ♥ tricks first! Specifically, before running ♠s or taking the ♥A, we should let the defense have their two ♥ tricks! Playing it this way, we still have the ♥A, so South can't run them. That will allow us to get the same ending as in the previous example. However, it's worth noting that this is not foolproof. If the opponents can knock out our stoppers in one of the minors while North still has a ♥ entry, we'll need to simply cash out. But some chance is better than none!

Quick Quiz

On each of these hands, East is playing 6♠. Which hands are suitable for an endplay?

a.

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

b.

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

c.

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

d.

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

On this hand, East is playing 6 NT. South shows out on the second ♥, while North shows out on the second ♦. Plan the play.

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

How would things change if the shortness was reversed (i.e. if South was short in ♦s and North was short in ♥s)?