

Finding the Danger Hand

When declaring a hand, it is often important to identify which of your opponents is more dangerous if they get on lead. We talked a little about this in our session on holdup plays in No Trump contracts. In that session, we talked about keeping the person with length in the initial suit off the lead. That is one of the most common type of danger hands. However, there are also certain card combinations that can create problems. Consider this combination:

North

8 7 6

South

K 3

If West leads this suit, you will always be able to score your King (either on the first trick or after the Ace has been cashed). However, if East leads the suit, you will need to find East with the Ace. If not, you won't get any tricks in the suit.

There are also situations in which a suit combination isn't initially problematic, but can become so. Consider this combination:

North

Q 6 4

South

K 3 2

Initially, there is no problem with this suit: you will always get at least one trick. However, look what happens when West leads a low card in the suit. Your best play is to play a low card from North. If East plays the Ace, you'll get two tricks in the suit. On the other hand, if East plays any other card, you will need to win the first trick with the King. But now, you are exposed to West leading a second card through North's exposed Queen. So, West has become the danger hand.

Once we've identified the danger hand, we need to plan the play to try to keep that hand off lead. In most situations, that will mean taking a finesse *through* the danger hand. Consider these holdings in the majors:

North

♠ A Q J 6 4

♥ 8 7 3

South

♠ 8 7 3

♥ A K J 6 4

If we attack the correct suit, we may be able to get 5 tricks in that suit. But which suit should we try first? If there isn't a danger hand, we should attack hearts first because it's the stronger suit. But if West is the danger hand, we're better off attacking spades first. That's because if the finesse loses in spades, we're safe because East will be on lead. On the other hand, if the heart finesse loses, West will be on lead and we may go down. One final note: If the first spade finesse works, come back to your hand with one of the top two hearts. If you finesse the ♥ J, you may be undoing all your hard work.

Quick Quiz

With the following combined holdings, is there a danger hand? If so, who is it?

North

Q 6 4

North

A 3 2

North

K 10 3

North

8 5 2

South

J 3 2

South

Q 4

South

Q 6 2

South

K Q 4

If East is the danger hand, which suit would you attack first? And how?

North

♠ A Q J 6 4

♥ 8 7 3

North

♠ A K Q 6 4

♥ 8 7 3

North

♠ A Q J 6 4

♥ 8 7 3

South

♠ 8 7 3

♥ A Q J 6 4

South

♠ 8 7 3

♥ A K J 6 4

South

♠ 8 3

♥ A K 10 5

How would you play this hand in 3NT on the lead of the ♥ J?

North

♠ 8 5 2

♥ A Q 4 3

♦ Q 4

♣ A J 5 2

South

♠ K Q 10

♥ K 6

♦ A 3 2

♣ K 10 7 6 3