Declaring a Hand
Part 3: Specific Strategies

When many advancing players think about "declarer strategies", they immediately start dreaming of squeezes. "How do I set up a progressive squeeze?" "How do I know if a show-up squeeze will work?" "What is 'rectifying the count'?" These are all important questions… for fairly advanced players. But, for advancing players, they're just a distraction for one key reason: as much fun as they are to execute, they rarely come up. For a squeeze to work, you not only need the right situation (e.g. needing to find one extra trick), but you also need to have multiple threats to the opponents. You also need to have transporation between your hand and Dummy all the way until the crucial trick. Finally, you can do all this and fail on the last step: the cards need to be in the correct hand! Instead, we're going to focus today on some techniques that you can use on a regular basis to improve your results.

1. Identifying and delaing with the "danger hand"
2. Hold up play

"Danger Hand"

Last time, we touched on the concept of a "danger hand". On many hands, there will be a situation where one of the opponents can do more damage to you that the other. Often, this happens when one opponent has a unstopped, long suit in NT: if they get the lead, they'll be able to cash a lot of tricks. However, if their partner gets in, they may be out of that suit which will keep those extra tricks at bay. This can also happen when your stoppers are in one hand, but there are gaps. Consider these holdings:

Holding 1

♠ A K

<u>Holding 2</u>

♠ A Q

<u>Holding 3</u>

♠ K Q X

<u>Holding 4</u>

♠ K X X

In the first case, you have two stoppers in ♠ no matter which opponent leads that suit, so there is no

"danger hand". In all the other cases, the number of stoppers you have may depend on who leads the

suit. Take the third holding. If your RHO has the Ace, then you have two stoppers. However, if LHO has

it, then you'll only have one unless(!) you can get LHO to lead the suit twice. So, in this case, RHO

opponent is the "danger hand": letting him take the lead puts your ♠ holding at risk.

When there is a "danger hand", we would like to find a reasonable line of play which takes the

finesses through that hand, not into it. That way, if the finesse loses, the winner won't be able to attack

our exposed holding. That may not always be possible, or advisable: we still want to execute our plan.

So, you need to be careful. So, let's take a look at a couple of examples. In all of these, the contract is

3NT and our goal is to make the contract. How should we proceed on a ♥ lead?

<u>Hand 1</u>

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

This is the classic example. You have 7 tricks: 4♥, 2♣ and 1♠, so you need 2 more. You're natural

inclination may be to finesse in ♣ since you have 8 of them. But, what happens if that finesse fails?

Then, RHO can lead a ♦ through your K 2. In that case, you're going down if LHO has the Ace. So, in this

case, we're better off finessing in ♠. If that works, we can get our 2 extra tricks there. If it doesn't, then

we can either hope that LHO sets up our King by leading a ♦ or fall back on the ♣ finesse. Either way,

the opponents can immediate set us.

Hand 2

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

We've only changed one card here, but it makes all the difference. Now, RHO is still the "danger hand"

because of our ♦ holding. But, in this case, we don't have any options: even if the finesse works in ♠

that only brings us to 8 tricks. That means, we'll still need to try the ♣ finesse to make our contract.

Plus, if the ♠ finesse fails, then a return of the suit may put us at risk of going down, as well. So, in this

case, we need to try the ♣ finesse and hope one of the minors behaves.

Hand 3

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

In this case, LHO wins the first three ♥ tricks: Ace, Queen, King with RHO showing out on the second

one. The fourth ♥ lead gives us our 7th trick: 1♥ and two in each of the other suits. So, we need 2 more

tricks. If LHO regains the lead, then she'll cash her two remaining ♥: she started with 6, which would

make us down at least 2. But, if RHO gets in, he's already out, so we're not at risk. Therefore, we should

attack ♣ by finessing the Jack at trick 5. Even if that loses, that will be the defense's last trick, so we'll make our contract.

<u>Hold Up Play</u>

In most cases, we want to win a trick as soon as we get the chance. Specifically, winning the trick lets us start setting up our good tricks. But, in some cases, it can pay to wait. For this to happen, we need to have five things happen:

1. An exposed suit – this will be a suit that the opponents have length in where we only have 1, or in rare cases 2, stoppers

2. At least some chance that the opponent with shortness will be able to get back in

3. A choice as to which trick to win

4. We can't trump in to stop the opponents from running their suit

5. We're not worried about any other suit more than the one the opponents led.

6. We're not sacrificing a potential stopper

If all of these conditions are met, then we will often benefit from holding up. Before we get into some examples of why all of these items are important, let's first understand how we decide how long to hold up with some card combinations. In all of these cases, the opponents have 8 cards in the suit. If the suit splits 4-4, then it doesn't matter if we hold up: if either opponent gets in, they'll be able to cash their length trick(s). But, if the suit splits 5-3, which is more likely, and we're able to take the 3rd trick, then the only the opponent with length is a "danger hand". With that in mind, let's look at some card combinations:

<u>Combination #1</u>

♠ A 9 6   ♠ 7 2

Combination #2

♠ A 9   ♠ 7 6 3

Combination #3

♠ A 9 6 2   ♠ 7

Combination #4

♠ K 9 6   ♠ 7 2

The first combination is the classic example. In this case, if we play low on the first two tricks,

then our Ace will win the third trick. That means, if we can keep the opponent with 5+ cards in that suit

off lead, we won't lose any more tricks in that suit. In the second case, we can only hold up once before

winning the Ace. That doesn't offer as much protection, but it will work if the suit splits 6-2 or worse. In

the third case, we have even more flexibility, but don't fall into the trap! Specifically, remember that

we're trying to protect against the suit splitting 5-3, not 4-4. So, DON'T hold up 3 times, take the 3rd trick

in the suit![1] Finally, the fourth combination is one that's often overlooked. If LHO leads a ♠ AND RHO

doesn't cover with the Ace, then we may be better off holding up for 1 round. To see that, consider

these potential opponent holdings:

Combo #1

LHO ♠ A Q J 10 5 2
RHO ♠ 8 3

Combo #2

LHO ♠ Q J 10 5 2

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[1] This combination is a good example of why the fourth item is necessary. Specifically, if Dummy has trump, we're
much better off winning the first trick and ruffing as many of the others as possible.

RHO ♠ A 8 3

In the first case, if we win the first trick with our King, the defense can cash 5 tricks when they get back in. But, if we hold up, then LHO's second lead of the suit will draw RHO's last card in the suit, which means he won't be able to lead it if/when he gets in. In the second case, if we win the first trick, then either opponent will be able to establish their 4 tricks in the suit. However, if we hold up, then RHO can win the 2nd trick of the suit with his Ace and we win the 3rd trick with our King. But, that now leaves RHO without any ♠ to return if he gets back on lead. Things are even better if RHO ducks the again. Now, we win the 2nd trick with our King, but the suit is now blocked: RHO will need to cash, or discard(!), his Ace before LHO will be able to cash her remaining ♠ tricks.

One final note about this play with the King: it is not without its perils. Everything's all well and good if the opponents lead the suit again or if the cards are like in Combo #2. But, what if LHO can find an entry to RHO's hand? In that case, not taking the King on the first trick could lead losing 6 ♠ tricks instead of 5. That leads us into a discussion of the 5th rule: we're not worried about any other suit more than the one the opponents led. Just because we hold up, doesn't mean that the opponents will continue the suit again. Once they see the Dummy and their partner's signal, they may realize that there's a better suit to attack. Consider the following deal on the same ♠ lead:

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

If hold up and let LHO win the first ♠ trick, then there's no guarantee that she won't switch to a ♥ at trick 2. Since that switch might endanger the whole contract, we're much better off winning the first trick rather than holding up.

What about the other rules? The third and fourth are pretty clear: if we don't have a choice, then there's no chance to hold up. And, if we can use the short hand's trump, then there's no reason to

give the opponent's unearned tricks. So, what about the other two rules? For the first one, an exposed

suit, there are really two parts. First, the opponents must have length in the suit. Specifically, we're

worried about the opponents setting up their length tricks, so they need to have length in the suit.

Second, we can't have 3+ stoppers in the suit. To see that, compare these two holdings:

Combination #1

♠ A K 6   ♠ 7 2

Combination #2

♠ A K 6 2   ♠ Q 3

In the first case, if we hold up one trick, we can protect against a lot more potential holdings. For

example, if the suit splits 6-2, then the opponent with length will need to get in twice: once to drive out

our Ace and another time to cash their remaining winners. If we win the first trick, then either opponent

can get into to clear out our other winner even if we hold up on the 2nd trick of the suit. In the other

combination, there's no point in holding up: with 3 stoppers, our likely worst case scenario is only losing

one trick in this suit. If we hold up, then we guarantee that outcome on the first trick.

Rule #6: we're not sacrificing a potential stopper is another one that's driven by the combined

holdings. In all of the cases that we've looked at above, we had no intermediate cards in the suit. So,

either our high cards one or we lost the trick. But, things can get a little more complicated when we

have some intermediate cards, typically 9s, 10s and Jacks. Consider the following 2 holdings:

Combination #1

♠ A 10   ♠ J 7 2

Combination #2

♠ A 2   ♠ J 7 3

In the first case, we can guarantee two stoppers if we don't hold up. Specifically, if either hand plays either the King or Queen, we cover it with the Ace. Now, the 10 and hand and the J X in Dummy ensure that we will be able to get one more trick in the suit regardless of which opponent has the other honor. In the second case, if LHO opponent leads the King, then we expect her to also have the Queen. If that's true, then the J X sitting behind LHO will give us a 2nd stopper, but only if we win the 1st trick with our Ace. In both of these cases, if we hold up on the first trick, the defense can eliminate our 2nd stopper by playing low from both hands. Will they do that? Maybe, maybe not. But, why give them the chance?

What about the final rule, #2: at least some chance that the opponent with shortness will be able to get back in? Consider this hand at 3NT:

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

After opening 1♠, LHO leads the King of ♠. We've only got 7 tricks off the top, so we're going to need to finesse in ♦ to make our contract. But, based on her opening bid, we know that LHO has the length in ♠. So, if she also has King of ♦, then there's no point in holding up: whether we win the 1st, 2nd or 3rd ♠ trick, she'll be able to cash the rest of her winners when she spoils that finesse. As a result, we're better off winning the first ♠ trick. If we do, and the ♦ finesse works, we may be able to scrounge up 12 tricks: 5♦, 4♣, 2♥ and 1♠. But, reverse the ♦ holdings, and now holding up will almost guarantee the contract.

There's one additional situation where these two concepts intercept: where we can use a hold up play to keep the "danger hand" off the lead. Let's revisit one of the earlier hands we discussed:

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

Once again, we're in 3NT and receive a ♠ lead. In the previous discussion, we talked about LHO being the "danger hand". Specifically, if we hold up and she wins the trick, then she can attack our ♥ position at trick 2. But, what if RHO plays a higher card, say the Queen? As long as we keep RHO on lead, Dummy's ♥ holding is safe. So, in this case, we should hold up. In fact, if he returns the King of ♠ at trick 2, we should hold up again! Only if he leads a low ♠ should we fly with the Ace since we know LHO can beat our 10.[2] Playing this way maximizes our flexibility when deciding how to play the key ♦ suit later in the hand.

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[2] RHO's play of the Queen and trick 1 should deny the Jack. (Note: we'll cover this topic more in our next lesson.) He may or may not have the King, back the Jack will be enough to put LHO on lead for a ♥ switch if we hold up again.