

# Declaring a Hand

## Part 1: Setting a Goal

Usually when people learn about being the declarer, the focus is on the techniques: establishing winners, ruffing losers, drawing trump, etc. While that's important, it can only get you so far as a player. Eventually, you'll realize that there are multiple ways to "successfully" play a hand. At that point, you'll need to switch from focusing on what to do over to why to do something. Consider the following example, assume there are two lines of play for your 3NT contract. One gets you a guaranteed 9 tricks, no more, no less. The other gives you an 80% chance of taking 10 tricks and a 20% chance of going down 1. Which is the better line to take? The answer is unequivocally: it depends! If the rest of the room is also in 3NT, then the second route is better: 80% of the time you'll get a top and 20% of the time you'll get a bottom, which is a VERY good tradeoff! But, if everyone else is only in 2NT, then you're better off taking your 9 tricks and calling it a day: that'll guarantee you a top board. While we won't always be able to tell which situation we're in, the rest of today's lesson will lay out some general rules for you to set your goal on a particular hand. We'll also discuss how that goal can be used to help us decide on the right line of play.

So, let's start with some basic goal types. In general, there are four basic goals we're going to set on each hand:

1. Maximize the chance of making the contract
2. Take as many tricks as possible
3. Target a specific number of tricks
4. Take some reasonable chances

For the rest of today's session, we're going to walk through each of these to understand when each applies. We're also see some examples of how the different goals can affect the play of the hand. So, let's begin with the one that is most people's default: maximize your chance of making the contract.

### Maximize Your Chance of Making the Contract

In most bridge books and lessons, this is the default setting. Part of that is because it's the easiest to understand: making is good, not making is bad. But, it also aligns with how originally approach the game: we enjoy making a contract and are bummed when we don't. And yet, over time, we learn that sometimes its perfectly fine to go down in duplicate. In fact, that's the whole idea behind preempting: you expect to go down, but you think it'll give you a better score. In fact, its quite likely that only a small percentage of the hands you declare belong in this category! So, what type of contracts and situations actually belong in this category. Here's a good starting point:

- Any IMPs scored game (e.g. Swiss Teams, Knock Out)
- Any Slam bid
- Any naturally bid (i.e. non-preemptive) contract which gets doubled
- Any extremely pushy game contract

With IMPs, there is an unbalanced relationship between overtricks and undertricks. For example, when you're non-vulnerable, an overtrick is worth about 1 extra IMP. But, going down is worth -5 IMPs. So, the risk-reward tradeoff goes against taking any unnecessary risks. Same with Slam and Doubled bids at Match Point scoring. If both of these cases, you're likely to be in the minority in the room: slam bids and doubling for penalty are relatively rare, even when everyone reaches the same contract. So, if I'm in 4♥ Doubled, making is going to give me a better score than someone that is undoubled even if they take all 13 tricks regardless of the vulnerability! Same with going down: down 1 Doubled is the same as going down 2 Undoubled. And more then that, the difference is even bigger.

Finally, for the last bucket, we're talking about EXTREMELY pushy contracts, not run of the mill ones. In other words, ones where you may be the only pair in your game. So, we're not looking for one where partner raises your 1NT to 3NT on 9 HCP: you're likely to have company with that decision. No, we're talking ones where the bidding goes 1♠ - 2♠ - 3♠ - 4♠ with 5 Spades and 15 HCP opposite 3 Spades and 7 HCP. In those cases, we're in the same position as above: making our contract will beat anything our opponents can do in their part score contract. So, we should do everything we can to make that happen.

So, what do we do once we've decided that this is our goal? Well, we find a line which will land our contract. Sometimes that line may involve an unnatural play. Sometimes it may involve assuming a very specific card combination for the opponents. It will always involve trying anything and everything to bring home the contract. So, let's see how that might actually play out. In this first example, we've reached a very solid 6♥ contract with these cards:

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

How do you play the hand on a ♣ lead? If trump behave, we've got 12 tricks: 5 trump, 5 ♠ and 2 ♣. In that case, we should consider what could go wrong? If trump split 5-0 in either hand, there's nothing we can do: the defense is going to get 2 trump tricks to set us. What about if they're 4-1? In that case, it looks like we have 3 losers: 1 trump and 1 in each minor. We hope to get rid of one of the minor losers on dummy's 5<sup>th</sup> ♠, but that still leaves us one trick short. So, is there anything else we can do? What about ruffing a ♣ in dummy? If that doesn't get overruffed, then we just might have a chance. So, here's how we should play the hand:

- Win the lead in hand

- Draw 2 rounds of trump<sup>1</sup>
- If both opponents follow to those two tricks, draw their final trump and claim your 12 tricks
- If not, cash your second high ♣ and lead a 3<sup>rd</sup> one, which dummy ruffs
- Get back to your hand with the A♠
- Draw one more round of trump
- Cross to dummy to cash 3 more ♠
- Assuming the opponent with 4 trump hasn't ruffed in yet, lead Dummy's last ♠ and discard the Q♦ from hand
- Regardless of when the opponent trumps in, you will get 2 of the last 3 tricks to make your contract

Now, you might reasonably say "In that case, they could have set you by leading a ♦ at trick 1." While that is true since that would guarantee them 1 trick in each red suit, it's beside the point because that's not what they lead. You might also say "Aren't we better off in 6♠?" That is also true and not relevant since it's unlikely that any pair in the room will find that contract.<sup>2</sup> Finally, what about the most obvious "Isn't that really unlikely to work?" Once again, the answer is a resounding Yes: this will only work if the opponent with 4 trump also has all 4♠ AND at least 3♣. But, as we discussed above, going down 2 or 3 is likely no worse than going down 1 in this case since most pairs will only be in 4. In MP scoring, a bottom is a bottom!

### Take as Many Tricks as Possible

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<sup>1</sup> If either opponent doesn't follow to the first trump, just take your bottom quickly and quietly.

<sup>2</sup> If someone does, then it's even more important that you play the hand this way to match their score to protect your top board!

This might seem like the same approach as above. Specifically, don't I maximize my chances of making by taking as many tricks as possible? While they're close, they're not identical. Consider the example hand we looked at above. The approach above leads to the maximum chance of making our contract. But, since that make relies on a very unlikely lay of the cards, it also opens us up to a large chance of going down 2 or 3 tricks. That makes sense if we're in the small slam, but not if we're only in game. In that case, a remote chance of 2 overtricks is hardly worth a chance of going down! So, what type of hands fit in this category:

- Undoubled preemptive contracts
- Game bids where slam is a possibility
- Low level part scores

In all of these cases, your MP percentage is likely to be driven more by your opponent's results than your own. Specifically, how many tried and/or bid slam? Did they make it? Were other opponents get involved in their auctions?

To see how this might impact your play, let's go back to the hand from the previous section. Except, this time we're only in 4♥. Our play to the first 3 tricks will be the same: win in hand and cash two top trumps. If trump split, we again make the safe play for 12 tricks. The difference happens if they don't split. If they break 5-0, then we make our best play for 10 tricks:

- Cash the other top ♣ and ruff our 3<sup>rd</sup> one in Dummy
- Attack ♠

This approach is likely to hold the opponents to 3 tricks: 2 trump and a ♦. Even if the 3<sup>rd</sup> ♣ gets overruffed, its just converting a natural trump trick into ruff. If they break 4-1, then we're looking to hold our losses to 2 tricks: 1 trump and a ♦. However, if we go after either black suit, we risk a (over)ruff, a cross to partner in ♦ for a 2<sup>nd</sup> ruff. So, in this case, we're better off just taking our lumps by:

- Drawing a 3<sup>rd</sup> trump
- Drawing the 4<sup>th</sup> trump

The opponents can now cash their ♦ but that will be their last trick: we can ruff the 2<sup>nd</sup> ♦ and then cash our 6 black suit winners since the opponents are out of trump.

### Target a Specific Number of Tricks

This target typically come up in one of four situations:

- We've chosen the low road (e.g. part score over game)
- We made a choice of games
- Our preemptive bid was doubled
- The defense made a mistake on the lead

In each of these cases, we're assuming that the rest of the room faced a similar decisions: Should I take the game invite or not? Should we push to our game or double their preempt? Assuming those are close decisions, there's likely to be a wide range of bids at the different tables. So, you're not only going to be competing based on how well you do on your contract, but also on if the other choice scores better or worse. Consider this example. The bidding goes: 1NT – 2♦ (Transfer to ♥) – 2♥ – 3NT. What do you bid holding:

♠ K Q J 5  
 ♥ 10 9 7  
 ♦ A K J  
 ♣ Q 10 4

On the one hand, you have 3♥, so pulling it to 4♥ is a possibility. On the other hand, you hand has no ruffing value and has a lot of slow tricks (e.g. ♣ Q J 4) which tend to suggest 3NT. Let's assume you decide on passing 3NT. In that case, to get a good score, you going to need to make the contract and

either have: 1. 4♥ go down or 2. 3NT take one extra trick. In the first case, we partner need to hold something like:

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

In this case, if the J♥ is offside, then 4♥ will like go down 1 trick: 3 trump and the A♣. So, you should target 9 tricks: 4 ♠, 3 ♦ and 2 ♣. You can try and create a ♥ trick, but only as long as you have

♣ stopped. But, change partner's hand up a bit:

♠ A 7 2  
♥ K Q J 5 2  
♦ Q 4 2  
♣ 9 6

In this case, we expect 4♥ to make easily: the defense will only get 3 tricks: A♥ and 2♣. So, now our target needs to be 10 tricks to get a better score. That means we either need to assume that our RHO has either the A and K or J of ♣. The bid and play of the cards may help us figure out which is more likely, but it's far from foolproof. We can also improve our odds by concealing our ♦. That will at least open up the possibility that the opponents will switch to attack that suit, instead of ♣, when they get in with the A♥.

One final note on the defensive issue: Defense, especially the opening lead, is hard. The leader has limited information about where Declarer's strength is, much less partner's. While there are "rules" (e.g. 4<sup>th</sup> best) designed to help, they're more like suggestions. Sometimes they work, sometimes they go horribly wrong. So, it's quite common to get an undeserved trick early on in the play: we've all the joy of scoring our singleton King when the person on lead makes the normal play of the Jack from A J 10. In

those cases, the goal often becomes to try and bank that extra trick. Specifically, you're already ahead of the game, so just try a normal play to the end to maintain that advantage.

### Take some Reasonable Chances

This target is actually the most common in a Club game since it covers all of the rest of the situations. In particular, it applies in most straight forward, uncontested auctions like 1♥ - 2♥ - Pass or 1NT - 3NT - Pass. In these situations, we expect that there will be little to no difference in the auction, so tops and bottoms will be determined largely by the play of the cards. As a result, you may be willing to take an unusual line of play, even if it might cost the contract, if the probabilities are in your favor.

Consider the following combined holding:

Dummy:        A J 10 7 3

Declarer:     K 9 2

The standard play with this holding, assuming you have the necessary outside entries, is to 1. Cash the King and 2. Finesse Dummy's Jack (and 10, if necessary). This allows us to pick up 5 tricks in most cases that LHO holds the Queen, but also if RHO holds the Queen singleton. But, that's not the only way to attack this suit: you could take the Finesse towards your hand by leading Dummy's Jack on the first trick. This is slightly less likely to succeed: you're giving up picking up the singleton Queen in LHO's hand. But, it can make sense in certain situations (e.g. LHO opponent is the danger hand).

So, how might this play out in a full hand? Consider the following combined holdings:

♠ A 9 6 5

♥ A K Q 3

♦ Q 2

♣ A Q J

♠ K 10 7

♥ 8 6 5

♦ K 7 4 3

♣ 6 3 2

Your auction was pretty straightforward: 2♣ - 2♦ (Waiting) - 2NT - 3NT. Pairs playing Puppet Stayman will have a different auction, but even they will likely end up in the same contract. You've got 6 sure



tricks and lots of ways to take more: finesse in ♣, 3-3 split in one of the majors, something good happening in ♦. So, how do we decide which route to take? We start by looking at the lead. Since neither partner has shown a major in this bidding sequence, we expect to get one of those led. On a perfect day, she'll lead a ♠, Queen and Jack will be split and we'll be able to get 4 tricks in that suit. On a bad, they lead and ♥ which likely dashes our hopes of getting a 4<sup>th</sup> trick in that suit. What if they lead a minor suit? By the logic above, that tells us that the majors are more likely to split kindly. We can also infer a lot from the opponent's spots on that first trick. For example, assume LHO leads the 7♣ and RHO plays the 9. Assuming that the opponents are playing normal leads, it's quite likely that LHO is holding K 10 8 7, and possibly 1 or 2 more low ones, in the suit. That gives us a bunch of clues as to the best approach:

1. Try and cash 4♥ tricks
2. After attacking ♥, move on to ♠. Since you have to lose a trick in that suit, try and lose it to LHO: she can't successfully attack ♣
3. Even though it worked the first time, DON'T try the ♣ Finesse again

This approach isn't guaranteed to work. For example, if RHO has both the Queen and Jack of ♠, there's a chance you're going down. But, it gives you the best shot of getting a solid MP score.