Declaring a Hand (Part 2)

In Declaring a Hand, Part 1, we talked about developing a goal when we're declaring: Are we trying to take as many tricks as possible or do we just want to make the contract? In Part 2, we're going to focus on turning your goal into a plan. In most bridge books, they mention that trick 1 is where most declarers make the biggest mistakes. What they're really saying is that most declarers begin to play before they have a full plan. As Benjamin Franklin said, "If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail."

When declaring a hand, your plan usually starts with the idea of establishing additional tricks for your side. If you can count 13 tricks, don't worry about today's lesson. However, for the other 99.99% of the hands you'll play, you'll either need or want to develop additional tricks. While there are many possible ways to do that, you should focus on these four:

1. ruffing
2. finessing
3. establishing slow tricks
4. establishing long suits

We've already had sessions on the first two, so today we're going to take a look at #3 and #4.

Before learning how to establish **slow tricks**, it'll be useful to define them. Many of you may be familiar with **quick tricks**. These are tricks you can win without giving up the lead. Consider these holdings:

- A K Q
- A Q 7
- A 10 5

In the first case, you can win the first three tricks in the suit. It's worth noting that you consider the two hands together here. For example, A 10 5 opposite K Q 2 would also be three quick tricks. In the second hand, we can either win one or two tricks, depending on which opponent has the king. So, we call this $1\frac{1}{2}$ quick tricks. Finally, in the third case, we only have the Ace. So that counts as one quick trick.

If we don't have quick tricks in a suit, but still could win some tricks in that suit, then we have slow tricks. The following are examples of slow trick holdings:

- Q J 10 9
- K Q 10
- K J 9 8

On the other hand, these suit holdings are TOO weak to develop any tricks:

- Q J
- 10 9 8 7
- 9 7 6 5 3

Once we've identified the suit(s) that could be a source of slow tricks, we then have to decide which suit(s) we want to attack—and how? There are four questions you should ask, in this order:

1. Will I get enough tricks attacking the suit?
2. How many tricks will I lose?
3. Can I survive what the opponents might lead back?
4. Are there any lead considerations in setting up this suit?

Let's compare these two holdings:

♦ K Q J

♣ Q J 10 9 7

With the ♦ holding, one of our honors will be taken by the Ace. So, we'll only get two tricks. With the ♣ holding, we're going to lose tricks to both the Ace and King (i.e. two losers), but we'll likely have three tricks to cash after that.

So, now we're ready for the third question: Can I survive what they're going to lead back? To answer that, you should assume the opponents are going to attack your weakest suit, not just blindly return the first suit led. For example, assume the opponents lead a ♠ against you with this holding:

West

♠ A 5 3 2

♥ A 7 4

East

♠ K Q 10 4

♥ 8 6

If the opponents lead another ♠ after they win the first trick, you'll survive since you'll still have your third stopper in the suit. But what if they switch to a ♥ instead? Then, it depends on the contract. If you're in NT, you'll go down if you go after ♣s: The first ♥ lead would knock out your

Ace and the opponents could take at least three more ♥s when they won the second ♣. But, if you're in a ♠ contract, you may only lose one ♥ —as long as you leave some trump in East's hand.

So, what about that final question? To understand that, let's compare some possible holdings:

♦ K Q J   ♦ K Q 2
♣ Q J 10 9 7   ♣ Q J 9 7 5

With the holdings on the left, it doesn't matter how we attack the suit: the opponents are only going to get their top honor(s). That's true even if partner is void in that suit. But, the holdings on the right aren't as strong. In fact, if you have to lead **from** that ♣ holding, you may get NO tricks. In a worst-case scenario, the Queen loses to the Ace, the Jack is taken by the King, the 9 loses to the 10 and the 7 loses to the 8! So, you'll want to lead **toward** the holdings on the right, if possible, or simply avoid the suit. Playing toward that same ♣ holding will garner three ♣ tricks whenever RHO opponent holds one or more of the missing honors.

Now, let's look at establishing long suits. For long suits, we have many of the same considerations, just different timing. Specifically, you should ask yourself:

1. How many tricks will I get by attacking this suit?
2. How many tricks will I lose?
3. Will there be any discard problems for the short hand?

When setting up a long suit, we're focusing on getting rid of the opponents' cards in that suit so our low cards can win tricks. As a result, this section only usually arises when you're playing No Trump or when you can draw the opponents' trump first. Otherwise, the opponents are likely to be able to ruff in. So, we'll just focus on the subject suit.

To see how many tricks we should be able to win in a specific suit, we have to do a little math: Count the number of cards the opponents have in the suit. If it's an odd number, the cards are most likely to split as evenly as possible. For example, if you have an 8-card suit, the opponents five cards in the suit are most likely to split 3–2. However, if the opponents have an even number of cards in a suit, the cards are actually more likely to split one-off from even. That means a 4–2 split is more likely than a 3–3 split when the opponents have six cards in a suit. We can use that to estimate how many length-tricks we should get. For example, if we have a 5–2 fit, one of the opponents is likely to have four cards in the suit. So, we're likely to only get one length-trick. But, if our holding is 5–3, we're likely to get a second length-trick.

In between our quick tricks and these length-tricks, we're going to lose some tricks. Sometimes, it can be useful to lose those tricks early, especially if discarding from the short hand is going to be a problem. Consider the following situation:

West

♠5 3 2

♥7 4

♦A K 9 7 3 2

♣Q J

East

♠Q J 10

♥Q J 10

♦8 6

♣A K 10 7 5

You're hoping to get five ♦ tricks: the Ace, King and three length-tricks. But, what does East discard on the third ♦ trick? Discarding from either major could spell disaster: The opponents could clear the other two honors and take some extras. Discarding a ♣ gives up a trick there. So, what's the solution? It might seem counterintuitive, but it's simple: lose the ♦ trick early! If you play a low diamond from both hands, the opponents get the ♦ trick they're entitled to. But, now East doesn't have to make the possibly tragic discard.

Quick Quiz

How many tricks do you expect to take from each of these combinations?:

    a. A K 7 6 2   Q 9 5

    b. A 10 9 4 2   K 7 6

    c. A 10 9 4 2   K 7

    d. A K Q J 7   Void

On each of these hands, East is playing 3 NT. Plan the play on a ♣ lead.

a.

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

b.

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

c.

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

d.

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