Dealing with Short Trump

Most of the time when we end up in a suit contract, we have 9+ trump between the two hands. As we've seen the last few weeks, having that many trump opens up a lot of possibilities to try and bring home the contract. When we don't have that long a suit, we'll often end up in NT, instead. But, on some occasions, we will end up with only 7 or 8 trump between the two hands. We're not talking about hands in which one partner opens a weak 2 or 3 bid and partner, rightly, passes with his void. Instead, we're talking about situations in which you avoid NT, either because one of the hands has shortness – either a singleton or a void – or because you're sure that one (or more) suit is uncovered. Consider these two auctions with silent opponents:

North	South
1♠	2♣
2♦	2♥
3♣	?

North	South
1♠	2♣
2♦	2♥
3♦	?

In the second sequence, North is likely to have five ♠s and five+ ♦s. If he had more ♠s, he would have bid them again at his third turn. He could have more diamonds and bid this way to avoid reversing, but he wouldn't rebid ♦s with only four of them. Based on that reasoning, we should expect that North has five ♠s, four ♦s and three ♣s for the first auction. If he had more ♦s, he would have followed the second sequence. If he had more ♣s, he probably would have supported them rather than bidding 2♦.

Given that information, how would you continue with this hand for South?

South

♠ K 3

♥ 8 7 6 3

♦ A 6 2

♣ K Q J 3

Clearly, we want to be in game: We have 13 points and partner opened. So, that just leaves us the question of which game? 3NT seems like suicide, especially opposite the first sequence since that suggests at most one ♥. 5♦ is another possibility opposite the second sequence. But that could also be dicey on an 8-card trump suit and two minimum openers. So, what does that leave us? How about 4♠? It's not great, but it's likely our best shot. In particular, it's likely to make every time 5♦ does, plus it scores more!

Obviously, having fewer trump isn't ideal. In particular, since we have fewer trump, our opponents have more than usual. That makes it much more likely that we could lose control of the trump suit, especially if we're forced to ruff.

North

♠ K 2

♥ 8 6 3

♦ A 6 4 3

♣ K Q J 2

South

♠ A Q J 7 3

♥ 4

♦ K 8 7

♣ 10 9 6 4

On an auction like the ones above, we find ourselves in 4♠. We've done a good job avoiding 3NT: the opponents should set that contract with 5+♥ off the top. But we need to make the contract to beat out the teams that are in 5♣: They should make easily, losing only a ♥ and a ♣. Not surprisingly, the opponents heard our bidding, so they start off the play by leading a ♥ to the first two tricks. On the second ♥ trick, we have a chance to make a **loser-on-loser** play.

Clearly, we can ruff the second ♥, but that's going to create problems if trump split 4 - 2. Why? Well, look at our options if we ruff the second ♥. First, we could draw trump in four rounds, but that leaves us with no trump in either hand. So, when the opponents win the ♣A, they can take the remainder of their ♥s to set the contract. What if we attack ♣s instead? That just changes the order of our losers. Now, the opponents win their ♣A and lead another ♥. We can ruff that one, too. But that leaves us with fewer trump than one of the opponents, which is going to leave us at least one trick short: They'll get a ♥, the ♣A, a ♦ and their long trump.

A better play is to look at the ♦ suit. We're always going to lose one trick there: We each have three+ ♦s, so there's no ruff available. We also can't pitch one on ♣s since both declarer and dummy have four in that suit. So, what if we pitch the losing ♦7 on the second ♥ instead of trumping? Now, we're in control, even if trump split 4 – 2. Let's assume they lead another ♥. This one we ruff and then knock out the ♣A. Whoever wins that trick can lead another ♥, but there's a key difference now: dummy is out of ♥s. So, we can trump the fourth ♥ in dummy and still have enough trump in hand to draw all the opponents' trump.

The second play that often comes up when you have a short trump suit is called a **dummy reversal**. Normally, when we're ruffing, we try to trump in the hand with fewer trump. That way, we often have enough trump left in the long hand to draw opponents' trump after we're done ruffing. But the cards don't always cooperate with our plan. That's when we may have to switch the roles of the hands and treat declarer's hand like dummy. Consider this slightly different pair of hands in 4♠:

North

♠ K Q 2

♥ 8 7 6 3

♦ A 6 3

♣ K 8 2

South

♠ A J 7 6

♥ 4

♦ K 8 7 2

♣ A 9 6 4

Once again, the opponents start with a ♥ to each of the first two tricks. Tossing the ♦7 on this trick won't help because dummy won't be able to ruff the fourth ♥. So, we have to take a different tack here: Our approach should be to try and use our trump to ruff all of dummy's remaining low ♥s. We start by ruffing the second ♥ in our hand. Next, we take the A and K in one of the minors. It doesn't matter which suit, as long as we end in dummy. Since we're in dummy, we can now lead a third ♥ and get our second ruff. Now, we use the same transportation in the other minor, leaving us in dummy with these cards remaining:

North

♠ K Q 2

♥ 8

♦ 3

♣ 2

South

♠ A J

♥ Void

♦ 7 2

♣ 6 4

We haven't drawn any of the opponents' trump, but dummy has more trump remaining. That's why this is called a dummy reversal. We're also going to make our contract. Specifically, we have six tricks in the bag: two ♥ ruffs and four minor suit winners. Ruffing dummy's final ♥ yields trick 7 and we still have the top three trump between our two hands. There are a lot of pitfalls to get there. For example, if we use a trump to get back to dummy, we won't have enough high trump to make our contract. But, when done right, it can be a very useful arrow in your quiver.