

Early Tricks in Declarer Play

Most declarer mistakes occur early in the play, especially on the very FIRST trick. We've talked about making a plan as declarer, but, if you make a mistake at trick one, all that planning may be for naught. There are a few situations that we should be particularly aware of:

- Keeping the danger hand off lead
- Getting in the right hand to lead to trick 2
- Managing entries

The most common situation you will come across, both at the table and in bridge books, is trying to keep one of your opponents off the lead. Consider the following hand:

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

If you're sitting East playing in 5♦, how do you play to trick 1 on the ♥Q lead? If you're not thinking about it, you'll cover with the ♥K and probably go down. So, what should we do here? We can afford to lose two tricks. We're going to lose a ♥ and a ♠, so, it looks like we need to find the ♠K onside to make the contract. If that's the only choice, then it doesn't matter what we do at trick 1. Is there anything else we can do to guarantee the contract? First, don't fall for the ♣ finesse—even if it wins, we only get to discard a ♠ from dummy that we're not going to lose anyway. Maybe South holds the ♥A and our ♥K will win the first trick? That is VERY unlikely. Think about it: If your opponents are in a high-level contract, would you underlead an Ace?

Well, what if we could get South to lead a ♠ for us? That would definitely take care of our second loser in that suit. But, how do we do that? The idea is to draw trump, strip the side suits and then throw South in with dummy's final ♥. If that plan works, South will be on lead and either need to lead a ♠ or give us a ruff and sluff. However, if North wins a trick, he can scuttle our plan by leading a ♠ through us. That makes our play to trick 1 critical: We must DUCK the trick in dummy! South will win the trick with the ♥Q, but she can't attack spades. She can't continue ♥s either; that will let us finesse her out of her ♥J, which the lead of the ♥Q suggests she has. A club also doesn't look attractive, so let's assume she switches to a trump. We're now in ready to set our plan into motion: We draw trump, cash the ♣A and ruff the other two ♣s in dummy. We need to get

rid of North's ♥ A, so after the first ♣ club, we lead the ♥ K from dummy. If North doesn't cover, we discard our losing ♠ and make our contract. So, let's assume North covers. After the second ♣ ruff, we're left with these cards, with the lead in dummy:

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

When we lead dummy's ♥ 10, North plays low and we...discard a low ♠! We were going to lose that low ♠ anyway, so it doesn't cost us anything. But it gives us something big: South is on lead. If she leads a ♠, then we score both the Ace and Queen of that suit. If she leads one of the other suits, we make on a ruff and sluff. It's worth noting that this same idea would work if the ♠ AQ were in dummy, with a slight modification. In that case, South would be the danger hand, so we would want North to win the last ♥ trick. To do that, we would still duck the first ♥, just reverse the order of the other two. In that case, West will have the ♥ K left in the ending above. When North covers this with his Ace, East should let that win by discarding her losing ♠.

The second most common situation you will need to deal with is when you need to be in a specific hand. Usually, this will be because you want to take a finesse. However, it can also be because you want to avoid giving up the lead to the danger hand. Here's an example with BOTH of those situations:

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

This time, you are in 3NT and get a ♠ lead. So, what's your plan? First, let's count: We've got two ♠ tricks and two Aces and we can establish four ♣ tricks for a total of 8. So, we'll need at least one more trick. Fortunately, we've got a lot of options: we might get a finesse in ♠s or ♥s. We might also be able to set up something in ♦s. Do you see a way to guarantee our contract? If we finesse in ♥s, then we'll get a second trick there whether or not the finesse wins. But we need to make sure North can't clear out our ♠ stopper before we can establish ♣s, if he has the ♥ K. We can do that by carefully playing low from dummy at trick 1! We can win with our ♠ K and then lead the ♥ Q at trick 2. If that wins, we've got our 9th trick and can go about setting up ♣s. If it loses,

we're still fine: North can't attack ♠s, because that will give us a free finesse into dummy. On any other lead, we can win it and have time to set up ♣s. Either way, we'll make our 9 tricks!

The final theme we're going to look at tonight is managing entries. Usually, we have to worry about entries when dummy has a long suit we'd like to establish, but not a lot of entries. In that case, we need to make sure we can get to dummy enough times to set up the suit AND cash the length tricks. Consider this pair of hands:

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

We're in 6♠ and get a ♥ lead. We're going to lose a ♦ trick, so we need to find a way to pitch our low ♣s. That means we're going to need to establish dummy's ♦s. Specifically, if they split 3-3, we'll be able to toss them both on our long ♦s. But we can only lead ♦s once from our hand, so we'll need to get to dummy three times—twice for ruffs and then once more to cash some winners. We can do it, but we need to pay close attention to the spots. So, on the first trick, we need to ruff HIGH! At trick 2, we lead a ♦ for the first time. At trick 3, let's assume the opponents lead back another ♥. Once again, we need to preserve our entries to dummy, so we need to ruff that one high, too. Now, we're ready to use our entries to dummy: We lead the ♠7 from our hand and overtake with dummy's 8. Next, we ruff a ♦. We repeat the process for another ruff: low ♠ from our hand, overtaken in dummy and a ♦ ruff. If ♦s behave, we can now use dummy's last trump as the entry to the good ♦s. Making 6 for a well-deserved top! The key here is to note the spots: If you ever ruff in hand low, you won't have enough entries to dummy and you'll go down 1. Sometimes tops and bottoms are that close!

Quick Quiz

On each of these hands, East is playing 3NT and receives a ♠ lead. What is your plan? How does that impact your play to trick 1?

a.

West

♠ A 2

♥ 10 7 4

♦ K J 10 9 7 6

♣ Q 5 2

East

♠ K 7 6 4

♥ A Q 8 6

♦ Q

♣ A 7 6 3

b.

West

♠ A 2

♥ 10 7 4

♦ K J 10 9

♣ Q J 10 2

East

♠ K 7 6 4

♥ A K 8

♦ A 7 6

♣ A 7 6

c.

West

♠ A 2

♥ 9 7 4

♦ K J 10 9 2

♣ K Q 2

East

♠ K 10 6 4

♥ K 5 2

♦ A 7 6

♣ A 7 6

d.

West

♠ Q J 2

♥ 10 7

♦ K J 10 9 7 6

♣ Q 5

East

♠ A 7 6 4

♥ A Q 8

♦ Q 2

♣ A 7 6 3

On this hand, East is playing 6♠ and gets a ♥ lead. Plan the play.

West

♠ A K Q 10 2

♥ A 7

♦ K 4 2

♣ Q 5 2

East

♠ J 7 4

♥ Q J 6

♦ A 7 3

♣ A K 7 6

How would things change if North had opened 3♥?

On this hand, East is playing 3NT and gets a ♦ lead. Plan the play at IMPs.

West

♠ J 7 6 2

♥ K 7

♦ K 4 2

♣ J 6 5 2

East

♠ A K Q

♥ Q 10 6 5 3 2

♦ A J

♣ A K