

Handling a Crossruff

Last week, we focused on identifying when a crossruff was called for. This week, we'll focus on how to execute a crossruff. There are two basic approaches you can take. When we think of a crossruff, we think of alternating ruffs between dummy and declarer. The play is pretty straightforward, although we will discuss some of the pitfalls. The problem is that this takes a very specific combination of hands: both dummy and declarer need to be short, but in different suits. As a result, these hands don't come up very often. A more common situation is one in which one of the hands has a shortness you'd like to exploit. In that case, you get the ruffs in that hand first, then draw trump. Any leftover trump will still score tricks, they'll just happen in the normal course of play.

Despite their differences, these two types of plays are going to have some very similar approaches:

- Cash your outside winners first so they can't be ruffed later in the hand.
- Get your ruffs.
- Draw trump.
- Cash/establish any remaining tricks.

Sounds pretty straightforward, right? It can be, but you need to do your preparation to get it done correctly. So, just like last week, let's walk through some of the key items you'll want to consider when planning the play.

First and second consideration:

How many ruffs am I trying to get from each hand?

How will I transfer between the hands to make sure I can get all the ruffs?

Consider the combined holding below in a ♠ contract. Ideally, we would like to get three ♥ ruffs in dummy. But, to do that, we'll need three entries to South's hand. The first one is easy: we win the first ♥ trick with the A. Then, we give North his first ruff. But we still need two more entries. The next one should be in ♠s for two reasons. First, it pulls some of the opponents' trump, which reduces the chance of an overruff. Second, you only need three of North's trump for ruffs. Finally, it's a guaranteed entry to declarer's hand. South's ♠K will win that next trick. But, what about the third entry? That can't come in ♠s since that will clear out North's trump while South still has a losing ♥ in her hand.

North

♠ A 8 7 6

♥ 8

South

♠ K Q J 5 2

♥ A 6 4 2

Third consideration:

If I need to create another entry, when is the right time to do it?

Usually, the best time to force an entry is AFTER the first ruff and BEFORE any transfer in trumps. Why is that? Well, let's go back to the sample hand and bring in another suit. As we saw, we need to create another entry to South's hand. So, we need to bring the ♦ suit into play. Clearly, we can get at least one extra entry here, but when is the best time to take it? There are three different choices, so let's walk through each of them.

North

♠ A 8 7 6

♥ 8

♦ 7 6 4

South

♠ K Q J 5 2

♥ A 6 4 2

♦ K Q 4

Option #1: Go after ♦s first. Specifically, lead a small diamond from dummy before touching ♠s or ♥s. This works fine if East has the ♦A. In that case, we actually have two extra entries to South. But what if West has the A? Now, we're in trouble: He captures our K with his A and simply returns another ♦. We get our extra entry, but it's too soon. We aren't able to use the entry to

get an extra ruff because North still has his ♥. This might work -- say if West returns another suit -- but its not the best approach.

Option #2: Go after ♦ s last. Specifically, ruff the first ♥, come back to hand with a trump, ruff another ♥ and then lead a ♦. This is a little bit better, but not much. It only works if the defender with the ♦ A has a singleton trump. As we mentioned last week, the best defense to a crossruff is to lead trump whenever possible. So, your opponents best play will be to win the first ♦ and play another trump, if possible. If that happens, you'll still have two losing ♥ s in your hand, but only one trump left in dummy.

Option #3: Go after ♦ s in the middle. What does that mean in practice? It means taking the ♥ A and a ♥ ruff first. Next, since you're in dummy, you lead a small diamond toward your hand. Whether you get the first or second ♦ trick, you can use it to get another ♥ ruff in dummy. You then cross back in trump and get your third ♥ ruff. But what if the opponent returns a ♠ instead of a ♦ after winning the ♦ A? Then, you just reverse the order: You win the ♠ in your hand, ruff a ♥ in dummy, come back to your hand with a ♦ and, finally, ruff your last ♥ in dummy.

Final consideration:

When should I ruff high?

Ideally, we would like to be able to ruff low and keep our high cards to draw trump later. However, there are often cases in which we need to ruff high to avoid an overruff by the opponents.

Sometimes, your holding is strong enough to take all your ruffs high. Consider this trump holding:

North

A K 4 2

If North only needs to ruff twice, then he can ruff high both times, assuming South has enough high trump to clear the suit. More often, though, this one basically comes down to evaluating the risk vs reward. Let's go back to our previous ♥ holding:

North

♥ 8

North

♥ A 6 4 2

Assuming North doesn't have all high trump, there's not much you can do on the first ruff. Fortunately, there's not much chance East can overruff either. That would mean ♥s are split 6 - 1. There's also not much to think about with the third ruff since you may be down to your last trump anyway. But what about the second ruff? That one's actually the riskiest! If East can overruff it, he might then be able to clear North's trump by returning trump. That'll mean TWO extra losers: the overruff and South's last ♥. On the other hand, a 5 - 2 split is not that common either. East will have exactly two ♥s only about 16% of the time. So, in the normal course, it's probably not worth ruffing high. But there will be times when that small risk is not worth it. For example, if the last ruff represents an overtrick and we're playing IMPs, then it would make sense to ruff the second ♥ high.

Quick Quiz

How would you crossruff each of these holdings? Assume  s are trump.

North

 A 7 6 4

 Void

North

 8

 7 6 4 2

North

 8

 7 6 2

North

 J 8 5 2

 7

South

 8

 A 6 4 2

South

 A 10 7 6

 Void

South

 A 10 7 6

 Void

South

 6

 A 4 3 2

How would you play 4 with this holding on a  lead?

North

 K Q 10 2

 K 4 2

 7 4 3

 K 5 2

South

 A J 7 4 3

 A 7 6 3

 A K 6 2

 Void