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This Week in Bridge

(199) NT Declarer Play - Danger Hand

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Level: 2, 3

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General

An important concept in Declarer play is that of the *Danger Hand*. The danger hand is the opponent who can do the most damage to us, or the one who is a threat to take lots of tricks if they gain the lead. In contrast, the other opponent is the *Safe Hand*, the opponent with whom we are comfortable gaining the lead. The opponent who is the danger hand can vary based on their holdings or our holdings in a particular suit. Since we are discussing notrump contracts here, we will primarily focus on situations where one of the opponents has a long suit. Oddly enough, depending on our holding, sometimes the opponent with the long suit is the danger hand, while other times their partner is the danger hand. Let's look these situations in more detail.

Dealing with an Opponent's Long Suit - Holdup Plays

One classic Declarer play technique, especially in notrump contracts, is to hold up or delay taking our stopper in the opponent's suit. By doing so, we attempt to cut the communication between the two defenders. When one defender no longer has any more of the suit that the opponents have established, then they are now the safe hand. Meanwhile, the player who holds the winners in their suit is the dangerous opponent.

A classic situation for making a holdup play is when the opponents have an 8-card fit. If the suit is dividing 4-4, then we cannot cut communication between the opponents. But if the suit is splitting 5-3 and if our holding is Axx, then we can hold up on winning our Ace until the third round. By doing so we create a danger hand - the player with the two remaining winners in this suit, and a safe hand - the player with no cards left in this suit.

Example

84
KQJ97 T63
A52

By losing the first two tricks in this suit and winning the third round with our Ace, we can cut communication, making West the danger hand and East the safe hand.

Ways to Avoid Danger

Now that we know what a danger hand and safe hand are, we need to know how to make use of this information. One way to do this is to try to develop another trick by taking a finesse into the safe hand. This can be a one-way finesse or a two-way finesse.

Examples of Finesses into Safe Hands

- AQJ opposite xx - We take the finesse into the safe hand if possible.
- AJx opposite KTx - We have a two-way finesse and take it into the safe hand.
- AKTxx opposite xxx - We cover LHO's (the danger hand) card, probably with the T, to ensure that we lose our trick in this suit to the safe hand, not the danger hand.

There are some other situations where we need to set up tricks in a side suit, but we cannot ensure that the safe hand wins the trick. In these situations where we must develop that suit to make our contract, we just hope that the safe hand holds the opponents' stopper.

Examples of Developing Tricks Where We Need Some Luck

- AKxxx opposite xxx - We need the safe hand to hold something like Qxx or Jxx (and the danger hand to hold a doubleton) to develop these extra tricks.
- KJTxx opposite Qxx - We need the safe hand to hold the Ace of this suit.

Positional Stoppers

When we have a positional stopper, then sometimes the opponent with the long suit is not the danger hand. In this case their partner may be the dangerous opponent because our stopper can be led through.

For example, if we have Kx of a suit, then we want our LHO to be on lead so they cannot attack this holding. If RHO gets on lead, they can lead through this holding and put us in danger of losing control of this suit if the Ace is behind our King.

Another example of a positional stopper that affects the location of the danger/safe hand is AJx. When we have this holding, if our LHO leads a low card and RHO plays the King or the Queen, then we can capture this honor with the Ace. Now we are left with Jx, and if our LHO gets on lead, they cannot harm us because they are now the safe hand.

When this situation occurs (we have AJx and the play begins low, low, honor), we have two choices of how to use our holding in the suit. If we duck twice, making a holdup play, then if RHO has only 3-cards in the suit, we can make RHO the safe opponent. Our other option is to win the first round of the suit, keeping our Jx, making LHO the safe hand. We choose how to play the suit based on how we are likely to play the rest of the hand.

Examples

♠ 943
♥ AQJT
♦ AK5
♣ Q43

♠ AJ7
♥ 8742
♦ Q84
♣ AK7

Playing in 3NT on a ♠ lead, you should hold up and not win the ♠A until the third round. This is because we will be finessing the ♥ into RHO and we want to make RHO the safe hand - we hope they only have 3-card ♠.

♠ 943
♥ 8742
♦ AK5
♣ Q43

♠ AJ7
♥ AQJT
♦ Q84
♣ AK7

If we switch the ♥ holdings so that we will be finessing the ♥ suit into LHO, then we want to make LHO the safe hand. We do this by winning the first trick with the ♠A (capturing one of the ♠K or ♠Q) leaving us ♠Jx, a stopper in that suit if LHO is on lead.

Deception - Creating Ambiguity

Another part of good declarer play is deception. With a holding like KQx opposite xx, on a low lead in this suit and the play of the Jack by RHO, we win the King, not the Queen. When this lead happens, we are confident that LHO has the Ace, so in this case RHO is the danger hand and LHO is the safe hand.

Example

73
AT642 J95
KQ8

By winning the King, we leave ambiguity for the opponents about who holds the Queen. RHO would have played the Jack from Jxx or from QJx. Thus, if LHO gains the lead, they may not know if we hold the Queen (and they should not continue their suit) or if their partner holds the Queen (and they should continue the suit). Giving the defenders problems like this can be done by simply winning with the higher of our touching honors as Declarer.

Conclusion

The concept of a danger hand and a safe hand is usually determined by a specific suit - the danger suit. By recognizing the danger hand, we can make decisions about which player to avoid allowing to gain the lead. This can help us with choosing between two different suits to play on or it can inform us about how to play a suit differently (even inferiorly) to how we would normally play it. When declaring in notrump, where an opponent's long suit is of great danger, be sure to think about which is the danger hand and which is the safe hand. Use this information to help you avoid disastrous situations.