



Adventures in Bridge

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This Week in Bridge

(202) Notrump Declarer Play - Timing

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Level: 4

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General

When making a plan for how to take tricks we need to determine where our winners are coming from – establishing honors, developing long suits, taking finesses, etc. Part of determining which approach to take to developing winners comes from considering concepts we have been discussing -- like the Danger Hand, Control of the Hand, and Transportation. But another important part of making a good plan as Declarer is getting the order in which you attempt to set up these winners correct, which can be a complicated and delicate process. The order in which you attempt to implement your plan is called the *Timing* of the hand.

One of the classic examples of careful timing occurs when we are crossing ruffing a hand. To execute this play properly we must cash our outside winners in the correct order to allow ourselves to have the proper transportation and not have these winners get ruffed. Here we look at some of these timing issues common to declarer play in notrump contracts. We see here how timing a hand correctly is important for taking all your tricks!

The Repeated Finesse

Sometimes we have a finesse that we need to repeat multiple times if it is successful, which means that we will need to lead up to one hand multiple times. In this case we need to be in the “other hand” several times, so we need to make sure that we can be in the proper hand enough times, and that each time we are in the proper hand we make use of this opportunity.

Example

Play the following hand in 3NT on a ♦ lead.

| | |
|--------|--------|
| West | East |
| ♠ K73 | ♠ A95 |
| ♥ AQJT | ♥ 762 |
| ♦ Q83 | ♦ AK |
| ♣ KQJT | ♣ 7654 |

When we win the opening lead in our hand (East), we need to notice that we can be in the East hand three times if we want to repeat the ♥ finesse - now and with the other two honors that are left in the East hand. If we play a ♣ immediately, then we can win 3♣, 3♦, 1♥, and 2♠ for 9 tricks. But we can take more tricks than that.

If we play a ♥, taking the (hopefully successful) finesse at trick two, we can then return to our hand with a ♦, repeat the ♥ finesse, return to our hand with a ♠, take the ♥ finesse one more time, and then knock out the ♣A - taking 3♣, 3♦, 4♥, and 2♠ for 12 tricks.

So, entries (the number of times we can be in a hand) are important to consider when making our plan for a line of play. The timing of when to use an entry to the hand that has a limited supply is important. Spend these precious entries carefully when you are making a plan for your line of play.

Advanced Note

We should be careful when playing against an expert player. In this situation, if North ducks the first round ♥ finesse holding the ♥K, and we return to our hand with a ♠ or ♦, we create danger for ourselves. If we repeat the finesse and North now wins the ♥K, they can knock out our final stopper in the suit we started to “open up” and we only have 2♠, 3♥, and 3♦ for 8 tricks. And when we knock out the ♣A, we can go down. Against this kind of opponent, we might not risk repeating the ♥ finesse - instead we just set up the ♣ winners after we “steal” our second ♥ trick - making 10 tricks instead of 9!

A Classic Ducking Play

When playing a contract at teams (IMPs), remember that overtricks are a luxury and you do not need to focus on them. Our goal is to make our contract. But at matchpoint scoring, we need all the overtricks we can get, so we can't necessarily afford to *just* make the contract. Let's look at another example.

| | |
|---------|--------|
| West | East |
| ♠ K84 | ♠ A762 |
| ♥ AKJT9 | ♥ 63 |
| ♦ 765 | ♦ A83 |
| ♣ AK | ♣ 8743 |

On this hand, if we get a ♠ lead against 3NT, we win in East and play a ♥ to the ♥J. At matchpoints (where we need overtricks), we return to the ♦A and repeat the ♥ finesse, hoping to score 2♠, 5♥, 1♦, and 2♣, for 10 tricks. But at teams (where overtricks do not matter as much), this is dangerous. If we play a ♦ to the Ace to repeat the finesse and it fails, the opponents can now take many ♦ tricks.

An expert player knows how to duck (hold up their winner) to mess up our timing. So be careful and do not assume that something that works once will always work again. If we are wrong it can be a disaster!

Conclusion

Think, think, think! First, figure out where your tricks may come from, and then try to make a plan for what the priorities are for each of these potential sources of tricks. Even after you have a priority list, you must consider the timing of how to develop these tricks. This timing, or plan of order of development, can be affected by entries, danger hands, or control, as well as many other factors. A common way to become an expert at getting the timing of a hand correct is to get it wrong many times and try, try again!