



Adventures in Bridge

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This Week in Bridge

(240) Optimistic and Pessimistic Declarer Play

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Level: 2

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General

Perspective is an important part of analyzing a hand at trick 1. When we are declaring a hand (in either NT or a suit contract) and we see the dummy, we need to make a plan, either for winners or losers. Finding the best plan may be difficult, but after a short time we should have a general idea if the contract seems likely to make or is going to be extremely difficult to make. Knowing our chances, good or bad, should help us take the proper approach to finding a good line of play on the hand.

Declaring a “Good” Contract - Be a Pessimist

When we see the dummy and it looks like we are in a good contract, one that is likely to make if “normal” things happen, then we should start to ask ourselves “What if bad things happen?”

We should start to ask ourselves things like, “What if suits break poorly?” We start with our large fits and try to figure out if there is a way to protect against bad breaks.

Example

♠ A974

♥ 73

♦ KQ5

♣ Q82

♠ KQT85

♥ 842

♦ A74

♣ K6

The opponents play 3 rounds of ♥ and we ruff in the dummy with the ♠7. It looks like we have only 3 losers - 1♣ and 2♥. But as declarer, if we think our contract is safe, we should ask ourselves “What could go wrong? Can we do anything about it?” Specifically, we should be thinking “What if trump split 4-0?” If we make the

normal play of leading the honor from the short side first, playing the ♠A, we will go down if LHO has Jxxx. Instead, we cash the ♠K (or ♠Q) first to insure against a 4-0 split in either player's hand.

It is not just the trump suit where we should focus on the possibility of bad things happening. We should focus on any suit that we have the time to do something about. The important thing is that when it looks like everything is going to work out well, we need to focus on trying to figure out whether there are any "disasterous" situations that we can prepare for and hope to prevent from sinking our contract.

Declaring a "Bad" Contract - Be an Optimist

When dummy hits and we see far more losers than we can afford in a suit contract or we cannot find near enough winners to make our contract in notrump, then we need to find any layout of the cards that will allow the contract to make. In this case, we start by making assumptions that good things are going to happen until we can find a line of play that will allow us to make the contract. We start by assuming suits will split well, that finesses will work, etc, until we find a line of play that allows the contract to make. Then, once we find a line of play that will allow us to make the contract we can work from there to find better, more reasonable, lines of play that work. And if we can not think of any better lines of play then we go ahead with our "hopeful" one and see if everything is lying just right!

Example

♠ 86
♥ AQ63
♦ Q82
♣ AQJ7

♠ A5
♥ K42
♦ KJ764
♣ 953

Playing 3NT with a ♠ lead, knocking out our ♠A, we face danger and can not let the opponents on lead again. In this situation, we can not afford to setup the ♦ suit. Instead, we must find a way to make the contract with 8 additional tricks from the ♥ and ♣ suits (plus our 1 ♠ trick). The only way to have this work is for ♥ to split 3-3 (giving us 4 ♥ tricks) and for the ♣ to split 3-3 with Kxx onside (giving us 4 ♣ tricks). Only this friendly lie of the cards allows us to make the contract.

When we are in a bad contract, we often must assume that the cards are where we *need them to be* and play the hand as if we know where every card is located.

Iterative Thinking

Whether playing in what looks like a good contract or a poor contract, instead of trying to come up with the absolute best line of play immediately, a better approach is to find a possible line of play that will work and then try to improve on things from there. We take the line of play we first come upon and then compare it to other lines of play we are considering. Then, we keep working to decide what our best options are for making our contract – we do not settle for our first idea! Part of working on one specific line of play allows us to get into the details of how it is going to work. This allows us to see complexities that may arise and consider our options for avoiding difficult situations. So, we find a starting point and work from there. We do not force ourselves to solve every issue on the hand from the beginning.

Conclusion

Though this discussion of how to approach a hand may seem simple, you would be amazed how effective having the right mindset can be in playing a hand well. You often see dummy hit and everything looks good, but this is the time we should start to ask ourselves what can go wrong – do not get over confident. You will also frequently look at the dummy and feel as if you have no chance to make your contract. In this case, be confident and make good things happen for yourself. Give these approaches a try and see if they can help you become a better declarer!