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This Week in Bridge

(245) Trump Suit Management - Ruffing Finesse

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Level: 2

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General

A finesse is one way to win tricks with smaller honors or even spot cards, but the trump suit can be used in conjunction with a side suit to allow us to promote smaller cards into winners as well. The trump in partner's hand can be used to ruff the opponent's potential winners (often honors) when partner is out of a suit and promote our smaller cards into winners. When we do this by taking a finesse in the "opposite" direction than normal, then this is called a *Ruffing Finesse*. Let's see how it works.

Ruffing Finesse

A ruffing finesse is a common way to establish winners in a side suit when we do not have enough trump in the dummy to ruff all of our losers in that suit or we need to create some pitches. Let's look at part of a hand to see how this works.

Example 1

♠ K
♥ --
♦ 4
♣ 53

♠ A7
♥ KQ
♦ --
♣ --

With ♠ as trump, we do not have enough trump remaining in dummy to ruff all of our ♥ losers. We could simply give up the ♠A as 1 ♥ loser, but we want to win 2 tricks in ♥ and have no losers. If LHO has the ♥A, we can accomplish this! We lead the ♥K; if LHO covers it with the ♥A then we ruff, promoting our ♥Q into a winner. If LHO does not cover, then we discard some minor suit card and allow our ♥K to win the trick if LHO has the ♥A.

We do not need partner to have been dealt a void in a side suit to take a ruffing finesse. We can take a ruffing finesse on the second round of a suit.

Example 2

♠ 6
♥ 9
♦ 76
♣ 5

♠ A5
♥ AQJ
♦ --
♣ --

Imagine that ♠ are the trump suit. We can take a traditional finesse by leading a ♥ from North and playing the ♥Q. But if we think that LHO has the ♥K, then we can take a ruffing finesse by play the ♥A and then leading the ♥Q from our hand. If LHO covers the ♥Q with the ♥K, we can ruff this in the dummy and promote our ♥J into a winner. This is a good line of play when LHO has made a bid that leads us to believe that they are more likely to have the ♥K than RHO.

Combining Your Chances

Taking a ruffing finesse can be done against lower level honor cards as well.

Example 3

♠ 6
♥ 95
♦ 76
♣ 5

♠ A5
♥ AKJT
♦ --
♣ --

In a ♠ contract, one line of play is to play the ♥A and ♥K, and then lead the ♥J. If LHO covers with the ♥Q then we can ruff and establish our ♥ suit. If LHO does not cover the ♥Q, then we can “let the ♥J go” and it will win the trick if LHO started with the ♥Q. This line of play works if the ♥Q falls doubleton in either hand, or if the LHO holds the ♥Q.

Using Information from the Auction or Play

There are times when either the auction or the play of the hand help inform us about the location of the opponents' honors. For example, if there is no bidding from the opponents and our RHO shows up with 10-11 HCP, then we know that a missing Queen is almost certainly held by LHO. We should not take a finesse into LHO, the hand we know has the Queen. If we hold no "good spots" then we must try to "ruff out" the Queen. If we hold AKJx, then we play the Ace, then the King, and finally ruff our small loser in the dummy, hoping the Queen falls on the third round. We do not lead the Jack on the third round because if LHO covers it the opponent's T will be promoted. But if we have good spots, something like AKJT, then we can take a ruffing finesse by playing the Ace, then the King, and leading the Jack from our hand on the third round of the suit.

A common situation where the play of the hand can lead us to taking a ruffing finesse is when LHO leads the Ace of a suit (showing the Ace and King) and a singleton is in the dummy. If we started with a holding like QJT_x, then after trick 1 the suit will look something like this:

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--  
Kxx      xxx  
      QJT
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From here we can use dummy's void to take a ruffing finesse against LHO's known King.

Finesse Vs. Ruffing Finesse

When deciding between a finesse and a ruffing finesse we generally use the information available from the auction to help us determine who is most likely to have the missing honor. Sometime the play has revealed that one player is more likely to have the missing honor than another and then we can use this information to choose between a finesse and a ruffing finesse.

But without any additional information the ruffing finesse has a slightly better chance of success than a traditional finesse. A finesse plays the missing honor to be in one player's hand, while a ruffing finesse plays the missing honor to be in the other player's hand. But in addition, the ruffing finesse combines the chance of the missing honor falling short, offside.

Example 4

♠ 6
♥ 95
♦ 76

♣ 5

♠ A5

♥ AKJT

♦ --

♣ --

In this case, the ruffing finesse wins with either player has ♥Qx or when LHO has the ♥Q of any length. A simple finesse only wins when RHO has the ♥Q. The ruffing finesse has the extra chance of working if the Queen drops doubleton, a small improvement over the simple finesse. If we have no other information about the hand, from the bidding or play, that can help us make a good decision, then the ruffing finesse is a slightly better line of play.

When we need all of the tricks from a suit (say 5 tricks from a 5-card suit) then a ruffing finesse will not work. When we take a ruffing finesse, the opponent may cover our honor and force us to ruff in the other hand. In doing so, we have one fewer potential winner.

Example 5

32

AKJT9

When we need 3 discards from this suit, a ruffing finesse is not an option. If we play the Ace, then King, and lead the Jack, if it is covered and we ruff it away, then we will only have 2 discards left on the remaining winners. If we need 5 tricks from this suit, then we must compare only the simple finesse (about a 50% chance) with the Queen falling doubleton (far less than 50%). In this case, where we need 3 discards on this suit, we must choose the finesse over the ruffing finesse.

Conclusion

When missing an honor in a suit, there are several ways to play the suit for no losers. If we have a large number of trump in partner's hand then we can ruff our potential losers. We can ruff all of our losers or ruff enough times until the suit establishes and becomes winners. But we will often not have enough trump in partner's hand to adopt this line of play. Instead, if we have honors that we can lead up to, then you have the option of taking a finesse or seeing if a small number of ruffs is enough to establish the suit. With good "touching honors" there is another option of taking a ruffing finesse. This option is strongly preferred when we have reason, from the bidding or previous play, to believe that the missing honor is not on the traditional finesse side but is on the other side. Look for ways you can



use ruffing finesses to avoid taking traditional finesse that you are pretty sure are losing!