

The Advancing Player

Finding Queens



By Maritha Pottenger

marithapottenger@gmail.com

When you have a two-way finesse for a Queen (e.g., KJx opposite A10x), you have a 50-50 shot of guessing who has it. However, there are a number of options which can improve that percentage. They are covered below.

END PLAYS

The 100% option is to end play the opponents so that they have to “find” the Queen for you (or give you a ruff-sluff so you no longer need to find the Queen). **End plays involve giving the opponents the lead at a time when they have no choice but to do something good for you.**

Most end plays require 5-4 or 4-4 trump fits so you can pull all the opponents’ trumps and still have at least one trump in each hand (for the ruff-sluff option) before giving them the lead. The suit in which you surrender the lead is an evenly divided suit—one in which you and Dummy have an equal number of cards. There is another suit which you have usually eliminated (played out) from both hands before surrendering the lead.

An example: North holds ♠KJ10xx ♥AJx ♦Kx ♣Axx. South holds: ♠AQxx ♥K10x ♦Axx ♣Kxx. The contract is 6♠, and the lead is the ♣Q. You have one sure club loser and one possible heart loser. If you try to “find” the ♥Q yourself, you will guess incorrectly—on average—50% of the time. If you end play the opponents, you will make the hand whenever spades divide either 2-2 or 3-1.

Win the ♣A. Pull two (or three) rounds of trumps as needed to remove all the opponents’ spades. Play ♦K and ♦A, and ruff a diamond in the North hand. [You have now eliminated diamonds from both North and South. If either opponent leads a diamond, they will be giving you a ruff-sluff or ruff and discard, and you can get rid of a potential heart loser.]

Take ♣K and give up a club. The opponents have only two losing options. (1) Lead another club or diamond giving you a ruff-sluff. You ruff in one hand and discard a heart loser in the opposite hand. (2) Lead a heart. You play second hand low and are guaranteed three heart winners. Voila!

ENTRIES

Sometimes you will decide to take a finesse in a particular direction because you need an extra entry to one hand or the other. Let’s consider this example.

North holds: ♠AJ10 ♥7532 ♦543 ♣J42 and South holds ♠K98 ♥AQ4 ♦AQ109 ♣AK4. You are declaring 3NT from the South with a heart lead to the 10 and your Queen. You have seven top tricks. You would like to finesse twice in diamonds, and you have the two-way spade finesse. You are going to play a low spade to the ♠10. If it loses to the Queen, you will later be able to overtake your ♠K with the ♠A to take one diamond finesse, and play your ♠9 to the ♠J for a second diamond finesse.

The need for entries to the North hand (for finessing diamonds) determined your finessing decision in the spade suit.

BAD BREAKS

Generally, when you are missing a Queen, you finesse with 8 or fewer cards between the two hands. (Other considerations such as avoidance plays when there is a dangerous hand could alter that course.) Good technique is to cash ONE high honor before finessing—just in case there is a singleton Queen lurking.

Sometimes the distribution is such that you can only guard against a bad break in the suit in which you have a finesse on one side of the table—or the other. Here is an example.

Your trump suit consists of KJ987 in the South opposite A106 in the North. If you cash the King first and then finesse to the 10, you will lose a trick when the suit is 4-1 with West holding Qxxx. By contrast, if you play the Ace first, and run the 10 (letting it ride if not covered), you can guard against singleton Queen on either side AND Qxxx in the East. Since 4-1 breaks occur about 28% of the time, this is not a trivial concern.

Important point: **even though you are planning on playing the Ace on the first round, you should play the JACK toward the Ace on the first round of the suit.** Some people automatically “cover an honor with an honor.” As we discussed last month, that is not advisable, but lots of people do it. Or, West may hesitate in a way that really makes you think s/he has the Queen. (Beware: some hesitations are just that person thinking ahead to what they will eat for lunch or dinner!) If convinced it is a true “balk” showing the Queen, you can let the Jack ride. This is known as a “fishing expedition.” You can afford to play the Ace on the Jack because you have all the spot cards. Unless something interesting happens, you will overtake the Jack with the Ace and run the 10.

COUNT HCP

Unless the two-way finesse is in your trump suit, it pays to play the suit with the two-way finesse LAST in the hand. You want to collect as much information as possible about the hand. Sometimes you can determine by the middle or near the end of the hand who has the Queen based on bidding (or lack thereof) and what HCP have already shown up in the hand.

Easy examples occur when one opponent opens 1NT (15-17) and your side wins the contract. RHO opens a strong NT and you bid 2♥ (DONT—showing hearts and spades) with: ♠KJ10x ♥AQxxx ♦Kx ♣xx. LHO passes. Your partner passes with ♠A9x ♥Jxx ♦QJxx ♣xxx and the NT Opener passes. LHO leads the ♣Q, promising the Jack. You have 13 HCP. Dummy has 8 HCP that is 21.

RHO has 15-17, so LHO has 2-4 HCP, and you know about 3 of them already. The NT Opener MUST hold: ♠Q; ♥K; ♣A ♣K; and ♦A to reach a NT opening.

Other easy examples occur when one opponents could have opened the bidding and passed. Since that person will usually have no more than 11 HCP in his/her hand, once s/he has shown up with 10 HCP, play the partner for your missing Queen.

Another easy example: **When one opponent passed his/her partner's opening suit bid.** That opponent does NOT have 6 HCP. If that opponent shows up with an Ace, the partner has your missing Queen.

COUNT VACANT SPACES (from beginning of hand)

Sometimes you have to count the whole hand to reach a decision. This is more difficult, but can be done. It is much easier if you decide at the beginning of the hand that you will be forced to count distributions. Think in terms of **hand patterns**, e.g., 5-3-3-2, 4-4-3-2, etc.

If either opponent has shown a long suit (e.g., made a weak 2 or weak 3 bid, or opened a 5-card major), count that hand. It is easier to count a hand with a long suit.

The reason you are counting is to determine **Vacant Spaces** in the suit with the two-way finesse for your missing Queen. If you have six cards in that suit, the opponents hold seven. You may be able to determine that one opponent has 5 and the other 2 cards in the suit. You then have 5-2 odds that the Queen is in the hand with more cards in the suit.

Here is an example: You hold ♠J109x ♥AJx ♦642 ♣QJ10 in the North opposite ♠KQxx ♥K10x ♦KQ5 ♣Axx in the South. You open 1NT in the South, and reach 4♠ after a Stayman auction. The lead from West is the ♦J. East plays the ♦A and returns the ♦7 your King in the South and the 8 in West's hand. [Since Jack leads are usually from length, you note that West probably started with ♦J1098 and East with ♦A73.]

You force out the ♠A. West takes it and leads the ♦9 to East's ♦2 and your ♦Q. You take a second and a third round of trumps, ending in the North hand. West shows up with 2 spades and East shows up with 3 spades. You play the ♣Q and East covers with the ♣K. You cash two more clubs. East shows out on the third round of the suit, discarding a heart. So, West started with 5 clubs, 4 diamonds, and 2 spades. West has only 2 hearts. Conversely, East started with 3 spades, 3 diamonds, 2 clubs, and therefore 5 hearts. **The odds are 5 to 2 that the Queen of hearts is in the East hand. Finesse accordingly.**

You cannot always count out the whole hand. In such cases, you use Vacant Spaces principles on the one or two suits on which you hold an entire count. For example, LHO preempts 3♦ and you and your partner reach 4♥ with an 8 card fit missing the Queen. After losing a diamond and then gaining the lead, you need to pull trumps. LHO is known to hold 7 diamonds, so has only 6 Vacant Spaces for the other 3 suits. With 3 diamonds in Dummy and a singleton in your hand, RHO started with 2 diamonds.

Therefore RHO has 11 Vacant Spaces for the other three suits. Finesse RHO for your missing Queen and do not be surprised if you get a 4-1 trump break.

The above finishes analytical tools for finding the Queen. The next three options should only be tried when NONE of the above are possible in the hand.

CRANE'S COMMANDS

Barry Crane was probably the best matchpoint player in the world—and would likely hold the record if he were still alive today. He was notoriously hard on his partners. They were expected to make all logical inferences and deductions. However, if there was NO WAY using the above tools to determine the likely position of a missing Queen, Crane had his superstition. Woe to his partner who did not follow Crane's command in that case. **“The minor suit Queens lie over [above or behind] the Jack.”** Conversely, **“The major suit Queens lie below the Jack.”** [Major queens are expected to be in front of the Jack.] So, with AJ10 opposite K9x, in a major, Crane's command is to cash the King and finesse to the Jack. If it is a minor suit, cash the Ace and run the Jack toward the King.

If you have no other indication in the hand, you can go with Crane's Command.

KANTAR'S KINDNESS

Eddie Kantar is a world champion, great author and teacher, and has a wonderful sense of humor. If you are playing in a game with people you know (often NOT the case on BBO), here is **Kantar's suggestion: take the finesse so that—if it loses—it will lose to the opponent you like better**—never to an opponent who is not a friend.

Lynne O'Neill was a lovely lady, good bridge player, and wonderful mentor to a lot of players. When I first came to San Diego, she told me about Queen finesses: “Just sit quietly for a few seconds and let your intuition tell you.” Unfortunately my intuition has taken a vow of silence, so that never worked for me. However, I have noted that some of my partners seems to have a “psychic sense” of where the Queens are—and do sometimes take “anti-percentage” plays that work on that specific hand.

So, if you are one of these gifted people, go for it!! [As a psychology major, I must point out that what is called intuition is often just a lot of small, unconscious cues that someone has put together in a meaningful way. Whatever works for you, use it! Although I must also mention a brother who worked in a lab in Princeton that found statistically significant results—repeatedly—for ESP. I visited the lab and lacked any talent in that regard.]

EXECUTIVE DECISION

You can make up your own “rule” to follow. Having a guideline makes it easy to remember and saves time after you've exhausted other paths of collecting information. It can be simple: “I'll always finesse the person on my right (or left if you choose).” It can be a little more complicated: “I'll finesse the minor suits on my left and the majors on my right.” Or, “I'll finesse on my right Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and on my left on the other days.” It does not matter. It is just to make it easy to come to a decision when you cannot get any more information on the topic.

Have Fun!! ♣