

Playing No Trump Contracts

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Make a Plan

Count your sure winners as soon as dummy puts the hand down. Don't play a card until you've formed a plan for making your contract. Winners are tricks you can take without giving up the lead.

If you don't have enough top winners to make your contract, make a plan to create more winners. You have two main ways to develop extra tricks:

Finessing to trap the opponents' honors.

Developing long-suit winners, (suit promotion), which may require letting the defenders win early tricks.

Decide which suit offers the greatest number of potential tricks and lead it first. In most cases, this will be your longest fit. Don't be afraid to give the opponents their tricks in your long suit if you can set up tricks for yourself by doing so.

Before you lead the suit, make a plan for how you'll set up and cash its tricks. Decide which hand you want to lead from first, how you will "unblock" your honors, and whether or not you may be able to trap missing honors with one or more finesses.

Count the opponents' cards as you lead your long suit. Keep track of the number of cards they still have, so you'll know if and when your small cards are winners. Remember that the 13th card of a suit, even if it's a deuce, is always a trick in notrump.

In general, be cautious about leading the suit the opponents chose for the opening lead. At least one opponent has length in that suit, so don't set up his winners for him. The opponents will usually attack that suit again when they get the lead.

Establishing and Cashing Tricks

Your first step as declarer is deciding on an overall plan for making your contract. To develop and carry out that plan, you need some basic knowledge about the different techniques that can be used to establish tricks. One play you'll need to use frequently is the finesse, which involves trapping the opponents' honors (see the lesson on The Finesse). Other techniques include building

your natural honor tricks and setting up your long suits. Here's a basic overview of these declarer-play techniques and some tips on how to cash the tricks you set up:

Building Natural Tricks

One of your main sources of tricks is in suits where you have honors. Some holdings – aces, or AK and AKQ combinations – provide sure tricks that can be cashed without giving up the lead. On most hands, though, you'll also need tricks from suits that don't have all the top honors. To turn these suits' potential tricks into sure tricks, you have to do some work.

One of the most common ways to build tricks through power is to drive out the opponents' aces and kings (and sometimes queens). When you form your plan, identify which honor combinations and suits offer the greatest number of potential tricks. Decide how and when you'll lead these suits, and don't be afraid to lose the lead. Here are some simple examples:

KQJ opposite 432 – This combination is one loser and two winners. To actually cash your two tricks, though, you have to get the ace out of the way. The opponents won't usually be anxious to help. You'll have to lead this suit yourself and force them to take their ace.

J10984 opposite 7653 – This suit has at least two potential winners, but to score them, you must be willing to give up the lead three times. Note that you'll win three tricks if the missing cards divide 2-2.

Developing Long-Suit Winners

Another way to establish tricks is by setting up your long suits. Small cards in a long suit will often become winners when the opponents have no more cards in that suit. The chance that a long suit will provide extra winners will often depend on how the opponents' cards are divided. For example:

AKQ32 opposite 654 – This suit will provide five tricks if all the opponents' cards drop under the AKQ. The missing cards must be divided 3-2 for you to win five tricks. What if the cards divide 4-1? If you're in notrump, you may want to give the opponents the fourth trick so you can win the fifth.

AK876 opposite 54 – In notrump, this suit can provide three or four tricks, but only if you let the opponents win a trick or two. If the missing cards break 3-3, you can cash AK and lead the 6, letting the opponents win the trick. This will establish dummy's 87 for two more tricks. If the missing cards instead break 4-2, you'll have to lose two tricks to establish the 8.

Unblocking plays

With some combinations, you must plan your plays so that once you establish your suit, the lead will be in the correct hand. The order of your leads can be critical if one hand has more cards in the suit than the other. Whether you're building natural honor tricks or trying to establish a long suit, you will often need to plan to unblock the suit to be sure you can cash all the tricks you set up.

If you're leading a suit that's unevenly divided between your hand and dummy's, play the high cards from the short side first. Stated another way, plan your leads so the hand with the long suit is winning the trick when you are playing the last card from the hand with the short suit. Here are some examples:

QJ102 opposite K3 – With this combination, you'll have three winners after you force out the ace. Attack this suit by playing the king on the first trick (high card from the short suit). Now you can lead the 3 over to the QJ10 and continue leading the suit.

AKJ32 opposite Q4 – You should also unblock when you're cashing sure tricks. Here, win the first trick with the queen, then lead the 4 over to the AKJ3. If you instead lead the ace first, then low to the queen, the suit is blocked -- you'll have three good tricks left in the long suit, but no easy way to get to them.

Overtaking Plays

With some combinations, K10942 opposite QJ, you must plan to overtake the Jack with the King after playing the Queen if you lack sufficient entry to the long suit in other high cards. If you do not, you may not be able to finish the suit.

Expert Tips:

Your most promotable suits are usually your longest. What if the suits are equal in length.

Tip #1. If two suits of equal length and strength exist, promote Dummy's longest suit first.

Tip #2. If two suits have equal length, promote the suit with more honors first.

Tip #3. Always ask yourself "What if the opening defender started with 5 pieces in the suit?" ♣