

Suit Combinations – Part 1



By Kitty Cooper

kittymcooper@gmail.com

The way you play a suit depends on how many tricks you need in it. For example, if you're in a slam with no losers outside of trump and have a trump suit of AQ10xx opposite xxxx you should start with the ace, which guarantees not losing two tricks in the suit whenever that is possible. Obviously, if the KJx is over the AQ10xx there's nothing you can do, but if you were to finesse (say the 10) on the first round, lose to the jack, and then see LHO play a low card on your next lead you would be forced to decide whether the suit had originally split 2-2, in which case you should play the ace, or if you had lost to the singleton jack, in which case you should finesse again.

You can find many online and written sources to tell you what the proper play is given the number of cards you have in the suit and the number of tricks you need, but you are not allowed to consult those sources at the table! In order to decide how to play a suit combination at the table you must think about all of the possible distributions and how your various alternative plays would do against them.

Consider the common case where you have a nine card fit in trump missing both the king and the queen - say AJ10xx in the South hand opposite xxxx in the North. Assuming that entries aren't a problem to either hand and that bridge logic doesn't help, is it best to play the ace and another or to finesse twice? Here we must introduce the important concept of "cases" - this refers to the number of ways a particular distribution can occur. For example, there is only one way for RHO to have KQxx, but there are two ways for him to have KQx (he can have either of the two little cards).

Sometimes you will lose two tricks no matter which play you choose, as shown in the following table:

LHO	RHO	Cases	Best Play
KQxx	--	1	Both plays lose two tricks
KQx	x	2	Both plays lose two tricks

Sometimes both plays work, as long as you remember to play the ace if an honor appears when you lead towards your hand. The "H" in this table stands for either the king or queen (but not both).

LHO	RHO	Cases	Best Play
Hxx	H	2	Both plays work
Hx	Hx	4	Both plays work
xx	KQ	1	Both plays work
H	Hxx	2	Both plays work

The best way to analyze the play of a suit is to look at those cases where it matters which play you choose. These are laid out in the table below.

LHO	RHO	Cases	Best Play
KQ	xx	1	Ace & another
x	KQx	2	Finesse twice
--	KQxx	1	Finesse twice

Not all of these layouts are equally probable - it's good to remember that a specific 2-2 (6.78%) is slightly more likely than a specific 3-1 (6.22%), even if you don't remember the exact percentages (incidentally, this is the basis for the "nine never" rule covered by this column previously); a specific 4-0

is somewhat less likely at 4.78%. However, the percentages are close enough to just count the cases when working this out at the table.

So what does the table tell us? There are three cases where it's right to finesse twice (when RHO has KQx and KQxx) and one where it's right to play the ace and another (when RHO has xx and LHO has KQ). In fact, playing ace and another is 10.43% worse than taking two finesses. As to taking one finesse and then playing the ace, that is the worst play - look at the table showing when both plays (should) work and you will see that this alternative loses two tricks to LHO's stiff honor.

The foregoing analyses are mathematically correct, but that does not mean that you should always play the way the math dictates. You may have or develop information from the bidding or play that tells you to play ace and another - for example, if LHO opened the bidding 1NT and your side has a total of 24 HCP you know that he must have both honors if he has 15 HCP. Sometimes you will play ace and another because you have no choice - you may only have one entry to dummy; or you may have two entries but need one of them for something else. Another reason to play ace and another is when it looks like the enemy will get a ruff if you let them in too soon.

For further reading on suit combinations try this article by Gavin Wolpert bridgewinners.com/article/view/how-to-solve-a-suit-combination or this article by Richard Pavlicek rpbridge.net/4a00.htm.

The *Official Encyclopedia of Bridge* has an extensive collection of combinations; another good book is the one that we mentioned in our percentages article, which also has many suit combinations, *Bridge Odds for Practical Players* by Michael Glauert and Hugh Kelsey. You may also want to try suitplay, a program available from suitplay.com.

Your homework assignment is to work out the best way to play A432 opposite Q10987

This article was co-authored by Kitty's husband, the late Steve Cooper, and previously appeared in the District 17 newsletter. ♣