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This Week in Bridge

(386) NT Play: Taking Winners – Unblocking & Overtaking

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Level: 3 of 10 (1 of 6)

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General

One of the most important skills in playing a hand of bridge is taking tricks. The simplest form of doing so is to take tricks that are already immediate winners. Though this may seem simple, there are many aspects to handling the play of these types of tricks. Here we look at the issues that may arise when we are taking these winners. This is an important skill for us to focus on because it is fundamental to declarer play, defense, and even visualizing how things are likely to go during the auction. This material is a stepping stop to more sophisticated declarer play, such as developing winners, transportation, timing, and combining your chances.

Unblocking Basics

One of the most important skills for taking your winners in a suit is to be able to *unblock* the suit properly. *Unblocking* is the act of playing the cards in an order to allow us to take all our tricks in the easiest way possible, so as not to block or tangle the suit. *Blocking* a suit is winning a trick in the wrong hand and not being able to continue to play that suit or cash our winners in that suit because we are in the wrong hand. So, unblocking a suit involves playing our cards in the order that allows us to take all our tricks and to be in the correct hand when we want to be there.

Example 1

KQ2 AJT43

If we play the 2 to the Ace on the first round of this suit, then at tricks 2-3 we will be forced to win the King and Queen (in the short side) and be stuck in the wrong hand, unable to immediately cash the Jack and Ten. We will have blocked the suit. Instead, we can cash the King and Queen on the first two rounds of the suit, being careful to win the third trick (the one where we run out of the suit in the short side) in the hand with the long suit. This will now allow us to immediately cash the rest of our winners. The general guideline for how to unblock a suit is to “*get the honors out of the short side first.*”

Blocking a suit is not always costly. If we have lots of outside entries to the hand with the winners, then we can easily cross to that hand and take our tricks later. But blocking a suit can be extremely costly if we do not have other entries to the long suit or if we are forced to prematurely use our entries to get to our winners.



Overtaking

Sometimes to unblock a suit we play two winners on the same trick. This *overtaking* of one winner by another can be an effective tool for having good transportation between our two hands. One important aspect of unblocking a suit is to not need to overtake and thus preserve our honors. We do not want to waste our honors in a suit to create transportation for ourselves if we can avoid it. Overtaking one honor with another can cost tricks and set up intermediate cards for the opponents, especially if the suit does not break well.

Sometimes we have a good enough suit that we do not need to worry about promoting tricks for the opponents.

Example 2

KQ AJT98

With this suit we can safely cash the King, unblocking it, and then play the Queen, overtaking it with the Ace so that we are in the long side and can now take the rest of the winners in the suit.

Unblocking Tight Honors Then Crossing

Often, we do not have a good enough suit to overtake our honors without giving up a trick.

Example 3

KQ AJ32

If we cash the King and then overtake the Queen with the Ace (as we did in our previous example), we unblock the suit, but we promote a trick for the defense. Our Jack will be a winner on the 3rd round of the suit, but we will lose the 4th round – our 3 is too small to win the trick.

Here, we need to maintain all our honors if we want 4 tricks – we do not overtake. We unblock both the King and Queen, cashing those two honors separately and leave the AJ remaining in the other hand. We then cross to the other hand, using an entry in another suit, to cash our remaining two winners.



Unblocking on Defense

Just as we unblock suits when we are trying to take our tricks as declarer, we also need to do so when we are on defense. Specifically, when we are defending notrump, we frequently try to run a long suit. We want to set that suit up by knocking out the opponent's stopper while also untangling and unblocking our cards in the suit. This will put us in a good position to take a large number of tricks in this suit. Let's look at some examples of how we unblock on defense.

Example 4

When partner leads a suit and we hold AJ2, we need to know what to do. Assuming that dummy does not have an honor for us to hold onto our Ace to capture, we win the Ace at trick 1. From there we return the Jack (top of our doubleton and remainder count). Returning the Jack also unblocks the suit. If we return the 2 on the second trick and the Queen and King show up - say declarer plays the Queen and partner wins their King - we are stuck with the high card in the short side - the singleton Jack. This blocks the suit. We return the Jack, not the 2, on the second round, unblocking the suit!

Example 5

When partner leads a suit and we hold AJ32, we play similarly as before. We usually play the Ace at trick one and return our remainder count at trick 2. This means we return the 2. We can afford to return low because we will not block the suit. We are left with J3 in the suit. The 3 is low enough that we can play that card later to return to partner if we need to let them cash the remaining cards in the suit.

Example 6

When partner leads a suit and we hold AJT2, we need to go out of our way to unblock the suit. Assuming the situation in dummy is similar to above, we win the Ace at trick 1. But when we continue the suit at trick 2 we cannot continue with normal remainder count - returning the 2. If we do, we will be left with JT and that may block the suit. Instead, we must return the Jack on the second round, starting the process of unblocking. This is an example of a time when unblocking must take precedence over giving correct return count.

Conclusion

Playing a suit the best way possible can change based on what we need from the suit on each hand. We are often focused on making sure we play our cards in the proper order. The best order can involve using the suit for transportation or just trying to take winners. When we are just trying to "cash" our winners, we want to do so in a way that allows us to run the suit as easily as possible. Unblocking a suit is sometimes hard to see and we must think a few tricks ahead, but if we try to keep in mind "untangling the suit" then we will be able to avoid suit blockage and be able to cash our tricks more easily without having to risk overtaking or using extra outside entries. Make sure that this is a part of the game that you work on feeling comfortable and confident about.