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This Week in Bridge

(387) NT Play: Developing Winners – Promotion, Length, & Finesse

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Level: 3 of 10 (1 of 6)

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General

When we declare in a notrump contract, we need to produce winners. We begin by counting our immediate winners, cards like Aces and Ace-Kings, that can be used to take a sure trick. We then turn our focus to how we can develop other cards into winners. The traditional methods for developing winners are *Promotion*, *Length*, and *Finesse*. Here we look at each of these methods in detail to help us understand our options and determine when to make use of the different trick development techniques.

Promotion

In many ways, promotion is the simplest of ways to develop additional tricks. Promotion is the act of sacrificing a card (usually an honor card) to force the opponents to spend their master card in a suit. In doing so we develop another of our cards into the new master card in that suit – a winner!

Examples

1. KQ xx

We lead the King (or Queen) to knock out the opponent's Ace and promote the Queen into a winner.

2. Kx Qx

We again lead the King (or Queen) to dislodge the opponent's Ace and promote the remaining honor into a winner.

3. KQJ xxx

We lead the King (or Queen, or Jack) to dislodge the opponent's Ace and promote two winners.

4. QJT xxx

We lead one of the honors (say the Queen) to knock out one of the opponent's high honors (Ace or King). Later we lead another honor (say the Jack), and knock out the second of the opponent's honors, finally developing our third-round winner in this suit.

One of the advantages of promotion is that it is certain to develop a winner for our side. One of the complexities is that we must surrender the lead by giving the opponents their winner. This makes promotion effective when we have time to develop our tricks and ineffective when the opponents have a source of tricks to take if we allow them to gain the lead.



Length

High cards (honors) are often used to produce winners, but they are not the only way we can take tricks in notrump contracts: we can also use the little cards in our long suits to produce winners. This is particularly effective when the outside cards in this suit divide well between the opponent's hands – a “good split”.

Example 5

AKQx

xxx

We are certain to have 3 winners here, but if the suit splits 3-3 then we will have a fourth winner – a length trick.

Example 6

AKQxx

xx

If the suit splits 3-3 here, we will have five winners – two additional tricks from length.

Example 7

AKQxx

xxx

If the suit splits 3-2 (a better chance than the 3-3 needed above) we will have five winners.

Sometimes to produce tricks from a long suit we must give up the lead.

Example 8

AKxxx

xxx

Here we have two sure tricks (the Ace-King), but even if the suit splits 3-2, we cannot produce additional length tricks without giving up the lead. We must lose one of the first three rounds of the suit and then if the suit splits 3-2 we will have two additional length tricks.

Example 9

AKxxx

xx

This is similar to the previous example, with the need for the suit to split 3-3 (less likely than a 3-2 split needed above) in order to produce two length tricks. If the suit splits 4-2 we may be able to develop one length trick by giving up two tricks in the suit.



Example 10

XXXXX

xxx

Here we have no immediate winners, but if we persist and the suit “behaves itself” (splits 3-2) we can lose the first three rounds of the suit and eventually develop two length tricks.

Producing tricks from length allows us to attempt to develop extra winners if the suit divides well. On some hands, being able to develop tricks without giving up the lead is essential. In these situations, testing to see if a suit divides well, and can produce immediate length tricks, is a valuable tool to combining with other lines of play and give us the best chance to take tricks.

Finesse

The third classic way of developing winners is by taking a finesse. A finesse is an effort to take a trick with a lower-ranking card (non-master) by taking advantage of the location of a higher-ranking card.

Example 11

AQ

xx

We lead from South up towards North’s AQ. Assuming the West does not play the King, we insert the Queen. If East has the King this will lose. But if West has the King, then the Queen will win the trick. We will have finessed against West’s King to produce a second winner in this suit.

Note: If West has the King then we say the finesse is “working”, or that the King is “onside” (where we want it to be located).

Example 12

Kx

xx

Some players (and authors) refer to leading up to an honor (like leading from South, up towards North’s King in this example) as “finessing against the Ace”. This is similar to our previous finessing example, with the exception that the opponents can take the lead by playing second hand high, even if the finesse is “working”.



Example 13

Qxx

Axx

Here is another example of leading up to an honor where some players (and authors) refer to this as a finesse. If we lead a low card from South towards North's Queen and West has the King (it is onside), we will produce a second trick.

Combining Our Chances

These three methods of developing additional tricks can also be combined to produce tricks in more sophisticated ways in one play.

Example 14 – Finesse and Promotion

AQJ

xxx

Here we lead up towards North's AQJ and take a finesse (play the Queen or Jack). If this wins, we return to South's hand (in another suit) and repeat the finesse. If the finesse does not win, we have promoted a second trick with our Jack (or Queen).

Example 15 – Finesse and Length

AKJxx

xx

Here we lead up towards North's Jack (though we may play the Ace first and finesse on the second round, so as not to lose to a singleton Queen). Whether or not the finesse wins, we can use North's long suit to develop tricks.

Example 16 – Length and Promotion

QJxxx

Kx

Here we use the King to knock out the Ace, promoting the Queen and Jack into winners. We also use the long suit to produce additional tricks through length (2 if the suits splits 3-3 and 1 if it is 4-2).



Example 17 – Length and Promotion and Finesse

AQJxx

xx

Here we lead up towards North's AQJ and take a finesse (play the Queen or Jack). If this wins, we return to South's hand (in another suit) and repeat the finesse. If the finesse does not win, we have promoted a second trick with our Jack (or Queen). Additionally, we use the long suit to hopefully produce 1-2 extra length tricks (depending on how the suit divides).

Conclusion

These three methods of Promotion, Length, and Finesse are the traditional techniques that you can use as declarer to develop tricks in a notrump contract. Though our focus here has been on using these methods in notrump contracts, these methods can be useful in developing tricks in suit contracts as well. Make sure that you master these basic techniques and then work to combine them in more sophisticated ways to get the most out of your declarer play. This combining of your chances is often the key to get the most out of your card play!