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This Week in Bridge

(391) NT Play: Control of the Hand

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Level: 5 of 10 (2 of 6)

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General

One of the major differences in declaring a notrump contract versus a suit contract is the level of *control* we have on the hand. In a suit contract, we have a trump suit which can be used to keep us in better control of the hand – we are able to trump in to regain the lead when we are out of a suit. In a notrump contract, we have no such ability to regain control when the opponents start cashing winners in their suit. Here we will focus on how having or losing control affects the play of the hand in notrump contracts.

Note: This discussion can be confusing because we use the word control when talking about “keeping control of the hand” in the case where the opponents have the ability to take many tricks if they regain the lead, and when we are discussing “giving up control”, which means giving the opponents the lead. I will try to make the distinction clear, but if you are confused, go back and check which one we are discussing.

Establishing Winners – Dislodging an Opponent’s Ace

One time that we may give up control (or give the opponents the lead) when playing a notrump contract is when we use our honor cards to knock out the opponent’s Ace, promoting winners in that suit.

Example 1

KQJx T9x

Playing on this suit develops 3 winners for us, but in order to do so we must “give up control” allowing the opponents to regain the lead with the Ace.

Giving the opponents the lead gives them the opportunity to cash their winners in another suit. Knocking out their Ace is certain to develop winners for us, but in some situations we may not be able to give up control by giving the opponents the lead as they may take too many tricks in their suit.



Example 2

♠ 94
♥ KQ5
♦ Q762
♣ KQ86

♠ A6
♥ A843
♦ AK5
♣ JT53

Play this hand after the auction 1NT – 3NT and a small ♠ opening lead.

On this hand we have 7 immediate winners and 3 potential winners in the ♣ suit. But promoting those ♣ winners requires us to give up the lead to knock out the opponent's ♣A. With no more stoppers in the ♠ suit, we cannot afford to give up the lead. If we knock out the ♣A, the opponents will take that trick and at least four ♠ winners, so we cannot give up the lead. Instead, we look for extra tricks in the red suits, hoping both the ♦ and ♥ split 3-3. If so, our 4th card in each suit will be winners for 9 tricks.

Establishing Winners Without Giving Up Control

When we are “wide open” in a suit (we have no more stoppers and the opponents have many winners left in that suit), we look for ways to win tricks without giving up the lead (giving up control). Some of the classic declarer play techniques for developing winners without giving up control are:

- See if a suit “splits” well. (This has no risk of giving up control to the opponents.)
- Take a finesse. (This may give up control to the opponents if the finesse fails.)
- Play for a squeeze. (This has no risk of giving up control to the opponents.)

Example 3

♠ 74
♥ KQ5
♦ T983
♣ KQ74

♠ A3
♥ A963
♦ AKJ5
♣ JT6

Play this hand after the auction 1NT – 3NT and a small ♠ opening lead.

Again, we can not afford to give up control to the opponents by establishing our ♣ winners because they will take too many ♠ tricks. Instead, we must develop winners without giving up control or losing the lead. We attempt to make 3NT by taking the ♠A, 4 tricks in ♥ (hoping the suit splits 3-3), and 4 tricks in ♦ (hoping the finesse works) for 9 tricks without any tricks from the ♣ suit.



Hold Up Plays – Creating a Safe Hand

One way that it can be safe for us to give up control and lose the lead is to do so to a player who can not harm us, or to give up the lead to the “safe hand”. In order to do this, we must first create a safe hand. The most common technique for creating a safe hand in notrump is to make a *hold up play*. By holding up and refusing to immediately take our winner in a suit, we cut the communication between the opponents. When one opponent is out of a suit in which their partner has winners (and their partner has no outside entry), then the opponent who is out of that suit is now a safe hand (while their partner is the danger hand).

Example 4

xx

Axx

A classic example of when to make a hold up play in notrump is when we have Axx opposite xx (or even xxx) in partner’s hand. In this case, we usually want to wait to take our Ace until the third round of the suit. By doing so we hope to cut communication between the opponents and make one of the opponents into a safe hand.

Giving Up Control to the Safe Hand

Once we have used a hold up play to create a safe hand, we want to ensure that if we lose the lead, we do so to this hand, and not to their partner the danger hand.

Example 5

♠ 84
♥ QJ3
♦ AKJ2
♣ Q854

♠ A76
♥ AK76
♦ T984
♣ A6

Play this hand after the auction 1NT – 3NT and a small ♠ opening lead.

Here we make a hold up play in the ♠ suit, letting the opponents win the first 2 tricks. Now we can take a ♦ finesse into our RHO, after first cashing the ♦A. If the finesse loses then we can still come to 9 tricks (1♠, 4♥, 3♦, and 1♣) as long as the opponents do not take 5 tricks first. If the ♠ suit splits 4-4 then RHO will have a ♠ to return, but we are safe, losing three ♠ tricks and the ♦Q. If the ♠ suit splits 5-3 then we are safe because RHO will not have any ♠ to return to their partner. Here, if we win the ♠A earlier, not making the hold up play, then RHO would have a ♠ to return and we would go down – losing 4♠ and 1♦.
Note: All of this is assuming the LHO has lead from a 4+card ♠ suit.



In the previous example we are able to take the finesse into the safe hand, not risking giving up the lead to the danger hand. But sometimes we are missing an Ace in a suit and our only way to make the contract is to develop winners by knocking out that Ace. In that case, we make a hold up play and hope that the player who has the Ace is the safe hand, not the danger one.

Example 6

♠ 83
♥ QJ6
♦ KJ53
♣ K972

♠ A76
♥ AK83
♦ Q982
♣ A5

Play this hand after the auction 1NT – 3NT and a small ♠ opening lead.

The only way to take 9 winners is to develop the ♦ suit. We must make a hold up play in the ♠ suit, not winning the Ace until the third round, and then knock out the ♦A and hope that either the ♠ split 4-4 or that the ♦A is with RHO, the player whom we expect to be the safe hand (because they are out of ♠ if the suit was 5-3).

Another way to make use of a hold up play in creating a safe hand and a danger hand is to play a suit in an anti-percentage way. In a vacuum (without any other information about the hand) it can be best odds to take a standard finesse (like AKJx opposite T9xx). But when we can not afford to give up control of one of opponents because we are finessing into the danger hand, then we may need to play this suit differently.

Example 7

♠ 83
♥ AK4
♦ T984
♣ A93

♠ A42
♥ QJ75
♦ AKJ3
♣ T6

Play this hand after the auction 1NT – 3NT and a small ♠ opening lead.



The best line of play for 4 tricks in the ♦ suit in this 8-card fit missing the Queen is to take the finesse. But on the this hand, after we make a hold up play, we can afford to allow RHO to gain the lead, but we can not afford to allow LHO to do so (if the finesse fails and they started with a 5-card ♠ suit, then we will lose 4♠ tricks and a ♦ trick.) Since we only need three ♦ winners to get to 9 tricks, instead of playing the ♦ suit in the traditional way, we play the ♦ from the top – playing Ace, then King, then another. If RHO gains the lead with the ♦Q we are safe, losing three ♠ tricks and a ♦ (if ♠ split 4-4) or losing two ♠ tricks and a ♦ if RHO is the safe hand (♠ split 5-3). We can not afford to take the finesse into the danger hand, and thus we play to give ourselves the best chance to give up the lead to the safe hand. If RHO started with ♦Qx we will be very happy that we chose to play the hand this way!

Conclusion

When to keep control of the hand and when to be willing to give up control (give up the lead) to the opponents is a large topic in declarer play, both in suit and notrump contracts. In notrump contracts control of the hand primarily is concerned with when the opponents have established a suit and developed a source of tricks for themselves. When you do not have control of a suit, you often cannot afford to give up the lead. One way that you may be able to give up control, even when the opponents have established their winners, is to give up control the safe hand. Remember to use hold up plays to help you create a safe hand and do what you can to lose to the lead to this opponent if you must give up control.