



# Adventures in Bridge

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## ***This Week in Bridge***

### **(389) NT Play: Making a Plan - Length Vs. Strength**

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Level: 5 of 10 (2 of 6)

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#### **General**

When we are playing the hand in a notrump contract, we frequently have many options for setting up tricks. One of the major factors we need to weigh is whether to use length (small cards in long suits) or use strength (high cards) to produce tricks. These will not be easy decisions and we need to consider a variety of factors to make the best decision. All these decisions are a part of our process of making a plan as the declarer. Let's take a look at what we should think about when we are making a plan and how to balance our options of length and strength when it comes to developing additional tricks.

#### **Making a Plan**

In notrump contracts (and actually, this can be useful in all contracts), it is usually right to start by counting our winners, but this is only the beginning of our process of attempting to take tricks. We need to develop a plan for how to take our tricks. *Taking the time to make a plan is one of the most important parts of declarer play.* To effectively make a plan, we need to first understand the types of tricks or winners that are available to us as declarer.

#### **Types of Winners**

##### ***Immediate ("Top Trick") Winners***

These are tricks that we can take without giving up the lead or even risking giving up the lead. They are tricks that we can count on – we do not need to do anything to develop these tricks. While it can be tempting to, there are several reasons that we do not necessarily start our play by “cashing” these tricks.

- First, cashing these top trick winners can leave us susceptible to the opponents taking later tricks in that suit. Winners can also be important *stoppers* – cards to stop the opponents from running their winners in a suit.
- Second, top tricks can be used for transportation between our hand and the dummy, so saving them for later can be useful.
- Third, there is no rush to develop these winners. We should often use our entries and tempos to focus on other aspects of the play; we should look to developing our other tricks first.

Sometimes we cash our winners forcing the opponents to discard, pressuring them to make a mistake.



### ***Developed Winners***

Unlike top tricks, developed or potential winners take some effort to turn into tricks. This frequently means giving up the lead, knocking out the opponents' stoppers, or risking setting up tricks for the opponents. When we think about developing winners, we consider many factors:

- Winners that are guaranteed to develop.
  - *Example:* KQJT. If we knock out the Ace, we will have three certain winners.
- Winners that are less certain – potential winners.
  - Finesses, Double Finesses, etc.
  - Length Tricks (hoping a suit will split well)
  - Squeezes
- Timing / Tempo:
  - Danger Hand vs. Safe Hand
  - Control -- Are we wide open in a suit? Can we afford to give up the lead?
  - Deception – What do the opponents know?
- Risk / Reward – Tricks for us if things work well vs. tricks for them if things do not work well.
- The order in which we should try to develop winners:
  - Transportation – Entries, Unblocking, etc.
  - Probability – Distributions and Card Combinations
  - Combining Our Chances
  - Visualizing the Opponents' Hands
  - Changing Tacks – making use of new information

Our three traditional lines of play have certain strengths and weaknesses.

- Promotion
  - Pro – Certain Tricks
  - Con – Give up Lead (cost a tempo)
- Length
  - Pro – Possible Tricks, may not give up lead
  - Con - Not Certain Tricks, may need to give up the lead
- Finesse
  - Pro – Maybe not give up lead
  - Con – May give up lead, may not produce tricks



## Back to Making a Plan

The process of making our plan begins by trying to understand what immediate winners or options for developing potential winners are available to us. We then determine what factors we need to consider when choosing which potential winners to develop. One of the most important factors when playing a notrump contract is the level of danger we face from the opponents. This danger level is determined by understanding concepts like *Danger Suits* and the *Danger Hand*.

Timing is also an important part of our plan. Timing for developing winners often relates to how many stoppers we have in the danger suit and how much work we need to do to promote tricks there. Declaring can be a race, and the timing of the hand has a lot to do with our chances of winning the race. There are of course many other factors to making a good plan as well, and we will explore those in time.

## Length Tricks – Long Suits

Many declarers focus on developing winners with their HCP, either by promoting their honors or taking finesses. But this is often not the best line of play. Especially in notrump, looking to win tricks with small cards in long suits is often the best place to begin looking to develop winners. We focus on testing to see if a suit breaks in a friendly fashion, allowing us to win more tricks with our small cards. We often try to focus on these options first when we are making our declarer play plan at trick 1. Remember, if a finesse is an option, it is not going away, and it will often be available to fall back on if our suit does not break well for us (no length tricks are available to us).

When we are looking to develop little cards into tricks, we need to think about how best to do so. We need to look at the pros and cons of each line of play (for example, will we give up the lead and can we afford to do so to that opponent). We also need to develop some techniques for playing these common situations well, so that we do not have to solve the same problem repeatedly. Good technique can save us a lot of mental energy!

### Example 1

AKQxx            xxx

Here we can test for our length tricks without giving up the lead. If the suit splits 3-2 we have 2 length tricks without giving up the lead, but if the suits splits 4-1 we have only 1 length trick and we must give up the lead in order to develop the rest.

### Example 2

AKQxx            xx

Here we can also test for our length tricks without giving up the lead. If the suit splits 3-3 we have 2 length tricks without giving up the lead, but if the suits splits 4-2 we have only 1 length trick and we must give up the lead in order to develop the rest.



*Example 3*

AKxxx            xx

When playing this suit, we know that we will get two tricks, the Ace and King. We want to develop more tricks by turning the little cards into winners. To do this, we hope that the suit splits 3-3 and that we would have 4 winners and only one loser. But we also want to maintain control of the situation and not allow the opponents to take too many tricks if the suit does not divide as we hope.

The best way to play this suit (in general) is to give up the first round of the suit – *giving up our loser early*. Then when we regain the lead, we cash the Ace and King and see how the suit splits. This has two advantages compared to playing the suit from the top. First, it preserves communication between our hands – after we give up the first trick we can still reach the long suit (because we still have one small card in the other hand). Second, if the suit does not split well, we will not lose multiple tricks in that suit. We are still in control (because we still have the lead after cashing the Ace and King) and thus we can turn our attention to trying to produce tricks elsewhere (while only having lost one trick, not two or more).

**Strength Tricks – Promotion or Finesse**

Although we tend to focus on length before strength, especially when we have lots of time to develop tricks (and are not under a lot of pressure from defenders). On most hands we can still try to develop tricks with strength later in the play. The number of times we can afford to lose the lead and the number of tricks that we need to develop will often determine which tack we take first. But in the end, we almost certainly need to develop tricks by using our strength, either knocking out stoppers and promoting our honors or taking finesses, at some point in the play.

Here is an example where strength is an important asset, but the key to the hand is to combine our chances.

*Example 4*

West	East
♠ KQxx	♠ Axx
♥ xx	♥ AQ

If we need all the remaining tricks, we can combine our chances by using both length and finesse on the same hand. We play ♠ and see if the suit splits 3-3. If it does not, then we can fall back on trying to get our extra trick by finessing to the ♥Q.



## Combining Chances – Length and Strength in the Same Suit

Sometimes we can combine length and strength in the same suit. There is a classic example of this that we should look at and know well.

### *Example 5*

AKTx            Qxx

The Ten is a significant addition to this suit. We can now take 4 tricks if the suit splits 3-3 (length) or if either player has Jx (strength). This is 36% + about 16+% that either player has Jx. We also can make it when the suit breaks 5-1 or 6-0 with Jack onside or stiff J, for about 8+% more. So that is a total of almost 61%. Given no other information about the hand, we should play this suit from the top and not try a finesse! But even more importantly, if we are considering two 4-3 fits, having the Ten makes a significant difference in the probability we will be able to take 4 tricks.

## Conclusion

We when are declaring a notrump contract, we make a play for how to develop potential winners into actual ones. In doing so we must consider what our potential winners are in each suit, what their chances are of being actual winners, and if we can afford to give up with lead (if they require or risk us doing so). We also must consider other facts like timing and transportation. But most bridge players fall in love with their honor cards and immediately focus too much on developing tricks with them. Make sure that you do not neglect your long suits. If you can find ways to combine your chances, you will see that lots of great things tend to happen.