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This Week in Bridge

(437) Suit Contracts - Counting Losers Basics

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Level: 4 of 10 (1 of 6)

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General

When we are declaring in a suit contract, we think about the hand differently than we do when declaring a notrump contract. Assuming we have a trump fit, we do not have the pressure of the opponents running a long suit on us that we may in a NT contract. There is less danger of losing lots of tricks from a long suit if we manage our trump because we can trump their winners. This gives us more time to develop our winners or tricks. This lessening of pressure allows us to think of our hand in terms of losers instead of winners. Let's see how this changes our approach to our thinking at trick 1 and to the entire play.

Counting Losers

When we count losers, we generally do so by focusing on our holdings in the hand with the long trump. We examine the hand with the long trump and approximate the number of losers in each of the suits from that side. We determine the losers by thinking of partner's hand as assets (or covers) for helping us get rid of our losers in each suit. The art of playing the hand in suit contracts is how to make use of all our assets to help us reduce our potential losers. (Of course, some losers we cannot get rid of, like the Ace of trump.)

Note: Frequently the long trump side will be the declarer's hand (since that's the hand that likely bid the long suit first) but there are some common exceptions to keep in mind: when we open notrump and partner uses a transfer, then dummy will frequently have the long trump and we will want to count our losers from the dummy (the long trump side).



Developing Tricks – Getting Rid of Losers

When declaring a suit contract, although we do not have the pressure of the opponents setting up and running a long suit, timing is still important. Specifically, there is still a race between the declarer and the defense. This time the race is between the opponents trying to set up their winners (take our losers) and our trying to get rid of our losers (discard, ruff, etc.)

As the declarer we must balance our use of the having the lead (our tempos) for drawing trump to stop the opponents from ruffing with setting up our tricks to get rid of our losers before the opponents set up their winners. When we play in NT, if we have very little threat from the opponents (lots of tempos) then we should focus on setting up our length tricks (long suits) vs. our strength tricks (finesse, etc.) In suit contracts, we have even more flexibility to establish length tricks by ruffing out long suits without having to give up the lead.

Example 1

Axx

Here we have two potential losers in this holding. When we see the dummy, we will have options for how to get rid of these losers.

- x – singleton gives us a chance to ruff these two potential losers.
- KQx – both losers are covered up by dummy's honors.
- KJx – still one potential loser – one is covered by the King and one may be covered by the Jack (finesse or endplay).
- Kxx – one loser is covered by the King and one other loser will have to go away from another suit (discard).

Example 2

♦ AK8 ♦ 432
♣ KQJ ♣ 54

The opponents lead ♦Q to start to develop their ♦ trick. We knock out the ♣A to establish our ♣ tricks and discard our ♦ loser before the opponents can take that trick. We have enough controls to do so, so this is an example of “winning the race”.



Misfits – Control of the Hand

When we are playing in a suit contract but we do not have an actual fit (fewer than 8 cards together), then we are not as in control of the hand as in other suit contracts. In this case, we face the danger that the opponents might be able to take control of the hand by running us out of trump and run their long suit against us. This makes playing a misfit hand similar to playing a notrump contract – we face the danger that there is a race to set up tricks. When we play a misfit we should count our winners, not our losers (like a notrump contract).

Note: If we are not planning to draw trump on a particular hand (like one with a 4-4 fit that we are going to use to crossruff), then we need to count winners instead of losers there as well.

Conclusion

When we play in a suit contract (especially when we have a fit), we have the advantage of being in control of the hand – the opponents cannot run a long suit on us like they can in a NT contract. This allows us to take a different approach to the play of this kind of hand – counting losers instead of winners. In doing so we make use of partner's hand as our asset to get rid of our losers by discarding, ruffing, or promoting them. The play can be very different in a suit contract, but it still maintains many of the same factors, like the race to develop tricks, that notrump play does. Learn to think about these hands differently, take your tricks, and make a plan to get rid of your losers!