



Adventures in Bridge

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This Week in Bridge

(495) Smother Plays

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Level: 8 of 10 (4 of 6)

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General

When we look at a card combination where we are missing an honor, our thoughts usually turn to how we should play this suit for the best result. We generally focus on whether we should play “for the drop” of the missing honor or take a finesse. But in trying to avoid a loser in this suit, there is sometimes another line of play that we have at our disposal – the *smother play*. The smother play produces extra tricks by “dropping” a card in an unorthodox way.

Normally we drop the opponent’s honor(s) by leading our high cards, hoping that their honor falls underneath our high cards and promoting our cards just beneath theirs. A smother play involves leading an honor from our hand or the dummy, forcing the second-hand opponent to cover the honor with an honor, capturing those honors with another honor (from the third hand), and then having another honor (or valuable card) drop (be “pinned”) underneath our cards. This is particularly effective when the play results in the promotion of our spot cards. Let’s look at some examples to see how this play moves the opponent’s valuable card to the hand we want it to be in. Do not worry, this is not as complicated as it sounds!

Smother Plays

First, let’s look at some examples of smother plays so that we can get the mechanics of these plays down.

Example 1

Imagine this layout of a suit:

	KJ7	
T4		Q32
	A9865	

If we play the King on the first round of the suit and then lead the Jack from the dummy, we can take five tricks. When we lead the Jack, if RHO does not cover, the Jack will hold the trick. If RHO does cover the Jack, we win the Ace and see LHO’s Ten fall under it – smothered! Either way we take the rest of the tricks in the suit.



We might ask, “How do we know when to use this smother play instead of taking a finesse?” In this example, if the auction tells us that RHO has most of the values (likely the Queen) and length in this suit (for example if LHO has made a preemptive opening bid), then both the finesse or drop seem unlikely to produce extra tricks. This makes the best chance for an extra trick the smother play.

Example 2

But imagine this is the layout of a suit:

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      KJ7
T43      Q2
      A9865
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In this case the smoother play would not work. If we play the King and then lead the Jack, then RHO gets to cover with their Queen and promote their partner’s Ten. A smother play works best when we move the opponent’s potential winner from the long suit to the short side (as we did in Example 1). If the opponent’s potential winner is already in the short side, then our best line of play is to play for the drop – playing the Ace and the King and hoping the Queen falls.

Example 3

Here is another smother play situation.

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      A985
K32      J
      QT764
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When we lead the Queen from our hand, if LHO does not cover, our Queen will win the trick and smother the Jack. If LHO covers the Queen with the King, then we take our Ace and see the Jack fall, giving us all the tricks no matter what the defense does.

We make this play when we expect LHO in this example to have both length and strength in the suit. For example, if RHO preempts the bidding, we expect them to be shorter in our suit than their partner and have fewer values than our LHO. In this case, leading the Queen and trying to smother the Jack is a good line of play.

Conclusion

There are many card combinations where we are missing a couple of honor cards (or important spot cards). In these situations, we have several options. We can play our cards from the top, hoping for a good split or for the important card to fall. We can use a smother play to and hope to pin the important card. Or, of course, we can take a finesse. These are important options based on the other information we know about the opponents’ hands. The smother play is an important addition to our declarer play options, especially when we strongly suspect that a finesse is not working, and the missing high honor will not drop. Look for clues from the bidding to help you judge when to make use of the smother play.