



Counting Ruffs in the Context of a Master Hand and a Support Hand by Bob Gruber

One concept that is often difficult for people learning bridge is how to properly count ruffs when evaluating the number of tricks they'll win as declarer. By the time ruffing is introduced as a technique to win extra tricks, the idea of one hand being Declarer and the other being Dummy has been well established and is used in this context. But, as we'll see, a different terminology might be more instructive.

Declarer's 1st Task is Making a Plan

As Declarer, before you play your first card from Dummy, you should be actively making a plan to take (at least) the number of tricks your contract requires. You count your Sure Tricks, i.e. immediate winners, and if they're insufficient, you think about developing an extra trick (or tricks) by promoting secondary honor cards, by establishing long cards in a suit, and by finessing. These techniques apply to both no-trump and trump contracts. In a trump contract, additional extra-trick winning tactics are available. We'll discuss one of them in this paper.

Ruffing Losers in Dummy

One new extra-trick taking technique is called "ruffing losers in Dummy." Note, it's in dummy's hand, not declarer's hand. Yet, to the beginning student, it seems that sauce for the goose ought to be sauce for the gander, that is, if ruffing in Dummy is good, and I have shortness in my hand, shouldn't that be good too. Frankly, NO! Why is that? you ask. To satisfactorily answer that question the concept of a Master Hand and a Support Hand should help.

The Master Hand—the One with More Trumps

The master hand is the one Declarer will "set up" to win the majority of tricks for his/her side. In making a plan, Declarer should do so from the perspective of setting up the master hand. In a trump contract, the master hand is generally the one with more trumps. Trump length is, indeed, usually more important than High Card Points.

Declarer's tendency, however, is to evaluate the hand's trick taking potential from the perspective of his/her own hand, regardless of the number of trumps, thereby implicitly assuming it's the master hand. (So, it's no coincidence that the beginning textbook presentation of a trump contract has declarer holding more trumps than dummy. It's rigged to make Declarer's hand the master hand.) In making a plan, Declarer counts the Sure Tricks, the immediate winners, in his/her own hand and then augments that count by any Sure Tricks in dummy's hand.

You've implicitly assumed a master hand and counted winners in that hand, including trump winners. (Note, the initial count of trump winners may include high trumps in dummy to cover lower trumps in your hand.) You count trump winners using the hand with the longer trump suit. That's your "base" count of trump winners. Since you've already counted the winning trumps in the master hand, extra trump winners can only come from the "other" hand, dummy's hand (excluding any high trumps already included in the "base" count).



The Support Hand—the One with Fewer Trumps

The terms currently in use—declarer and dummy—contribute to the confusion of assuming declarer's hand is the Master Hand. They confuse the roles of the players—declarer and dummy—with the roles of the hands during play—master hand and support hand. And, they're based on an artifact of the bidding—who bid the suit first—instead of recognition of which hand has more trumps. Declarer bid the suit first, but declarer is not always the one with more trumps. Modern conventions such as transfers and 2-suited overcalls often result in the hand with more trumps being face up on the table. Thus, a more appropriate terminology when it comes to the play of the hand would be to refer to the Master Hand and the Support Hand. This terminology makes it easier to emphasize what's important during the play of a trump contract, namely which hand has more trumps¹.

Using this terminology, the extra trick-taking technique would be referred to as “ruffing losers in the Support Hand.” Not as catchy as “ruffing losers in Dummy,” but more accurate and more likely to help you identify the true Master Hand, even if it's face up on the table.

The Role of Trumps in the Master Hand

You count the trumps in the master hand as winners in their own right. You use them to draw the opponents' trumps so they can't ruff your high card winners (in hand or in dummy). You also first pull the opponents' trumps on those occasions when you'll be cashing long suit winners in dummy (discarding losers in your hand) but after you've exhausted all of dummy's outside entries. If you've left a trump out, the opponent with a trump will ruff as soon as you're out of the suit, stranding any remaining winners in that suit.

Also, you use those trumps to stop the opponents from taking tricks in other suits. If you use all the trumps in the master hand by ruffing before you've pulled the opponents trumps, you risk one of the opponents having the most trumps. If so, he or she may be the one pulling the adverse trumps and then you watch powerless as the opponents are the ones running a long suit.

To recap, the primary roles of trumps in the master hand are protecting your high card winners, preventing the interruption of the run of a long suit, and keeping control of the hand.

Extra Winners via Ruffing

So, you've counted the trumps in the master hand as winners in their own right. Let's look at an example to see if we can get extra winners in the trump suit by ruffing in the master hand. After all, the master hand often has its own short suit.

¹ When bridge started, there were no conventions. Declarer was almost always the one with longer trumps. Using the terms Declarer and Dummy to describe the strategy of playing the hand was almost always appropriate. That situation changed with the creation of modern conventions. Unfortunately, bridge terminology has not changed to stress what is truly important: Which hand is the Master Hand and which is the Support Hand.



Let's say you have 5 trumps in the master hand and count them as 5 winners. You also have shortness in a side suit. A possible illustration of this situation is shown below. In a heart contract, South is the master hand with shortness in diamonds.

NORTH (Dummy = Support Hand)

♠ 4
♥ 9 8 7
♦ 7 6 5 4
♣ 8 7 6 5 4

SOUTH (Declarer = Master Hand)

♠ A 3 2
♥ A K Q J 10
♦ A 2
♣ A 3 2

Your preliminary assessment of winners is eight—5 trumps in the master hand and 3 aces outside of the trump suit. If you use one of South's 5 trump winners to ruff a diamond, does that generate a 6th trump winner in South's hand? Absolutely not! You have a maximum of 5 trump winners in that hand and you've already counted every one of them.

If you say there are 5 trump winners in the South hand and an extra winner is available by ruffing a diamond, you're saying you're going to use those 5 trumps to win 6 tricks. That's an impossibility! Your logic is faulty because you're counting the same winner twice.

But if you use one of dummy's trumps—a trump in the Support Hand—to ruff a spade, that will be a trump you haven't already counted as a winner, and will, indeed, be an extra winner. You didn't promote the ♠ 2 into a winner, but you wisely used one of the trumps in the Support Hand to remove it from the Loser column². In fact, by using the outside Aces judiciously, you should be able to ruff 2 spades in the Support Hand (dummy) and thereby generate 2 extra winners. (To accomplish this feat, you have to delay fully pulling the opponents' trumps.)

We're very interested in extra winners and not at all interested in counting the same winner twice. Counting the same winner twice gives an unwarranted sense of safety. Bridge players and fathers of teenage daughters try to avoid that at all times.

² Ruffing losers in this manner is one reason why you're advised to count winners in NoTrump, but to count losers in a Trump contract.