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Maintaining Control of a Hand

by Bob Gruber

When we talk about maintaining control of a hand in a suit contract, it behooves us to think in terms of a Master Hand and a Support Hand. The Master Hand typically has the longer trump holding. Maintaining control involves keeping enough trumps in the Master Hand to prevent the opponents from running a long suit or cashing too many high cards in the side suits where the Master Hand is short. That means, in general, we want to avoid ruffing in the Master Hand.

We especially want to avoid ruffing in the Master Hand to eliminate losers in the Support Hand. Our perspective is the Master Hand. We may need to ruff in the Master Hand as indicated above or for an entry to a long suit or to be in the right hand to take a finesse, but not to eliminate losers in the Support Hand. We want to retain trumps in the Master Hand if at all possible.

Keeping control is threatened by using all the trumps in the Master Hand while you still have to let the opponents gain the lead. There are several ways we lose control. As already stated, we may mistakenly ruff Support Hand losers. We may arrive at a point where the opponents have the master trump and we drive it out without enough trumps of our own left to maintain control. Lastly, the opponents may attack a suit where the Master Hand is short and they repeatedly force the Master Hand to ruff.

Let's look at a hand that illustrates driving out the master trump when we can't afford to do so.

Contract: ♠ 10 6 4
4♠ South ♥ Q 8 4
Lead: ♥ J ♦ Q J 7 6
♣ K J 8

♠ Q 9 2
♥ J 10 9 6 3
♦ 9 4
♣ A 6 5



♠ A K 8 7 3
♥ 5
♦ A K 10 8
♣ Q 6 3

♠ J 5
♥ A K 7 2
♦ 5 3 2
♣ 10 9 4 2

The defense starts with 2 heart leads, the 2nd one ruffed by South, the Master Hand. This defense has shortened the trump holding in the Master Hand, often a danger sign.

The A and K of trumps show a 3-2 break, so there's only 1 spade loser. With 1 heart loser so far, only 1 trump loser, and 1 club loser, the contract looks safe. If we drive out the high trump (which will be our 2nd loser), we'll still have one trump left to control the hand. But will that be enough?

If the opponents cooperate and lead ♦s or ♣s, yes, that will be enough. We'll be able to drive out the

♣A (our 3rd loser) and still have a trump left. But what if they lead a ♥? We'll have to ruff with our last trump. We can cash ♦ winners, but when we lead a ♣ to drive out the opponent's Ace, West will win and cash however many ♥s he/she has left. Even 1 heart winner will set the contract.

So, let's examine what happens when we leave the master trump out (which leaves South with 2 trumps) and go about the business of establishing our ♣ winners. When West takes the ♣A, he/she can cash the master trump, but now, not only can we trump the heart lead, we can claim the rest of the tricks with the established club and diamond winners.

Is there an indicator to recognize this situation? Yes, the first inkling was the defense shortening the trump holding in the Master Hand. The real indicator was the point where the master trump was outstanding and we still had a side suit (or suits) to establish.



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The guideline is we need one trump to drive out the master trump and a second trump to handle the return in the suit the Master Hand is void and must ruff. Then, for each side suit loser, we need 1 additional trump. If we have that number of trumps, we'll maintain control. If not, we must establish the side suit(s) before driving out the master trump.

In fact, we may never drive out the master trump. It is entitled to a trick and we can't change that. As long as we have enough entries to our winners on both sides of the table, we don't need to drive out the master trump. But let's say winners on one side of the table lack sufficient entries to get back there if a ruff by the master trump interrupts the run of those winners. Here, you must drive out the master trump before starting the run of those winners.