

Declarer Play in a Suit Contract (2)

Avoiding having winners ruffed

If there is a danger that the opponents may ruff one of your winners, you can sometimes take preventative measures:

♠ 7	♠ A 9 8
♥ T 9 8 6 4	♥ A Q J 3
♦ A K 4 2	♦ 5
♣ K J 3	♣ A Q T 9 7

West plays in 6♥. North leads ♣4. How do you play?

On the surface it appears that there is just one potential loser in trumps if a trick is lost to ♥K.

However, there is a very real danger that the opening lead is a singleton, and that you may sustain a club ruff.

How can you avoid the danger of a ruff?

Normally, with this trump holding, you would finesse, hoping that North held ♥K.

However, on this hand, if you win the first trick and take a losing heart finesse, there is a danger of South winning and returning a club for North to ruff.

The full hand:

♠ Q T 6 5 2	
♥ 7 5	
♦ Q J 8 7 3	
♣ 4	
♠ 7	♠ A 9 8
♥ T 9 8 6 4	♥ A Q J 3
♦ A K 4 2	♦ 5
♣ K J 3	♣ A Q T 9 7
	♠ K J 4 3
	♥ K 2
	♦ T 9 6
	♣ 8 6 5 2

A losing heart finesse would be followed instantly by a club ruff

Do not finesse in trumps: play ♥A and another heart.

The contract is now safe against any enemy distribution.

Here is another hand where the danger of a ruff is imminent:

♠ K	♠ A Q 4
♥ Q J 9 8 7 3	♥ K T 2
♦ K Q 5	♦ 9 7 3 2
♣ Q 5 2	♣ K J 8

West plays in 4♥. North leads ♦T. South wins with the Ace and returns ♦4, North playing the ♦8. How do you play?

Since you can see ♦9 in dummy, it is very likely that the opening lead was from a doubleton - North would probably not lead ♦10 from a suit of three or more cards.

With 3 top losers (1 in hearts, 1 in diamonds and 1 in clubs), you must avoid a diamond ruff if the contract is to make.

How should you proceed?

If you lead a trump at trick three, South will win with ♥A and give his partner a diamond ruff.

To avoid this, you must first get rid of the diamond in hand before playing trumps

Suppose the full hand is:

	♠ T 9 7 3 2	
	♥ 6 5 4	
	♦ T 8	
	♣ A 7 6	
♠ K		♠ A Q 4
♥ Q J 9 8 7 3		♥ K T 2
♦ K Q 5		♦ 9 7 3 2
♣ Q 5 2		♣ K J 8
	♠ J 8 6 5	
	♥ A	
	♦ A J 6 4	
	♣ T 9 4 3	

This is easy: overtake ♠K with dummy's ♠A and discard your remaining diamond on ♠Q. Now when you play a trump, South will win. But if he leads a diamond you can ruff high (NOT with the 3), draw trumps and claim the rest of the tricks.

What about this hand:

♠ A K Q 4	♠ 8 3
♥ K Q J T 7 6 5	♥ 9 8
♦ (void)	♦ Q T 7 6 4
♣ 9 6	♣ Q 7 5 2

West plays in 4♥. North leads ♦A. How do you play?

You have three certain losers: ♥A and two clubs, so you cannot afford to lose a spade trick. You begin by ruffing the opening lead. Can you draw trumps? No; if you lead a trump they will take their Ace and lead another one to remove the trumps from dummy, so you now have an extra loser in ♠4. So you begin by cashing two top spades and ruffing ♠4 in dummy. Both opponents follow to three rounds of spades.

So far, so good. All would now appear to be plain sailing. In fact, you are in great danger of an enemy ruff.

Here is the full hand:

	♠ T 9 2	
	♥ 4 3	
	♦ A K 9 8	
	♣ A 8 4	
♠ A K Q 4		♠ 8 3
♥ K Q J T 7 6 5		♥ 9 8
♦ (void)		♦ Q T 7 6 4
♣ 9 6		♣ Q 7 5 2
	♠ J 7 6 5	
	♥ A 2	
	♦ J 5 3 2	
	♣ K J T 3	

What is the safest way to play the hand from this point?

Having ruffed your low spade in dummy, you should return to hand with a diamond ruff and then ruff your remaining high spade in dummy with ♥9

If, instead, you play dummy's last trump after ruffing the low spade, South will win with ♥A and lead his fourth spade for North to ruff. The defence would then score Ace of trumps, the spade ruff and two club tricks to defeat the contract.

The ruffing finesse

Sometimes in trumps you can take a finesse "the wrong way", called a ruffing finesse.

Instead of leading towards the A Q J of a suit in dummy, hoping the King is on your left, with a singleton in the suit you can play the Ace first and then lead the Queen, hoping the King is on your right.

EG:

♠ K Q T 6 4 2	♠ J 7 5
♥ K 4 3	♥ 7 5 2
♦ A 2	♦ K 5 3
♣ 3	♣ A Q J 2

West plays in 4♠. North leads ♠3, and South shows out. How do you play?

There is a danger here that North will be able to ruff something, so you want to draw his trumps. Suppose you play a second trump and he wins, returning a third trump to remove those from dummy. There is a danger here you will lose three hearts and the Ace of trumps. If the club King is with North you can take the normal finesse and discard a heart on a top club. However this has only 50% chance of success (actually slightly less when North has all the spades). Suppose the full hand is:

	♠ A 9 8 3	
	♥ A Q 9	
	♦ Q T 8	
	♣ 9 7 5	
♠ K Q T 6 4 2	♠ J 7 5	
♥ K 4 3	♥ 7 5 2	
♦ A 2	♦ K 5 3	
♣ 3	♣ A Q J 2	
	♠ (void)	
	♥ J T 8 6	
	♦ J 9 7 6	
	♣ K T 8 6 4	

A better way to play it is to draw North's last trump and then lead the ♠3 to the Ace.

Play the ♠Q and if South covers ruff and cross to dummy to throw a heart on the winning ♠J. If South does not cover, then discard a heart on the ♠Q. Even if North can win this he can only cash one heart trick. If he does not cash it you can still get rid of a heart loser on the established ♠J.

Which finesse to take

Sometimes there is a choice of finesses to take. There are situations where, in no trumps, it would not matter which finesse were taken first, but, in a suit contract, the choice becomes critical.

♠ A K Q J 4	♠ T 9 6 3
♥ A 7 5	♥ 4 3 2
♦ 7 4	♦ A Q J
♣ Q J T	♣ A 7 6

West plays in 4♠. North leads ♠2. How do you play?

First count winners: eight. Two more may be made by taking finesses in the minor suits, should North hold either king. In fact, both suits will produce an extra trick even if the finesse in the suit fails.

Now count losers (including potential losers): two in hearts and one in each minor should both finesses fail. Not so good.

The safe way to play this hand is to draw trumps (which we will assume break 3-1) and then take the diamond finesse. If this loses to ♦K and South plays a heart you may win and discard a heart loser from hand on dummy's third diamond. Now you will only lose one heart trick, so even if both minor suit finesses fail you make the game.

However, if you choose to take the club finesse first and it fails, you risk being defeated. South switches to a heart which you may win, but now, when the diamond finesse loses, the defence can cash two heart tricks. The discard on dummy's good diamond will come too late.

When there is a choice of finesses in this type of position, it is usually right to choose the suit that breaks unevenly. If it fails, the suit may still provide a discard for a loser.

An Impossible Finesse - The Trump Coup

♠ A T 7 5 4 3	♠ K Q
♥ 4 3 2	♥ A K 5
♦ 2	♦ A K Q 9
♣ 7 4 3	♣ 9 8 6 2

West plays in 4♠. North leads ♠A followed by the King, Queen and Jack. South discards two diamonds on the third and fourth rounds. How do you play?

West ruffs the last top club with a small trump. When declarer plays ♠KQ, North discards ♦4 on the second spade. Now what?

Declarer has lost the first three tricks, and cannot afford to lose another.

It looks as if a trump must be lost, as there is no low spade in dummy to lead for the marked finesse against South's ♠J

However, it is possible for the diamonds in dummy to be used to do the job. Declarer is about to take an impossible finesse by means of a trump coup.

Here is the full hand:

	♠ 2	
	♥ J 9 7 6	
	♦ T 8 7 4	
	♣ A K Q J	
♠ A T 7 5 4 3		♠ K Q
♥ 4 3 2		♥ A K 5
♦ 2		♦ A K Q 9
♣ 7 4 3		♣ 9 8 6 2
	♠ J 9 8 6	
	♥ Q T 8	
	♦ J 6 5 3	
	♣ T 5	

Declarer now cashes a top diamond and ruffs a diamond to reduce his trumps to the same number as South, before entering dummy with a heart.

The lead is in dummy. When diamonds are played, South is caught in a Trump Coup.

If South ruffs, you overruff, and can draw his remaining trump

If South discards, you too discard, and lead the second diamond with the same result.

In order for this to work, declarer needed to end up with the same number of trumps as South, hence the need to trump that ♦9. Otherwise South would simply discard and declarer would end up having to ruff and lead away from his ♠A T

Whether South discards or trumps, he cannot take a trick. His potential trump trick has been caught in a trump coup.