

## Resumé of Declarer Play – Lessons 11-13

In our last 3 lessons, we have been looking at how to improve our declarer play, and this time we'll do a recap of the main points.

### COUNT AND PLAN

Your side has won the auction, and you are declarer. The opponents have made the opening lead, and dummy is tabled. The **first thing** you do is **count and plan**. Even if the opening lead happens to be a suit where dummy holds a singleton, so there is no decision to be made about what card to play, **DO NOT PLAY IT YET!!**

(That applies to dummy too- only play a card when declarer asks you to!!). **WAIT, while you make your plan, and take your time.**

WHY??

- 1 Even the seemingly simplest hands take a few moments to work out your line of play.
- 2 If you start playing immediately, you will find it very hard to pause later to formulate your plan. The time to plan is BEFORE you play to trick 1.
- 3 Many contracts are lost because of a mistake on trick 1, which would have been avoided by making your plan first.

How many times do we launch into playing a contract without a clear idea of how were going to play it, and just “see what happens”? If you do that, the chances are you will miss chances for extra tricks and get a poor result.

We discussed a mnemonic to help us- **ATTITUDE**

- A** Aim – how many tricks are we aiming to make?
- TT** Top Tricks – how many tricks can we take without losing the lead?
- I** How to increase from our Top Tricks to reach our Aim
- T** Threats- what can we immediately see that might wreck our plan?
- U** Unhelpful distribution- can we plan to cater for a bad split?
- D** Defence- what options has the opposition got?
- E** Execute our plan

### AIM

The first part of the plan is **How many tricks am I aiming to make?**

We saw that it's often not just a simple as the number of tricks you've bid to make!

**Example 1:** You have bid to the full extent of your hands. When dummy goes down, your contract looks tough: you need to work hard to come up with a plan that gives you the best chance of getting home. Proper planning will be critical.

**Your AIM is to make your contract.**

**Example 2:** Dummy looks great! It's pretty clear your contract is going to make.

Say you're in 3NT, and you can see an easy 9 tricks. The temptation here is to just play off the 9 tricks and congratulate yourself on bidding and making game. But think. When you're playing Duplicate Pairs, it's likely that most other pairs playing your hand will also be in 3NT. If everyone else makes 10, you have scored an outright bottom- you might as well have made no tricks at all.

If you can see your 9 tricks, try to work out a line of play so you can make 10, without risking going off. If you can see 10, work out how to make 11. Overtricks are very important in duplicate bridge.

**Try to get used to this mindset. Here, your AIM is to make with overtricks!** Playing Duplicate Pairs is very different from what's required in other forms of scoring, such as rubber bridge, where overtricks are less significant.

**Example 3:** You might have made a sacrifice, expecting to go down, but hoping for a better score than if the opposition were playing in their contract. The number of tricks you can afford to go down is dependent on vulnerability and whether or not you've been doubled – you need to become accustomed to working that out.

Say you've bid 4♠ as a sacrifice over their 4♥, thinking that 4♥ was going to make. They **DOUBLE** you, rather than pressing on to 5♥.

If they are vulnerable, they stood to make +620 for 4♥ making exactly. If you are non-vulnerable, you can afford to go 3 down doubled, for -500, and score better than every other pair who let the opposition play and make 4♥. But 4 down would be a disaster, at -800.

But if they are non-vulnerable, they stood to make +420 for 4♥ making exactly. If you are vulnerable, you can afford to go only 1 down doubled, for -200, and score better than every other pair who let the opposition play and make 4♥. But 2 down would be a disaster, scoring -500.

Getting used to these numbers and calculations is why we like to use score sheets at every practice session, when we're playing our prepared deals.

So, the first thing we've done as declarer is work out our **AIM** – how many tricks we are trying to make.

## TOP TRICKS

The next part of our mnemonic is **TT**: top tricks.

How many tricks can I take off the top, **without losing the lead?**

It's a simple thing to count, but don't miss out that step! It's a vital part of your plan.

## INCREASE

The **I** stands for **I**ncreasing your tricks over and above your top tricks, to reach your aim. Almost always, your top tricks will be fewer than your aim, and you will be trying to identify the best options for making up the difference.

Here are some standard ways of doing that

- **High card combinations**, eg KQx opposite Jxx will yield 2 tricks once the A is gone
- **Long suits** – can you establish a long suit to yield extra tricks, ie exhaust the opposition of all their cards in a suit, so that your little cards are winners? This applies both in NT, and in suit contracts where you've drawn trumps. It can often be overlooked, especially if the long suit is only 5 cards.
- **Ruffing**: in a suit contract, ruffing with a trump in the hand **shorter in trumps** will generally yield an extra trick, but ruffing with a trump in your longer trump hand won't -it's a trick you'd have won anyway.
- **Finesses**
- A **throw-in play**- conceding a trick you are going to have to lose anyway, but at the right time so that the opponent then on lead has no option but to give you an extra trick. This is usually later on in the play of the hand, once some suits are exhausted. Avoid, if you can, leading a **"frozen" suit**: that's a suit where the honours are spread one to each of the 4 hands. Whichever side first leads in a frozen suit will give a trick away, so try to force the opposition to do it.

## THREATS

The next **T** in our mnemonic stands for **T**hreats.

- In a suit contract, can the defence cash some winners in an outside suit if they get on lead? Can I dispose of losers first, before they get a chance, so that I'm ruffing what would have been their winners?
- In a suit contract, if I delay drawing trumps, is there a threat of the opposition ruffing my winners? A vital part of your plan in a suit contract will be about **drawing trumps**: do it straight away (the usual option), or delay in order to do something else first (such as disposing of losers in an outside suit), or (rarely), don't draw trumps at all, and play the hand as a cross-ruff.
- Is there a danger hand, one that I don't want to get on lead? If I need to take a finesse, can I do it so that the non-danger hand is on lead if my finesse fails?  
For example, if there's a suit where dummy holds K x x and you have x x x in hand, you are happy for the opposition to lead that suit from one hand, but not the other. Can you see why?
- In a NT contract, do the opposition have a long suit where you only have one stop? If the opposition lead that suit, do you play your stopper, or hold up and let them win the trick? In Lesson 11, we talked about the "Rule of 7", and the hold up play. The idea is to wait and win our trick so that one opponent is now out of the suit, so she can't lead it back if she wins the lead again.

## UNHELPFUL SPLIT

The **U** stands for **U**nhelpful distribution of opposition's cards. Sometimes, you will get a bad split, the worst being where one opponent holds all the missing cards in a suit, and the other none. This might be the trump suit in a trump contract, or in NT, a long suit of yours which you're hoping to run. In your plan, can you cater for this possibility so that you still succeed?

Sometimes, say in a NT contract, it might appear that you can run a suit, for example, holding 9 cards between yourself and dummy, but missing the J and three small ones. That will work fine if the missing cards split 2-2 or 3-1. But what if they split 4-0? Or perhaps in a trump contract, you will have a fit of 8 cards, and if they split 3-2 your contract will be OK. But what if they split 4-1, or even 5-0? Can you play to cater for an adverse split and still achieve your aim?

In your plan, you should be thinking of these possibilities, and if possible, play that key suit to maximize your chances should you get an unhelpful split. A useful technique is to broach the suit in such a way as to **preserve a finesse position**, should an opponent show out.

Here, as an example, we are considering a trump suit, missing 4 cards:

In your PLAN, imagine one hand holds all 4 missing cards:

eg if you hold A Q 9 5 4 opposite K 10 3 2, don't unthinkingly play the K first, play the A (or Q) first. This preserves a finesse position in both hands (Q 9 and K 10) against the Jack, so if either opponent shows out on the first round of the suit, you know where the Jack is, so you have a marked finesse.

Here, by careful play you can GUARANTEE picking up the suit without loss, even with a 4-0 split. Avoid needless risks!

But if you hold A Q 9 5 4 in hand opposite the K 8 3 2 in dummy, say, you are missing the J and the 10, so you can't pick up the suit without loss if your LHO holds all 4 cards.

So play for RHO to hold all 4, and cash the K first; you'll pick up the suit if it splits no worse than 3-1, **or** if RHO holds all 4. There was nothing you could have done to avoid 1 loser if LHO holds all 4 missing cards.

Playing to preserve a finesse position is good bridge.

## DEFENCE

The **D** stands for Defence: think about what options the defence have to defeat you.

In a NT contract, you might have a weak suit, where the opponents can immediately cash a string of winners if they get on lead. You might be fortunate, and they didn't lead that suit on trick 1, but now they've seen dummy, and worked out

what's going on, they are likely to make the killing switch as soon as they regain the lead. In such a case you mustn't take unnecessary risks. Delay losing the lead as long as you can, cashing tricks in your own long suit(s) first. You never know, that might force the opponents into a problem choice of discards, where they have to (eg) bare a King or discard in their good suit.

If you see that a killing switch is a possibility, and can "run for home", ie take the requisite number of tricks to achieve your Aim without losing the lead, do so, and ignore trying to take more than that by, for example, attempting a finesse.

In a suit contract, your plan will often depend on ruffing in the short trump hand to generate extra tricks. A common tactic in defence is to draw YOUR trumps before you want to, to strip out those trumps before you can ruff with them. If you've decided to delay drawing trumps, good defenders will be alert and wonder why. If they can see one or two small trumps in dummy that they spot you're planning to use to ruff losers, then if they gain the lead, they can lead a trump and take one of them off the table. This can be critical, and sometimes leave you a trick or two short of your contract. So can you plan to take your ruffs without losing the lead?

Now we've done our planning- ie worked through the **ATTITUD**, and we still haven't played a card to trick 1! Don't be afraid to take your time to count and plan. It will take a while when you're inexperienced, but the more you play, the slicker you will get.

**EXECUTE** your plan

Now it's time to put it into action: the **E** is for execute.

Execute your plan but remain vigilant about what happens as the play proceeds, and be prepared to change your plan if necessary.

For example:

- you might get a friendly discard, which enables you to establish a suit you otherwise couldn't have
- you might get a free trick by an opponent leading a *frozen suit*
- you might get a free finesse by an opponent, leading up to your tenace (tenace= a holding of two high non-touching cards, such as A Q, or K J)
- opponents might inadvertently establish a suit for you by cashing their high cards, leaving you a nice suit to run.

As declarer in NT, cashing a long suit early is often helpful, as the discards your opponents make can give you useful information, or force them into discarding something they wanted to hold on to.

As declarer in a suit contract, the timing of drawing trumps is a key decision. We explored this aspect in detail in Lessons 12 and 13.

## **ESTABLISHING LONG SUITS**

We touched on this in Lesson 11, for NT contracts, but it applies just as much in suit contracts. We don't have time to delve into the detail on this course, but it is an important part of the technique of declarer play. If you are interested to know more, look up the lesson on Establishing long suits, in the Advanced series (it's on the website) and play through the examples.

