Play Technique

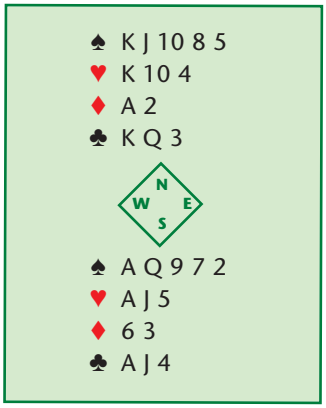
by Frances Hinden

Endplays

THE EDITOR passed this letter from Dave Parkin on to me: 'Hi Elena, has the magazine produced an article on endplay? If not, could we have one? Preferably one that starts with the planning stage and what to look for to develop more tricks.'

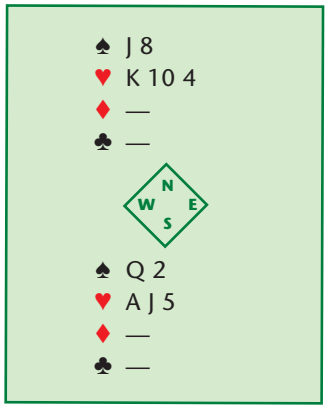
The time to look for an endplay is when you have a suit which you would prefer that the opponents lead. There might be a two-way finesse (A-J-x opposite K-10-x), or a position such as A-x opposite Q-x which is worth two tricks *if* and *only if* the player with the king has to lead the suit.

Here's an example:



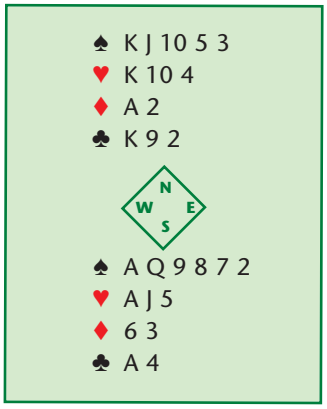
You play in 6♠ on the lead of the ♦K. You have five spade tricks, three club tricks, a diamond and two hearts on top, and no source of extra tricks from ruffs. It looks as if you have to guess who has the queen of hearts to come to twelve tricks. However, this hand is tailor-made for an endplay as you would much rather the opponents lead hearts for you. You win the opening lead, draw all the outstanding trumps, cash the three club winners and then concede the diamond trick. You have reached a position with five cards left where you have:

- **Trumps in both hands;**
- **The opponents on lead; and**
- **Any card they lead either gives you a trick, or removes a guess.**

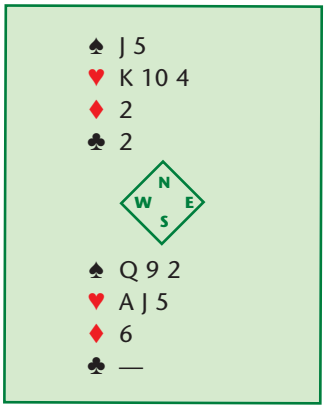


Whoever won the diamond must either play a heart, giving a certain three heart tricks, or must play a minor suit. If a minor suit is led, you gain a trick a different way: you can ruff in one hand while discarding a heart from the other (imaginatively known as a 'ruff-and-discard'), following which you ruff the third round of hearts in the other hand and make the rest of the tricks.

The key on this hand was to take all the club winners before playing a diamond. Sometimes you have to work harder, as can be seen by changing the layout slightly:

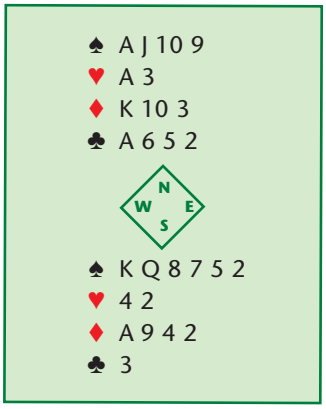


In the same 6♠ contract on the same ♦K lead, it's not enough to draw trumps and cash the ace and king of clubs, because this will be the position before the diamond is played:



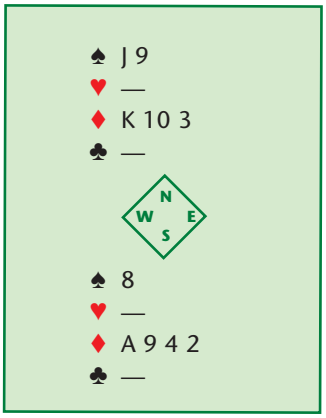
You have trumps in both hands and the opponents on lead, but whoever wins the diamond trick can simply play a club. You can ruff that in the South hand, but without the ruff-and-discard you haven't gained anything and still have to guess the location of the queen of hearts. To avoid that, you need to ruff the two of clubs in hand *before* playing a diamond. Then there is nothing they can do.

This process of getting rid of all the cards that would give the opponents a safe card to lead is called an 'elimination' and can be hard work. Here's a more complicated example:



You get to 6♠ by South again. The key to the hand is to see that the diamond suit is again one that you would rather the opponents played for you. In order to 'eliminate' all the clubs you need to ruff

three of them, as well as draw trumps and still have a trump left in each hand, so you need trumps to break 2-1. Suppose you get a heart lead. You win this with the ace, then take the ace of clubs and ruff a club in hand at once. Then you can play a trump to dummy, ruff another club (high), play a second trump to dummy and ruff the last club in hand. Now is the time to exit in hearts, leaving this position with the opponents on lead.



If they give a ruff-and-discard by playing a heart or a club, you throw a diamond from dummy and ruff in hand, and now can ruff two diamonds in dummy. The diamond suit itself is more interesting: if West (say) wins the heart and plays a low diamond, you can beat an honour from East with the ace and then finesse against West.

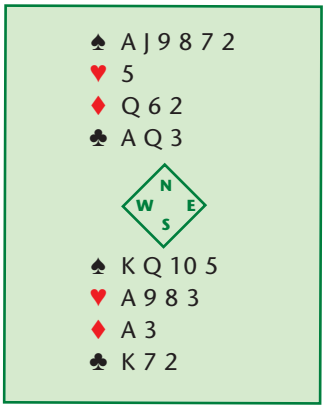
You aren't guaranteed to make the contract: if East has both the queen and jack of diamonds and West wins the heart, there is nothing you can do. However, you have roughly a 50% chance of making (the queen and jack split between the East-West hands) rather than the tiny chance of a singleton honour if you don't try for the endplay. If West wins the heart and plays a diamond honour, you should assume he has found a cunning play from, say, Q-x-x, and still finesse against East for the other honour. If he had both diamond honours he could have let East win the heart and beat the contract by force.

This deal shows a common fourth feature of an endplay:

- **Plan early for the position when you are going to lose the lead.**

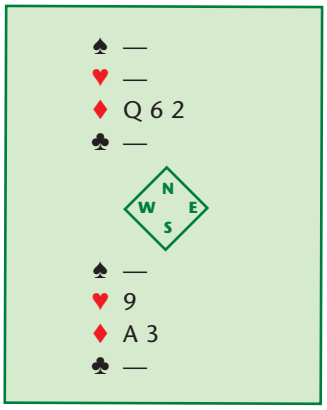
Here you can't afford to play any rounds of trumps before starting on the club suit, or you will run out.

Suit contracts are ideally suited (!) to endplays because you can give the opponents the unpleasant choice of playing the suit you want or giving a trick with a ruff-and-discard. However, endplays are still possible in no-trumps: now there's no possible ruff-and-discard to help, so you need to get to the point where the opponent who gains the lead only has one suit left. That can mean that you need to do some careful counting:



After West opens 1♥, then bids 4♥ at his next turn, you choose to play in 6NT by South after East doubled a 5♥ response to Blackwood. West leads the king of hearts at trick one and East discards a club. By being in no-trumps, you have avoided a ruff on the opening lead, but you only have eleven tricks: six spades, one heart, one diamond and three clubs. You start on the spade suit and West follows to the first round. That's good news, because if West has the king of diamonds (virtually certain for his decision to open 1♥ rather than 4♥) you can make the contract without any guesses.

Cash all six rounds of spades (discarding two hearts) and three clubs to get to a three-card ending:



You have, of course, counted how many hearts West has discarded and you know that he started with eight. If he has no hearts left, your nine is a winner. If he has two hearts, you can cash the ace of diamonds dropping his (now singleton) king. If he has one heart and two diamonds left, then you can play your heart, and he wins but then has to lead a diamond away from the king allowing you to make the queen and the ace.

In the second case, where he has one heart and two diamonds left, you need to play a heart. This means that you must have won the previous trick in hand. That, in turn, means that you had to order the black suit winners carefully – the last one had to be the king of clubs from South. Playing clubs before spades, or the king of clubs before the ace, would leave you in the North hand rather than the South one, and you would go off. So you not only need to count, you again need to plan for the ending before you get there.

Discerning readers will notice that if West has one heart, one diamond and one club left, then again his king of diamonds must now be singleton (you have, of course, counted all the suits!). However, because West followed to the first round of spades, he cannot have any clubs left: he has eight hearts, one spade, and the assumed king of diamonds, so cannot have started with more than three clubs.

On this hand reducing West to the two important suits, hearts and diamonds, was easy, but that wasn't enough. Without the threat of a ruff-and-discard from playing in a suit contract, you had to cash all the spades, or West could keep both ♦K-x and two winning hearts. Forcing him to retain a guarded ♦K meant he had to throw all his spare hearts. This ending is usually called a 'strip squeeze' or a 'squeeze throw-in'.

The four hands shown here have got successively harder – the last one is not only an endplay but also a squeeze. However, they have four general elements in common:

1. **Look for a suit you would prefer the opponents to lead;**
2. **Plan how to get to the right position to lose the lead;**
3. **Get rid of *(eliminate)* the opponents' safe leads in all the other suits;**
4. **Put the opponents on lead.**

This article is only an introduction to a huge subject. There are only a couple of dedicated books in print, but any book (or software) on declarer play that isn't aimed solely at beginners will dedicate a lot of space to endplays. ❐