

## ELIMINATION PLAY

There are two main methods of extracting an extra trick in a borderline contract. These are the known as ‘elimination play’ and ‘squeezes’. Both techniques require the ability to plan ahead and plot your way through the minefield of the difficult contract. Whenever you are short of just one trick it is usually possible to make your contract, unless the defenders are able to cash enough tricks to set you from the outset. Success demands the ability to appreciate in advance the problem(s) posed by a particular hand and it is simply not good enough to play out the cards and hope for the best. If you do this you will be defeated as often as you make your contract and such a negative approach is very wearing on partnership confidence.

The most common method employed to gain an additional trick is elimination play. Usually the technique requires the declarer to ‘eliminate’ dangerous side suits, before exiting to one or the other defenders to force them into making an awkward return. This hand arose in a recent Teams match.

### Example 1

♠ A 10 7 6 2 ♥ A 10 4 ♦ A K 3 ♣ 7 6	W                      E	♠ K Q 9 8 4 ♥ K 9 3 ♦ Q 7 2 ♣ A 4	
	N                      E                      S                      W		
		1♠	P                      3♦*
	P	4♣**	P                      4♦**
	P	4♠	P                      6♠
	All pass		

\*A ‘jump-shift’ agreeing ♠s and promising 15+ HCP.  
 \*\*Cue-bids, showing first-round control.

South led the ♣K. The immediate reaction is that the contract is doomed, since declarer must lose a ♣ and, because of the duplicated shape of the two hands, he has no long card on which to park a losing ♥. There is one good chance, however. If the missing ♥ honours are divided, then it is

possible to force one or the other defender into the awkward position of either having to lead away from their ♥ honour or concede a crucial ruff and discard. Because of the valuable pips in the ♥ suit you will be able to finesse each of your opponents in turn, *provided an opponent first leads the suit*. Therefore you must draw all the outstanding trumps and cash three rounds of ♦s, eliminating the danger of either opponent being able to make a safe return in these suits. Now you can simply exit with a ♣ and whoever wins the trick is end-played, assuming the ♥ honours are divided. If not, you cannot make the contract anyway, since whoever holds the two ♥ honours will be sure to duck the second ♣.

	♠	3			
	♥	J 8 7 2			
	♦	10 9 4			
	♣	J 9 8 5 2			
♠	A 10 7 6 2	N		♠	K Q 9 8 4
♥	A 10 4	W	E	♥	K 9 3
♦	A K 3	S		♦	Q 7 2
♣	7 6			♣	A 4
	♠	J 5			
	♥	Q 6 5			
	♦	J 9 6 5			
	♣	K Q 10 3			

Note that the best chance for the defence is for whoever wins the second ♣ trick to exit with their ♥ honour! This might seem to be an odd play, but at least you will have awakened the suspicion in declarer's mind that the honours are held in the same hand and there is now a chance that he will guess wrong.

The opening lead is frequently the determining factor in the decision to attempt the elimination play.

### Example 2

	♠	J 4			
	♥	A K 7	W	E	♠
	♦	9 7 6 4			♥
	♣	K J 8 2			♦
					♣
					A
					Q 4
					A Q 8 3
					A Q 10 7 6 4

N	E	S	W
P	1♣	P	1♦
P	4♦	P	4♥*
P	4♠*	P	6♣

\*Cue-bids, showing first-round control.

Before examining the play on this deal, note the auction. Over East's opening 1♣, West bids a quiet 1♦. He does not make the horrible error of jumping to 2NT (showing a balanced 11-12 HCP). There is no rush to get in the first bid in no-trumps in a misguided attempt to play the hand – especially when there is good support for partner's first-bid suit!

South led the ♠K. The ♦ suit was the problem, of course, since if the finesse failed there was likely to be at least two losers in the suit. But a little thought should guide you to the correct line of play. After drawing trumps you can discard one of the losing ♦s from your hand on the long ♥. You can then make the loser-on-loser play of throwing a second ♦ on the losing ♠J. This will endplay South, who will be forced to lead into your ♦A Q of diamonds or concede a ruff and discard. After a while plays of this sort become fairly routine.

The only other reasonable option on this hand is to play for the ♦K doubleton or ♦J 10 doubleton. The full deal shows that playing for a doubleton ♦K would have worked, but the difference between the two options is that playing for the ♦K doubleton is not guaranteed whereas the elimination play was marked by the opening lead.

		♠	10 9 8 5 3		
		♥	10 9 5 3 2		
		♦	J 10 5		
		♣	-----		
♠	J 4	N		♠	A
♥	A K 7	W		♥	Q 4
♦	9 7 6 4	S		♦	A Q 8 3
♣	K J 8 2	E		♣	A Q 10 7 6 4
		♠	K Q 7 6 2		
		♥	J 8 6		
		♦	K 2		
		♣	9 5 3		

Without the lead of the ♠ K, the best line is to win the lead in hand and draw trumps in three rounds. Then cash the ♠A and three rounds of ♥s, discarding a ♦ on the third round. Finally lead the ♠J from dummy, discarding a second ♦ if North plays low. If North covers the ♠J you should ruff in hand and lay down the ♦A. If you are very lucky the ♦K will fall. If not, cross to the dummy and lead a low ♦ towards your hand. North may go up with the ♦K and solve your problem. If not, you must guess whether to cover or duck, playing South for the doubleton ♦K. This line maximises your chances for locating the ♦K, without having to make an awkward decision.

As often as not, the probability that an elimination play is likely to succeed becomes apparent because of information revealed during the course of the auction.

### Example 3

♠	Q J 10 7 4		♠	6
♥	J 8 6 4	W	E	♥ K 10 5 2
♦	9 7			♦ A K J 10 4 2
♣	4 3			♣ A 7

	N	E	S	W
		1♦	P	P
	2♣	2♥	P	P
	3♣	3♦	P	4♥
	X!	All pass		

West finally wakes up to just how strong his partner's hand is and makes the good bid of 4♥ once his partner has insisted that they should be playing the final contract. Since he is maximum for his original pass of his partner's opening, he should invite with 3♥ once his partner has taken the opportunity to show a reverse over North's overcall.

South leads a small ♣ to North's ♣Q. How would you play the contract? You have one ♠ loser and one ♣ loser, so the contract depends on whether you can restrict your trump losers to one. Clearly North must have both the ♥A Q, since he is not likely to have doubled the final contract after his partner has passed throughout without a strong trump holding.

The problem with the hand is that it is difficult to get to the dummy to lead the ♥J from the table. There is only one chance to create an entry and that is via a ruff. There are two possibilities. You can play North for

the ♥A Q 9 and three ♦s, in which case you will be able to ruff the third ♦ as high as necessary to gain an entry. Now you will be able to lead a trump through North. This may well work, but you are still no nearer to making your contract. North will simply rise with the ♥A on the first round and you will need yet another entry to finesse the ♥Q.

In any case, it is not likely that North will hold three ♦s, given the competitive auction. However, there is a reasonable chance that he will hold two ♦s and the high trumps. If this is so, you have the possibility of creating an entry by dropping the doubleton ♦Q from North and then exiting with the ♦J and discarding the losing ♣ from the dummy. If North did start with ♦ Q X, he will be forced to ruff your ♦ J or concede an extra ♣ trick. This loser-on-loser play that is designed to create a necessary entry is a relatively common occurrence. The difficulty is not so much in the execution of the play, but in spotting that the possibility exists in the first place.

		♠	A K 3			
		♥	A Q 9			
		♦	Q 3			
		♣	K Q 10 8 6			
♠	Q J 10 7 4		N		♠	6
♥	J 8 6 4	W		E	♥	K 10 5 2
♦	9 7		S		♦	A K J 10 4 2
♣	4 3				♣	A 7
		♠	9 8 5 2			
		♥	7 3			
		♦	9 6 5			
		♣	J 9 5 2			

Once North ruffs the third ♦, declarer only requires one entry to the dummy to deal with the trump suit. Note how effectively North is end-played at this point. He can cash the ♠A, but his continuation is doomed. Note also that it does not matter if South wins the third round of ♦s with the ♦Q. Declarer should still discard his losing ♣, because this guarantees that the contract cannot be defeated by more than one trick. If he ruffs instead, North will simply over-ruff, cash the ♣K and the ♠A and then exit with the ♠K. Now declarer will have to concede another two trump tricks and will go two down. While it is important to make your contract if you can, it is equally important to limit your losses when the breaks do not go your way.

There are occasions when winning a cheap trick can turn out to be horribly expensive. This next hand was one of the deals in a Teams match. Both declarers finished in the same contract and both got the same opening lead, but one managed to make the contract while the other went down in flames.

#### Example 4

<p>♠ 10 9 5 ♥ 7 5 ♦ K 10 8 6 2 ♣ J 10 8</p>	<p>W                    E</p>	<p>♠ A J 4 2 ♥ K J 6 ♦ A J ♣ A Q 5 2</p>	
<p>N                    E                    S                    W</p>			
	<p>2NT</p>	<p>P</p>	<p>3NT</p>
<p>All pass</p>			

Not unreasonably, West decided he had enough to raise his partner to game with his five-card ♦ suit and three 10s. South led the ♦3. Declarer won North's ♦9 with the ♦J and immediately cashed the ♦A. Then he played a small ♣ to the ♣J, which North took with the ♣K. Declarer covered the switch to a low ♥ with the ♥J, but this was taken by South's ♥Q. South then exited with a low ♣ to the ♣10.

At this point declarer had seven sure tricks (one ♠, three ♦s and three ♣s) but it was not at all clear where the remaining two tricks could be found. If declarer cashed the ♦K he was likely to be setting up South's ♦Q, but if he did not take it immediately it was likely to disappear forever, since there was no guaranteed entry back to the dummy. His best chance to create additional tricks seemed to be in the ♠ suit. If the honours were divided, he might well make the extra tricks in ♠s. Accordingly, he cashed the ♦K and then ran the ♠10. South won with the ♠Q and cashed the ♦Q. Now declarer was in a hopeless mess. He had already discarded one ♠ on the ♦K and he was now forced to discard a second. South then returned a third round of ♣s and the hand collapsed completely. Declarer could cash his three remaining winners, but he was then obliged to exit with a ♥ and concede the last two tricks. The kindest description of this plan is to call it careless. Compare the result with what happened in the other room...

Once again South led a low ♦. The *first* action declarer took was to count his sure tricks. He had only seven (one ♠, three ♦s on the lead and three ♣s once the ♣K had been forced out.) Where were the other

two to come from? The ♠ suit would probably produce an additional trick, but how could the declarer develop the suit without inviting a dangerous ♥ switch, particularly if North was left on lead? But perhaps the ♦ suit could be developed? Still, the suit could not be established without a second sure entry. There seemed no way out of the dilemma – until the declarer had a sudden brainwave.

The ♦K was the second entry, of course! He won the lead with the ♦A and overtook his ♦J with the ♦K. Now he simply exited with the ♦10, discarding a ♠ from hand. This had the effect of eliminating ♦s as a safe return and South was end-played in four suits!

	♠	K 8 7				
	♥	9 8 4 3 2				
	♦	9 4				
	♣	K 7 4				
♠		10 9 5	N		♠	A J 4 2
♥		7 5	W	E	♥	K J 6
♦		K 10 8 6 2	S		♦	A J
♣		J 10 8			♣	A Q 5 2
	♠	Q 6 3				
	♥	A Q 10				
	♦	Q 7 5 3				
	♣	9 6 3				

When South won the third round of ♦s, he was helpless. A return in either of the black suits would have set up an entry to the dummy and finessed North at the same time. A ♦ return would set up the suit for four tricks. Declarer would win on the table, discarding a ♥ or a second ♠ from hand. Before cashing the remaining ♦ he would run the ♣J. Once this had held the trick he would probably be home free, since there would be no reason why South would duck the first ♣ if he held the ♣K. Now declarer will cash the remaining ♦ and run the ♣10. This will be enough for his contract (one ♠, four ♦s and four ♣s).

When in with the ♦Q, South's best shot is a ♥, hoping that his partner has the ♥J. He must attempt to exit with the ♥Q on the first round. Declarer will win the ♥K and exit with a ♣ to the ♣J and ♣K. North will return a ♥ and South will win the ♥A and exit with the ♥10. Unfortunately for him it is declarer who holds both missing ♥ honours and this unlucky defence will simply concede the overtrick.

When you can win a trick cheaply but it costs you a vital entry, then reject it. I cannot stress enough the importance of entries and the maintenance of communication between the two hands. There is no better illustration of this point than this hand. The second important point to stress is *never play too quickly to the first trick*, even if the play does seem marked. Take the time to make a plan before playing any card at all. This will often make the difference between success and failure – and never costs!

There are occasions when the possibility of an elimination play exists, but it is difficult to perceive.

### Example 5

♠ 9 8 7 5 3 ♥ A J ♦ K 10 4 3 ♣ A 7	W		E	♠ A 10 4 ♥ K Q 3 ♦ A Q J 7 2 ♣ K 8	
		N	E	S	W
		P	1♦	P	1♠
		P	3NT	P	5♦
		P	6♦	All pass	

It is difficult to fault East for his decision to attempt the slam. From his hand 3NT must be the correct game after partner's 1♠ response. Knowing that 5♦ was unlikely to be a contract that would score well, a shot at 6♦ seemed the better option. He had a reasonable expectation of a better ♠ holding in his partner's hand, but when the dummy came down he could see no obvious way of avoiding two ♠ losers. There was one other possibility, however. If the ♠K was held to a doubleton or if either defender held precisely ♠Q J doubleton, then an elimination play was the answer.

After winning the ♥ lead with the ♥A, declarer drew trumps in two rounds and then cashed the ♠A. Finally he set about eliminating the ♥s and ♣s from his hand and the dummy. Then he simply exited with a ♠. If either opponent had started with ♠K doubleton or ♠Q J doubleton, then whoever won the trick would be forced to concede a crucial ruff and discard.

	♠ Q J 6		
	♥ 8 7 6 5		
	♦ 8 6		
	♣ J 9 5 3		
♠ 9 8 7 5 3	N	♠ A 10 4	
♥ A J	W	♥ K Q 3	E
♦ K 10 4 3	S	♦ A Q J 7 2	
♣ A 7		♣ K 8	
	♠ K 2		
	♥ 10 9 4 2		
	♦ 9 5		
	♣ Q 10 6 4 2		

Like many an “impossible” contract, making this one requires you to imagine the distribution that you need and then to play for it. An important point to note is the order of play. It is vital to cash the ♠A before embarking on the elimination process. If you fail to cash it early, an alert defender will see the end-play coming and will drop the ♠K when you play the ♠A.

On a few rare occasions the problem with setting up the elimination position will not be a question of having too many losers, but rather that you have an excess of winners.

### Example 6

♠ A 6		♠ Q J 10	
♥ J 10 2	W	♥ A Q 9	E
♦ Q 10		♦ K J 8 5 4 3	
♣ A K 8 6 3 2		♣ 9	
	N	E	S
			W
			1♣
P	1♦	P	2♣
P	3NT	All pass	

South led the ♠5. Declarer had to choose between setting up the ♣s or the ♦s. Since there were six ♣s outstanding the suit was less likely to break than the ♦s, which had only five missing cards. The declarer ran the ♠ round to his hand, winning with the ♠Q. He then played a low ♦ to the ♦Q, which held the trick. However, when he continued with the

♦10 North showed out. Suddenly the hand had become quite awkward, since now he could no longer afford to overtake with the ♦J to force out the ♦A. South added to the difficulty when he also ducked the ♦10.

What next? Declarer's best chance now seemed to be to play for the 3-3 ♣ break after all. He was not at all happy with this option however, because he knew that the odds were strongly against the suit behaving. Suddenly he recognised that there was a far better line. He led the ♥J from the dummy and *overtook* with the ♥A. Then he laid down the ♦K, taken by South with the ♦A, and discarded the ♠A from the dummy!

South's goose was well and truly cooked. He could not play on either ♥s or ♠s without conceding an entry to declarer's ♦s. He did his best by exiting with a small ♣ to the ♣A. Declarer simply led the ♥2 to his ♥9 and the hand was effectively over. All South could do was win and exit with a second ♣, but now declarer's ♥Q was an entry back to hand.

Note how important it is to unblock the ♥ suit by leading out the ♥J to be overtaken by the ♥A on the first round. If the ♥2 is led to the ♥A, South can simply exit with a ♣ when in with the ♦A. Now declarer will need the ♥K to be doubleton in order to drop it. As it happens it was, but this would still have been good luck rather than good judgement.

♠	8 4 3				
♥	8 6 5 4 3				
♦	6				
♣	Q J 5 4				
♠	A 6	N		♠	Q J 10
♥	J 10 2	W	E	♥	A Q 9
♦	Q 10	S		♦	K J 8 5 4 3
♣	A K 8 6 3 2			♣	9
	♠	K 9 7 5 2			
	♥	K 7			
	♦	A 9 7 2			
	♣	10 7			

The hand is so unusual that it could have been set up as one of those problems that takes half the night to solve. In fact it was dealt at our local duplicate club one evening. I was the hapless South when we came up against this board in an early round and I must acknowledge a distinct frisson of annoyance when the declarer managed to solve the problem

and play out the entire hand in less than five minutes. A pretty impressive feat by anyone's standards! I do not know how many times the board was played in 3NT, but I imagine the contract was defeated more often than it made.

Next is another relatively unusual hand – an elimination play that gains two tricks instead of one.

### Example 7

♠ K 9 6 4 2 ♥ A 8 ♦ 10 4 3 ♣ A 9 4	W                      E	♠ A J 8 7 3 ♥ J 6 ♦ A Q 2 ♣ Q 6 2	
N                      E                      S                      W			
P	1♠ 4♠	2♥ All pass	3♥*

\*Unassuming cue-bid (UCB) agreeing ♠s.

South led the ♥K. Initially declarer thought that he should have been more conservative and settled for 3♠. Clearly South must have virtually all the outstanding values, missing perhaps the ♠Q and one or both of the minor suit Jacks. Declarer had a certain ♥ loser and at least one loser in both of the minors. Once the trumps had been eliminated, declarer could end-play South by exiting with the ♥J. Either his return would concede a ruff and discard or would set up whichever minor South switched to for one loser. Both alternatives would still leave two losers in the other minor, which was one too many. Nevertheless, it was possible that South could be end-played a second time if he switched to one of the minors, since declarer would be able to cash his two winners and exit back to South's King. This seemed to be the declarer's best chance, so he decided to play for it.

He won the lead in the dummy and cashed the ♠K, just in case North held three trumps. Both defenders followed to the first round, so declarer drew the last trump with the ♠A and South discarded a ♥. As planned, declarer then exited to South's ♥Q.

South now took some time to select his return, which gave declarer the chance to review his strategy. Suddenly an idea flashed through his head. It dawned on him that he was faced with the age-old problem of an uncomfortable duplication between his hand and the dummy. But if South returned a ♥ the problem could be resolved not by a ruff and

discard, but by discarding from one minor suit in the dummy and the other minor in his hand. Now the hands would reflect the desired imbalance. If South did then switch to one of the minors, then that suit could now be brought in for no losers, while the other minor could be brought in for one loser. On the other hand, if South persisted with yet another ♥, declarer could make exactly the same discards and there would then be no losers in either minor. Thus, a certain ♥ loser and two probable losers in either minor would be reduced to three ♥ losers and nothing more.

Eventually South did decide to continue with the ♥10, even though he realised that this would probably concede a ruff and discard. He was somewhat perplexed when declarer allowed the ♥10, but eventually he worked out what was happening and switched to a ♣, the suit that declarer had discarded from his hand. The declarer ran this round to his ♣Q, breathing a sigh of relief when North played low. He crossed to the ♣A and took the ♦ finesse – just in case! This lost to South's ♦K, but declarer could then claim the remaining tricks on a crossruff.

	♠		Q 10		
	♥		9 5 4 2		
	♦		9 8 7		
	♣		10 8 5 3		
♠	K 9 6 4 2	N	♠	A J 8 7 3	
♥	A 8	W	E	♥	J 6
♦	10 4 3	S		♦	A Q 2
♣	A 9 4			♣	Q 6 2
		♠	5		
		♥	K Q 10 7 3		
		♦	K J 6 5		
		♣	K J 7		

Can South defeat the contract? No, because he holds the ♦J. His best shot when in with the second round of ♥s is to switch to a low ♥ rather than the ♥10. Declarer will discard a ♦ from the dummy and ruff in hand (forced because he cannot afford a ♣ switch from North) and play a small ♦ to the ♦10. South will win, but again will have no good exit. A ♣ switch will be run round to the ♣Q. A ♦ will allow declarer to discard a ♣ on the third round. Another round of ♥s will allow declarer to discard a ♣ from the dummy and ruff in hand, also restricting his ♣ losers to one.



Now the contract looks doomed, since declarer has an unfortunate duplication in the black suits and there was no place to discard a losing ♣. In fact there is no problem even with a 4-1 ♣ break so long as the trumps break 2-1 and the singleton ♣ is not the ♣2. Declarer should eliminate the other three suits and then simply *exit* with a low ♣ from each hand. Provided declarer has a trump left in both hands (i.e. the trumps do break 2-1) there is no good return that either defender can make when in with the first ♣. A return in either red suit will enable a ruff and discard and a return in ♣s will allow declarer to take two finesses against the defender with four ♣s (always provided that the singleton was not the ♣2).

The play proceeded as follows:- Declarer won the lead with the ♥A; drew trumps in two rounds; crossed to the ♦A; cross-ruffed out his remaining ♥s and ♦s; led a small ♣ from the table and ducked when North played the ♣10. North was now obliged to concede a ruff and discard for declarer to bring home his contract. It would have made no difference if South had overtaken the ♣10. All he could do was return a ♣. If it was a high ♣, declarer would simply run it round to his hand and then take the marked finesse for his twelfth trick.

The only way to defeat the contract is to lead the ♣2 at trick one, which destroys the timing. The lead of a high ♣ will not succeed, since the declarer will be able to exit to South's hand after eliminating the other suits. Given South's holding he cannot be criticised for not leading the ♣2, since this is much more likely to concede the contract outright.

♠	2				
♥	J 9 8 7 3				
♦	K Q 10 9 7 5				
♣	10				
♠	A 9 6 4 3	N		♠	K Q J 10 5
♥	6	W	E	♥	A 4 2
♦	A 6 2		S	♦	8
♣	K 7 5 4			♣	A 8 6 3
	♠	8 7			
	♥	K Q 10 5			
	♦	J 4 3			
	♣	Q J 9 2			

When the board arrived at our table it had only been played three times and no one had managed to bid the slam. Just as well, perhaps, since none of them had managed to make twelve tricks either!

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(October 2009)