

Next Steps Seminar 2 - Planning the Play as Declarer in No-Trumps

Your LHO faces her opening lead and Dummy lays his hand in front of you. There is no immediate rush to play a card – you must first of all plan how you are going to make your contract. If you have enough winners to make your contract without losing the lead, you can just cash them, although you might want to consider options for making overtricks using any or all of the following techniques. However, most contracts will require declarer to do some work to generate the extra tricks needed. When planning the play, follow a logical process. Think **A, B, C, D, E.....**

Step 1 – Analyse the Lead. You can check what your opponents' system of leads is. In UK, most use 'Standard' leads i.e. '2nd and 4ths'. Fourth highest from an honour and second highest from rubbish. You can normally deduce a lot of information from the opening lead:

- A high card (7/8+) is often from a rag suit, probably no honours.
- A low card in an unbid suit will be 4th highest in a suit headed by at least one honour.
- Lead of the lowest card visible in an unbid suit suggests a 4-card suit.
- In an unbid suit, an honour should be top of a sequence of 3 touching or nearly touching cards: e.g. lead of the ♥Q shows ♥J 10 or ♥J 9 but denies the ♥K. If you can't see the King it must be in your RHO's hand.

If your opponents are using 4th highest leads, the *Rule of 11* can help you work out where some of the missing high cards are:

- Subtract the number of pips on the card led from 11.
- Subtract from the answer, the number of cards higher than the card led in your hand and Dummy.
- The answer is the number of cards higher than the card led in your RHO's hand. (If the answer is negative, this is impossible and means that the leader has not made a 4th highest lead – which may also be useful information!)

Sometimes the lead can give you a trick, which is why I recommend that you think first about the lead before counting your winners.

Step 2 – Think about the Bidding. Again, you are entitled to know the meaning of your opponents' calls, and can ask if you are not sure. You know that:

- A player who has opened has at least 11-12 HCP.
- A player who has passed before a player has opened the bidding has < 11 HCP.
- If opener's partner passed, she has <6 HCP.
- A one-level overcaller has at least 8 HCP and a 5+ card suit.
- A two-level (non-jump) overcaller has at least 10 HCP and a 5+ card suit.
- A player who has made a takeout double has at least 11 HCP.
- A player who has doubled a 1NT opening bid has probably 15+ HCP (or a solid suit).
- A Weak 2 opener is showing a 6-card suit and 6 to 10 HCP; a 3-level pre-empt has a 7-card suit. You can quickly build up a picture of how these suits are distributed.
- A No Trump opening bid has a clearly defined range of points.

If you have forgotten the bidding and the bidding cards have been put away, as Declarer you can ask for a restatement of the auction before you play a card to the first trick from Dummy.

Step 3 - Count your tricks. Count your top tricks. A top trick is one that you can be sure you will win because the defence do not hold a higher card. Aces are top tricks; Kings in suits where you have the Ace (either in hand or in Dummy) are top tricks as are Queens in suits where you have the Ace and King, and so forth. Assess how many extra tricks you need. 'Do the Math' as the Americans say. If you are in 3NT, you need 9 tricks. If you only have 6 top tricks, you will need to generate a further 3 tricks. Now, taking each suit in turn, consider options for extra tricks. These normally fall into one of three categories in No Trumps:

Forcing out High Cards. You may have a suit with two or three honours, missing the Ace or Ace and King. Consider this example:

Declarer	Dummy
♥ K Q 4	♥ J 7 6

This suit offers two tricks once the Ace is forced out. On the other hand:

Declarer	Dummy
♥ Q 10 4	♥ J 7 6

This suit offers the chance for one extra trick once the Ace and King are forced out. In order to generate a trick using high cards, you generally need more touching honours than the higher honours held by the defence, unless you have extra length in the suit.

Length. Often, playing your partnership's longest combined suit will offer the opportunity to take tricks with small cards – although you may need to lose one or two (or more) tricks in the suit first. If you have 8 cards in a suit, that leaves the opponents with 5. About two thirds of the time, those 5 cards will break 3-2. If you have the following holding:

Declarer	Dummy
♥ K 4 3	♥ A Q 7 6 2

You can expect to make 5 tricks two thirds of the time by cashing the A, K and Q and setting up two winning length cards. Even if the suit breaks 4-1 (a little over 25% of the time), you can still expect to take 4 tricks in the suit, but will have to lose the lead first. Where you don't hold all the top honours, such as:

Declarer	Dummy
♥ K Q 4 3	♥ J 7 6 2

You have to force the Ace out but, two thirds of the time can still expect to make 3 tricks (here your suit breaks 4-4, not 5-3 – but the probability of the opponents' cards breaking 3-2 remains the same).

Even with a holding like:

Declarer	Dummy
♥ 6 5 4 3 2	♥ 9 8 7

You have the potential for 2 tricks once you have lost the first 3. As long as you have enough stops in the other suits, it may pay you to give up tricks in this suit to set up your later winners.

When looking at setting up length winners, remember that, except for two cards (which are marginally more likely to break 1-1), if the opponents have an even number of cards in a suit, they are more likely to break unevenly (4 cards will be 2-2 about 40% of the time; 6 cards will be 3-3 only about 35% of the time); but if they have an odd number of cards, they are more likely to break evenly (5 cards will be 3-2 about 68% of the time and 7 cards will be 4-3 about 62% of the time¹).

Finesse. A finesse is an attempt to win a trick with a lower card than one held by the opponents. Consider:

LHO	Dummy	RHO
	♠ A Q 6	

¹ I suggest you don't try to remember the percentages – just the fact that an even number is more likely to break unevenly and an odd number is more likely to break evenly.

?

?

♠8 5 2
Hand

Here you have only the one top trick. But if your LHO has ♠K, you can make a second trick by leading a low card from your hand and playing the ♠Q if your LHO doesn't produce the King. Unless the bidding or earlier play suggests otherwise, this play will normally succeed 50% of the time. But you have to lead a low card up to the honour. If you were to lead the ♠Q, it would lose 100% of the time. You have a similar position here:

LHO
?

Dummy
♠A 8 6

♠Q 5 2
Hand

RHO
?

This time, the A and Q are in opposite hands. You now need your RHO to have the ♠K and must lead a small spade from Dummy towards the Q in your hand.

Combining techniques. Sometimes, you need to put the techniques together in order to maximise your chances of taking tricks:

LHO
?

Dummy
♠K Q 6

♠8 5 2
Hand

RHO
?

With the above holding, you can always guarantee one trick by leading Dummy's ♠K, forcing the defence to play the Ace, and setting up Dummy's Queen. However, you may be able to make both the ♠K and ♠Q by leading a card from your hand hoping that your LHO has the ♠A. Most LHO's in this position will duck the first round of the suit so you will need to have preserved an entry back to your hand so that you can repeat the finesse.

Step 4 – think about the Dangers. You have counted your top tricks and worked out your overall strategy to win the extra tricks that you need to make your contract. You now need to think about what can go wrong. In a No Trump contract, this normally involves a situation where the defence can set up length winners in their suit before you have set up your winners. This is why it is often so important not to cash your winning tricks in other suits until you have set up your winners in the suits where you know you will have to lose the lead. When leading against a NT contract, the defender making the opening lead will often lead an unbid suit – hoping it is the Defence's longest suit. If you hold the Ace in the suit and it is your only winner, it may pay you to hold it up for one or two rounds. Consider this hand where you are declaring in 3NT after you get the lead of ♠3 after no opposition bidding:

	Dummy	
	♠ 8 5	
	♥ K Q 3	
	♦ J 6 5 2	
	♣ A K 7 3	
LHO leads: ♠3		RHO ?
	♠ A 9 6	
	♥ J 8 4	
	♦ A K Q 4	
	♣ 9 6 5	
	Hand	

The ♠3 is likely to be your LHO's 4th highest card. She may also have the ♠2 or her partner may have it. You don't know for sure but you know from her lead card that she is likely to have either 4 or 5 spades. You count your top tricks and conclude that you have a total of 7: 1 in Spades; 4 in Diamonds and 2 in Clubs. Hearts offers potential for two more tricks once the Ace is driven out.

What can go wrong? If you play the ♠A on the first round of the suit and set about forcing out the ♥A to set up your two winning hearts, your RHO may win that trick and then return a spade to partner (in defence, it is a rule normally to return partner's lead if partner has led a low card). If your LHO started with 5 spades, the Defence will now cash 4 winning spades and you will be 1 down. However, by holding up the Ace until the third round, if your LHO started with a 5-card spade suit, your RHO will now be void of spades. If your RHO now wins the ♥A, she won't have a spade to lead back to her partner.

When trying to guard against a 5-3 break in a suit where you hold the Ace, you can use the 'Rule of 7' – which tells you to subtract the number of cards you hold between your hand and Dummy (in this case – 5) from 7 and that is the number of rounds you must hold up (not play) the Ace. In this case, you hold up for two rounds and play the Ace on the third.

Consider a slightly different layout:

	Dummy	
	♠ 8 5	
	♥ A J 3	
	♦ A Q J 6	
	♣ 8 7 3 2	
LHO leads: ♠3		RHO ?
	♠ A 9 6	
	♥ K 7 4	
	♦ K 5 4 2	
	♣ A Q 5	
	Hand	

Again, you have 8 top tricks (1 spade, 2 hearts, 4 diamonds and 1 club). This time, you need one of two finesses to come right. If your LHO has the ♥Q, the ♥J will be your 9th trick; if you play for your RHO to have the ♣K then your ♣Q will be your 9th trick. You have the same problem with the lead and have held up the Ace for two rounds to guard against a 5-3 break. Your problem now is to think about whether to take the heart finesse or the club finesse first. If you take the club finesse first and it loses to your LHO, if she did indeed have a 5-card spade suit, she will now cash her two winning spades and you are down. Your LHO is the **Danger** hand: your RHO is the **Safe** hand. If your RHO gains the lead, she cannot do you any damage. So, take the heart finesse first. If this wins, you have your 9 tricks. If it loses, then you can still take the club finesse with fingers crossed!

Consider these situations:

(i)	♥7 4		(ii)	♠Q 2	
♥6 led		♥Q	♠5 led		♠6/A
	♥K J 3			♠K 7 3	

In (i) trick one goes ♥6, ♥4, ♥Q and you as declarer win ♥K. Clearly you are very vulnerable in hearts, but in point of fact only East on your right can do you damage, leading a second heart through ♥J. If West leads a second heart — from his presumed ♥A — your ♥J 3 will provide a second stopper. You must make sure that if you lose a subsequent lead, it is to West, not East. East is the 'danger hand'.

In (ii) you must rise with dummy's ♠Q on ♠5 lead - it's your only chance of winning a trick with the card.

Say trick one goes ♠5, ♠Q, ♠6, ♠3 (meaning that West holds ♠A). In order protect your ♠K from a second spade through the card, you must make sure East does not win a subsequent

trick — she is the danger hand. West, on the other hand, is safe for a second spade from his side will promote your ♠K.

Now say trick one goes ♠5, ♠Q, ♠A, ♠3 and East returns ♠10. You duck and win his third spade with ♠K. This time, with West likely to hold the two long spades, it is West who is the danger hand.

Sometimes you can choose which opponent to make into the danger hand and which the safe hand...

(i) ♥7 4
♥6 led ♥K
 ♥A J 3

After ♥6, ♥4, ♥K, you as declarer have a choice as to whether to win ♥A. This is the predicted —and dangerous — layout:

(Dummy)
 ♥7 4
(W) ♥Q 10 8 6 2 ♥K 9 5 (E)
 ♥A J 3
(Declarer)

So which is correct:

- (i) Win ♥K with ♥A?
- (ii) Duck ♥K, and ♥9 (to ♥J and ♥Q) and win ♥A on the third round?

Answer: It depends! Say you have a crucial finesse to take in another suit: should that finesse lose, if it is West who will win then you must win ♥K with ♥A, to protect ♥J from West's second heart lead. However, if the finesse is into East, then you must duck ♥A and win the third heart so that East has no more hearts.

In other words, sometimes you can choose which opponent to make into the danger hand. You make that choice based on which opponent (if either) will win a subsequent lead.

Step 5 – Entries. The final step is to think about entries. This is particularly important when trying to set up a long suit in one hand or the other – after all your hard work in establishing tricks in a long suit, you need to be able to enter the hand to enjoy them. Consider this holding:

Dummy
♠ A 5
♥ K Q J 10 6
♦ 8 7 6
♣ 8 7 3

LHO leads: ♠3

♠ K 9 6
♥ 7 4
♦ A K Q J
♣ A 5 2
Hand

You have 2 top tricks in Spades, 4 top tricks in Diamonds and 1 top trick in Clubs. You need two more tricks. Hearts offers the best chance for this once you have knocked out the Ace. You plan to win the first trick and play the ♥K to knock out the Ace leaving you with at least 3 winning hearts in Dummy. If you win the first trick with Dummy's ♠A and then play the ♥K, a competent defender will duck the first round and win the second. You will be able to win the next trick in your hand but will have no way of getting back to Dummy to cash the remaining heart winners. You need to recognise at Trick 1 that the ♠A may be needed as an entry to Dummy and let the lead come round to your ♠K. This gives you the time to set up your heart winners and still have an entry to be able to enjoy them.

Here you have a slightly different problem:

	Dummy
	♠ 7 4 2
	♥ J 7 5
	♦ A 8 6 5 2
	♣ 8 7
LHO leads: ♠3	
	♠ A K J
	♥ A K 3
	♦ 7 4 3
	♣ A K 5 2
	Hand

Again, you are in 3 NT. You need 9 tricks. The lead gives you three tricks in spades; you also have two top tricks in hearts, one in diamonds and two in clubs. To make your contract, you need to set up a long diamond in Dummy, hoping they break 3-2. You only have one entry to the long diamonds in Dummy and that is the ♦ A. If you lead a diamond to the Ace, play a small diamond, which the defence will win and then play another small diamond after regaining the lead, you will have set up two diamond winners in Dummy – but you have no way of crossing to Dummy to enjoy them. Consider instead what will happen if, after winning the opening lead, you play a small diamond from your hand and play low in Dummy. The Defence can win and return a card in another suit, which you will win and lead another diamond, again, playing low from Dummy – and the Defence will win this trick as well. But, when you regain the lead, you still have a small diamond in your hand that you can lead over to Dummy's Ace as an entry to Dummy's established diamond winners. In this case, you duck two rounds of diamonds in Dummy to set up your clear entry.

Finally, where you have high cards in both hand and Dummy, be careful to play the higher cards in the shorter holding first so as not to block suits. This is particularly important where you have a shortage of entries to the hand with the longer holding.

Conclusion. The key to successful declarer play is to think and plan. Follow a logical process: Analyse the lead and think about what it tells you about the distribution of cards and HCP in that suit, consider using the 'Rule of 11'. Think about what the Bidding tells you about the distribution of cards and HCP. Count how many winners you have without losing the lead. Determine how many tricks you need for your contract and check to see which suit offers the best chance for this. Play that suit and do not be frightened to give up the lead to establish winners – and don't play off your winners in other suits until you know you will no longer have to risk losing the lead to make your contract. When you have made your plan, think about the Dangers: what can go wrong and what can you do about it. Should you hold up? Is one hand or other the Danger hand - can you choose which to make the safe hand and use that to your advantage? Finally, consider your Entries. Do you need to keep an entry to one hand or another – particularly if you have a long suit to set up and there is a danger the opponents will also use a hold-up play to try to cut your communications. It is as simple as A, B, C.....!