TIPS FOR TOPS

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All boards referred to in this article were played in the 299er game at Bridge Centre of Niagara on May 25th, 2021, (Game #16255). Full results and game schedule at www.bridgecentreofniagara.com.

- Establishing long suits
- Playing the odds

Bd: 8 Vul: None Dlr: West	♠ KJ7642 ♥ K632 ♦ -- ♣ AT7	Optimum NS 4S+1: +450
♠ 8 ♥ Q7 ♦ QT62 ♣ KQJ643	N W 8 E S	♠ 953 ♥ AJT84 ♦ J85 ♣ 98
11 10 HCP 6 13	♠ AQT ♥ 95 ♦ AK9743 ♣ 52	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - 2 1 5 3 S - 2 1 5 3 E 1 - - - - W 2 - - - -

Board 8 this week demonstrates 2 valuable points; the importance of making a plan, and a source of tricks that is often overlooked.

Almost all tables played this hand in 4S in the N, and all got a C lead - some the correct 9 and others the curious 8. N must count her losers and make a plan before doing anything else. Because, if you "get the kiddies off the street" and THEN plan, you're too late. Looking at declarer's hand (N), there are 5 or 6 losers - 2 Cs and 3 or 4 Hs. You might avoid 1 H loser if the A is onside, and at the tables where W opened the bidding, you might have strong hope that that's the case, but there are never guarantees. When you have more losers than you can afford, you must look for ways to eliminate them; the 2 most common are to ruff them with dummy's trumps, or to pitch them on winners in dummy. Here, dummy has the D AK to pitch 2 losers, but that still leaves too many.

Can you ruff anything? Yes, you can certainly ruff 1 C in dummy. To do this, you would take the A, and then immediately play them again. Defenders can take 2 more tricks at that point, but they can't stop you then from getting into your hand to ruff your last C. You would then cash dummy's top trump and pitch 2Hs on the Ds. You make 10 tricks - 11 if the HA is onside, but not today.

But there's a better way. A long suit in dummy should always be considered as a possible source of tricks. Even with a void in your hand, if the opposing Ds are 4-3, you can set up the last 2 small Ds for 2 more pitches.You need entries to do this, which you have in the 3 S honours, as long as you use them wisely.

Play a S to the dummy, then play the 2 top Ds, pitching 2 Hs, and ruff a D with a high S to avoid any potential overruff. When the Ds prove to be 4-3, you can play another small S to dummy, ruff one more D with your last high trump, then go to dummy with one more trump, picking up E's last S, and play your last 2 Ds for 2 more pitches. You make 11 tricks this way.

But the beauty of this plan is that, if it's not going to work, you learn in time to revert to an alternative. If one opponent shows out on the first trump trick, or if Ds prove to be 5-2 instead of 4-3, you still have time to duck a C and manage one ruff in dummy. The only problem here would be if one of the opponents can ruff one of your top Ds. That's a very small chance - less than 1 in 14, so well worth the risk for the overtrick in matchpoint play. Rubber bridge players should stick to the 100% safe plan of ruffing a C.

The key, however, is to know your plan before you play, because if you pull trumps first, it's too late for either of these plans. If it's easier for you, there's another way to look at this; count your tricks. If you pull trumps first, you will take 6 S tricks, CA, and D AK. That's 9, so unless your HK takes a trick, you don't have enough. You have to create extra tricks either by using at least one of dummy's trumps to ruff BEFORE you pull trumps, or by taking more than the 2 obvious D tricks.

I'm going to go straight from this hand to **Board 15**, because the situation was very similar. In this case, an aggressive opening bid got several Souths into a 4H contract. When dummy comes down and declarer counts losers, there are too many; 2Ss which we can do nothing about, at least 1 D, and 3Cs. What's our plan? Set up a long suit or ruff losers? In this case, the long suit in dummy is only 5 cards. Setting it up for discards requires finding the outstanding cards 3-3, or having the J fall. A 3-3 split is against the odds, and if they split 4-2, the J is more likely to be in the hand with 4 than

Bd: 15 Vul: N/S Dlr: South	♠ QT974 ♥ KJT4 ♦ QT64 ♣ --	Optimum EW 5Cx: +300
♠ KJ5 ♥ 853 ♦ K93 ♣ T762	N W 15 E S	♠ A62 ♥ 2 ♦ J52 ♣ AKQ843
8 7 HCP 14 11	♠ 83 ♥ AQ976 ♦ A87 ♣ J95	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - 1 4 1 - S - 1 4 1 - E 3 - - - 1 W 3 - - - 1

with 2. So this time our best bet seems to be to ruff the Cs - all of them. Most declarers got a C lead, so ruff, H to hand, C ruff, D to A, C ruff. At this point, you are in dummy with only Ss and Ds left there. You have to lead a S; let them take their 2 tricks, but after that, you will get back in and can pull the last trumps with your Q and 9, and try your luck on the Ds.

The key to this hand, again, was to recognize that you need to use some of dummy's trump to ruff losers; if you pull trumps first you will run short. With 4 trumps in dummy, and needing 3 to ruff, you can afford to play 1 round as transportation to your hand, but not 2.

But the play of the D suit also bears consideration. The first time we played it, we played small to the A. Leading the Q here for a "finesse" is not right; even if E has the K and covers, you still have to lose to the J - and maybe more. If dummy had QJ10, then leading the Q would be right; it would be our own J we were setting up. But always consider, before leading an honour: do you really want the opponent to cover it?

When we were in dummy later, leading a D would have been fatal.The only way to win a second D trick is to lead TOWARDS the Q10x in dummy. And I'm not going to pretend that the choice now is obvious. If you had only the Q and not the 10, you have no choice but to cross your fingers and play the Q if W plays low. But with the 10 as well, you have another chance if you can guess the position of the J. If E has both K and J, you have no chance. If W has both, you can't go wrong, If they are split? You need to play the 10 if E has the K and play the Q if W has it. If you have no reason to choose, the best play is usually the 10, on the basis that W might have played the K if she had it - many defenders have trouble ducking. But if you did that here and lost your 10 to E's J, congratulate W and don't call me to complain! (At a real table, you might watch to see if W flinches before playing low. This table feel is harder to pick up in the online game!)

One more word on odds, which I have referred to on both of these hands. I don't expect you to study the charts of probability distributions of cards, of course; I had to look up the "1 in 14" I referred to earlier. But what you can know, because it's easy to remember: when you are missing an odd number of cards in a suit, they tend to break as evenly as possible. So when we were missing 7 Ds in the first hand, they will divide 4-3 more often than 5-2; in fact, there's a more than 50% probability that they divide 4-3. When you are missing an even number of cards, they tend to split unevenly. So missing 6 Ss, they are more likely to split 4-2 than 3-3.

Knowing that can often help you decide which of 2 plans to choose when you need something good to happen.

Finally; we had a few hands this week where an opening NT bid was overcalled by the opponent. This would never have happened in our Mothers' days; announcing a hand of 15 or more points was enough to put the opponents in their place. That's not true these days, so it's important for you and your partner to know how you are going to handle the bidding after interference in your auction. Are transfers still in effect? How do you ask about Majors if they've taken away your Stayman bid?

There is no universal agreement on how to handle this, so talk to your partner about what feels right to you. I'm happy to tell you what I prefer - and play with most of my partners. A 2C bid over 1NT does little to interfere, so it's easy to play that a double of 2C is Stayman, and transfers are still in effect. After an overcall of anything other than 2C, transfers are off, and a cue-bid of their suit is Stayman. There can be more, of course, because interference over NT now often involves artificial bids to show 2-suited hands (highly recommended, by the way), but a simple agreement will go a long way towards keeping you and your partner on the same wave-length.