TIPS FOR TOPS

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- Careful Declarer Play

Board #6 referred to in this article was played in the 299er game at Bridge Centre of Niagara on June 15, 2021, (Game #81936). Full results and game schedule at www.bridgecentreofniagara.com.

Bd: 6 Vul: E/W Dlr: East	♠ K2 ♥ K754 ♦ AKT7 ♣ QJ4	Optimum N 6H: +980
♠ 865 ♥ 8 ♦ QJ9532 ♣ T52	N W 6 E S	♠ AQT73 ♥ J962 ♦ 86 ♣ 73
16 3 HCP 7 14	♠ J94 ♥ AQT3 ♦ 4 ♣ AK986	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 5 2 6 2 5 S 5 2 5 2 5 E - - - - - W - - - - -

Board 6 was played either in Hs or in NT, and from either N or S hand, depending on the bidding sequences. I chose it to illustrate a point on play.

In NT, you can count 11 tricks - 2 Ds, 4 Hs and 5 Cs. If you play it from the N and get a Spade lead, you make the SK as well. The only suit you have to be careful with is the Hs. If they break 3-2, nothing matters. What if one opponent holds 4 to the J? This is where it pays to pay attention. If the Jxxx are in the W hand, there's nothing you can do to avoid a loser. But if they are in the E, you can pick up the J with a finesse; playing toward the Q10. Of course, you don't do this on the first or second round of the suit; you can't risk losing to the J if it was going to fall. But what you need is to still have Q10 in the S hand when you lead the suit the 3rd time. So, the careful declarer plays the HA first, then to the K, and now to the Q10, picking up Es J along the way.

It's almost the same if you play it in Hs. If you draw trumps first, you can make exactly the same tricks as in NT. In fact, anything you do before you pull trump runs the risk of reducing your trick count. This is what I noticed on Tuesday. Players sometimes see a singleton in their hand, and ruff a D before drawing trump. That doesn't add to your trick count, and tangles the H suit, making it much more difficult to pick up the suit as described earlier.

When you make a plan for any hand, you should consider what losers you have in your hand, and how to handle them. Your only losers here are 3Ss, and one of them can go on a top D. So you should expect to make at least 11 tricks. And if you can pitch dummy's Ss on your long Cs, you can ruff a S loser - AFTER trump have been pulled. 3 rounds will usually exhaust the opponents' trump, leaving one in dummy to ruff a losing S. Today, you need all 4 trump to draw the opponents' so you settle for 11 tricks - unless you played from the N and got a helpful Spade lead.

There is another point to look at on this board. At one table, W made a preemptive overcall of 2D. Vulnerable! I guess she's not a Tips reader. What N really wants is to double for penalty. Your vulnerable opponent has just bid your best suit. For those who have adopted negative doubles, a X would promise at least one major suit - and we do hold one, but that's not the effect we are looking for. But if N passes, E will pass, too, and now S should double. This is part of the negative double system; when LHO overcalls and partner passes, you should make a balancing double when you are short in the opponent's suit. Your partner won't always have a hand like this; if they take out your double, your hand won't disappoint them. But if they have THIS hand, they need for you to double so they can pass for a top board. NS can take 8 tricks in Ds, for a score of 800. And maybe next time W will know better.

Bd: 3 Vul: E/W Dlr: South	♠ KT85 ♥ 9632 ♦ 763 ♣ 86	Optimum EW 3N+1: -630
♠ Q97632 ♥ Q4 ♦ 4 ♣ AJ92	N W 3 E S	♠ J4 ♥ AKJT ♦ AJT5 ♣ KQ3
3 9 HCP 19 9	♠ A ♥ 875 ♦ KQ982 ♣ T754	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - - - - - S - - - - - E 4 2 4 4 4 W 4 2 4 4 4

I'm including a hand that I noticed while directing the Friday afternoon open game. Most of the tables played this in 4S in the W. They all took the opening lead in the E hand, and started drawing trump. But look at the effect of one little difference in play. Some declarers led the SJ; others the 4. When the J was captured by the A, the defenders now had K108 behind Q97, and the contract had no hope. Those who led the 4 were happy to see the singleton A, and only had to lose 2 more S tricks. Yes; declarer was a bit unlucky, but there was nothing to be gained from leading the J. The tip: Always think twice before leading an honour that is not accompanied by other, equal honours. Unless it would help you to have it captured, or covered, it's usually best to lead a low card towards your other honours. Even a J has some value - don't waste it.