

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 Sept 21, 2021, (Game 10640). Full results and game schedule at www.bridgecentreofniagara.com.

- Take all your tricks
- Count

I'm going to start this week with a general word of advice, with no specific board to illustrate it. I see many instances of players losing tricks, even failing in their contract, because they don't recognize cards that are good, or don't know whether the opponents have any more trump. Counting is one of the most important skills a bridge player can develop. I know it isn't always easy, and you won't immediately be able to count all the cards, but start with one suit - probably trump to begin - and think about the patterns that are most likely to exist. If you have 8 trumps, the opponents have 5, and the most likely distribution is 3-2. So, if you pay attention to whether they both follow suit twice, you will know; if they do, it's 3-2, and there is only one still out. If one fails to follow on the second trick, they are 4-1, and you know where all the rest are. But counting down the few outstanding trump is much easier than trying to reconstruct later how many have been played.

Sometimes it's not the trump suit that's critical, but a side suit that you want to establish. The principle is the same; calculate how many the opponents hold, then count them down as they appear,

and you will know whether your last one is good or not.

Practise counting one suit on every hand you play, and you will find your results improve before your eyes.

Bd: 16	♠ A982	Optimum NS 7H: +1510
Vul: E/W	♥ J84	
Dir: West	♦ 5	
	♣ KJ732	
♠ J5	N	♠ KT7643
♥ 632	W 16 E	♥ QT
♦ T98763	S	♦ KQ4
♣ 84		♣ T5
9	♠ Q	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N
1 HCP 10	♥ AK975	N 7 2 7 2 6
20	♦ AJ2	S 7 2 7 2 6
	♣ AQ96	E - - - -
		W - - - -

Board 16: After 2 passes, most Easts bid their spade suit; some 1S and others 2S. In third seat, 2S is the much preferred choice. Because partner has already passed, you know you aren't going to miss a game, and 2S is much more effective, not only in interfering with the opponents, but in describing your hand to your partner. Knowing that you have 6 may help them know how high to compete.

Over either 1S or 2S, South has a clear take-out double; this hand is much too strong for a simple overcall. If the East bid was 1S, North

will respond to the double in clubs, but they should jump to 3Cs to indicate some strength. A 2C advance could be made with no points at all, and should be limited to about 8 HCP. If East's bid was 2S, North has a more difficult decision. A simple advance of 3C understates your hand, but it's often a good idea not to go beyond 3NT in a minor suit, in case 3NT is still possible as the final contract. So either 3C or 2NT would be possible choices here. In either case, South should now bid her hearts, showing a 5-card suit and a hand that was too strong for a direct overcall. North has heart support, a short suit, which adds ruffing value, and a hand that is better than she has shown (she might have bid 3C with 0 HCP). North should have no trouble raising partner to 4H.

In the play of this hand, most of our players made 5 or 6. The fact that nobody took all 13 tricks indicates a weakness in planning, or a lack of understanding of the nature of matchpoint scoring. To score well in matchpoints, it's important to take every trick available to you; don't be satisfied with making your contract if there are overtricks to be had. If you take one more trick than other declarers, you score a "top" just as

much as if you were the only pair to bid and make a slam. Looking at the South hand as declarer, you should see that you have no spade losers and no club losers. You might lose a heart to the Q, but that will depend on the lay of the cards, and nothing you do can change it. But, you have 2 losers in diamonds; is there anything you can do about those? Yes - you have a singleton in dummy, so you can ruff your 2 losing diamonds if you use those trumps while you can.

Is this safe? Absolutely! You have only 4 diamonds between the 2 hands; if either opponent was short enough in diamonds to over-ruff, her partner would have had enough to have bid them. So plan to play to your DA on trick 2, ruff a diamond, return to your hand with a trump - that keeps it very safe, and ruff your last diamond. Now is the only slightly risky move; you can choose to return to your hand by ruffing a spade - safe if East has the 6 she advertised, but might she have 7? Or, you can use a club for transportation; safe unless either player is void. Today, both methods work, and when you play your other top heart and the Q falls, you make 7.

Where else did I see players go wrong? Two declarers ducked the spade lead; I guess they were hoping to score their Q. But with only 1 spade in hand and the A on the board, ducking creates a potential loser in a suit where no loser exists. And when East has bid the suit, that's almost guaranteed to be the case.

I also saw at least one declarer ruffing spades in her hand. Using the trump in your hand as transportation can sometimes be necessary but, in general, you must realize that ruffing in the hand with the long trump suit does not gain you any tricks, or save you any losers, and it very often costs you

control. After all; you have 5 hearts in your hand. If you pull trumps and then play your hearts, you will take 5 heart tricks. If you use them to ruff, they are still only 5 tricks. But, if you can use the trumps in the hand where they are short - as here - you gain tricks; you end up with 7 heart tricks in the form of 2 ruffs plus the 5 in your hand.

Always look for a way to use the trumps in the short hand (most often dummy) before you draw trump, because that's how you use your suit to create extra tricks.

Bd: 17	♠ AT732	Optimum NS 1S+2, NS 1H+
Vul: None	♥ K87	
Dir: North	♦ 83	
	♣ K53	
♠ J64	N	♠ Q98
♥ T642	W 17 E	♥ 95
♦ Q975	S	♦ KJT62
♣ QT		♣ A82
10	♠ K5	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N
5 HCP 10	♥ AQJ3	N 4 1 3 3 1
15	♦ A4	S 4 1 3 3 1
	♣ J9764	E - - - -
		W - - - -

Boards 17 and 18 presented two illustrations of the importance of planning your second bid before you make your first.

On board 17, South has the right strength for a 1NT opening bid, but not the perfect shape. Several chose to open 1C, but that created a problem when North responded 1S. It's not a strong enough hand for a reverse, a 1NT rebid understates your values, and a 2C rebid with that anaemic suit is out of the question. As we have seen before, if you see this hand as 'balanced' rather than as a 2-suiter, 1NT becomes the clear favourite.

Similarly with the East hand on board 18. If East opens the bidding 1C, what will they do when West responds 1S? With 9 cards in the minor suits and a minimum

hand, it's usually better to open the diamond suit and plan to rebid the clubs to avoid the more awkward rebids. In this case, West responds 1H, and East's rebid will have to depend on your partnership agreements. Most experienced players will raise the heart suit with 3-card support and an unbalanced hand like this; after all, responder might have 5 cards, and if they don't, playing in a 4-3 fit isn't a disaster. An immediate heart raise should get the partnership to 4H easily. But, if your partner insists on 4-card support for a raise, East will rebid 2C, and West will have to rebid her hearts to get to the heart game.

Bd: 18	♠ K8653	Optimum EW 4H+1: -450
Vul: N/S	♥ 82	
Dir: East	♦ QT4	
	♣ A92	
♠ T94	N	♠ 2
♥ AK9653	W 18 E	♥ QJ7
♦ A7	S	♦ K832
♣ 65		♣ KQJ74
9	♠ AQJ7	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N
11 HCP 12	♥ T4	N - - - -
8	♦ J965	S - - - -
	♣ T83	E 5 1 5 - 1
		W 5 1 5 - 1

On this board, the difference between making 4H and making 5 is, again, in the planning. West has three spade losers, but has a singleton spade in dummy. The opponents will probably lead spades twice; you ruff the second with your H7. If you now draw trump right away, you will later lose to the CA, and at that point, they will cash another spade, because you have no more trump in dummy. If instead, you set up your club suit in dummy first, you still have a trump there to stop the opponents from cashing a spade. You will make 5 this way - a matchpoint victory over those making 4.