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 28th, 2021, (Game #44655). Full results and game schedule at www.bridgecentreofniagara.com.

- Declarer Play
- Best finesse techniques

Bd: 3 Vul: E/W Dlr: South	♠ QJ94 ♥ A ♦ AK8653 ♣ 86	Optimum NS 6Dx: -500
♠ K8 ♥ KQJ3 ♦ 942 ♣ Q953	N W 3 E S	♠ A52 ♥ T865 ♦ -- ♣ AKJ742
14 11 HCP 12 3	♠ T763 ♥ 9742 ♦ QJT7 ♣ T	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - 3 - 2 - S - 3 - 2 - E 6 - 5 - - W 6 - 5 - -

Board 3 gave players trouble this week. It was played in Hearts in the West at most tables, and made anywhere from 8 to 12 tricks. The opening lead was a top Diamond, which was ruffed in dummy. When declarers made their plans (before ruffing that Diamond, of course), they would see 4 losers in their hand; 3 Diamonds and the HA. The Diamond void in dummy provided the opportunity to ruff all 3 Diamonds there, but is there a better way? Consider the Club suit. Once trumps have been pulled, you have 6 Club tricks in dummy ready to run; with only 4 Clubs in your hand, you have room for Diamond pitches from your hand on the last two. So you really only have to ruff one Diamond in dummy.

Most declarers ruffed the first Diamond and led a Heart to start pulling trump. North won the Heart trick and usually led a Spade next. All West needs to do now is to pull the rest of the trump, and then run the Clubs, winning one ruff, three more Hearts, six Clubs and two Spades for twelve tricks total.

Where did people go wrong? Some took the Spade trick and played another trump. They must have panicked when they saw the bad trump break. But panic never helps. Take a breath and consider this: If I finish drawing trumps, I will effectively play the rest of the hand in NT; how many tricks will I have? In many hands, you will have to lose the lead again to set up more winners; if that is the case, do that while you still have a trump in your hand to regain control. In this case, you have the eight black suit tricks all ready to run - no need to lose the lead, so you are free to go ahead and cash your 12 tricks.

Other players went wrong by ruffing a Spade in their hand. This was very costly; once they had ruffed once in each hand, South had more trumps than either the East or West hand, and declarer lost control. As we have seen before; ruffing in your hand does nothing to add to your trick count. You have no Spade losers in your hand, there is no need, and nothing to gain by ruffing dummy's losers. Your Hearts will always take one trick each, however you use them; better to use them to get rid of the defenders' trumps. Shortening the trump holding in your hand opens you up to losing trump control when you have a bad break - as you do here.

There are 2 boards I want to compare to illustrate a point of finessing.

Bd: 9 Vul: E/W Dlr: North	♠ K3 ♥ J62 ♦ K9764 ♣ A54	Optimum NS 4H+1: +450
♠ AJ654 ♥ Q ♦ QJT85 ♣ 83	N W 9 E S	♠ T2 ♥ T975 ♦ A32 ♣ JT92
11 10 HCP 5 14	♠ Q987 ♥ AK843 ♦ -- ♣ KQ76	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 3 1 5 2 2 S 3 1 5 2 2 E - - - - - W - - - - -

On board 9, consider the Heart (trump) suit. There is only a very small chance that you can play this suit without loss. The only possibility is if the outstanding cards are divided 3-2, and the Q is one of the 2. Some players like to lead the J, thinking they are finessing, but this can never help, and, indeed can hurt. When you lead an honour, you must hope that your opponent will cover it with the Q - as they normally should if they have it. But, when you don't hold the 9 or 10, "picking up" the Q this way simply means you lose to the 10 instead. And today, you lose to the singleton Q AND to the 10. In fact, the best way to play this suit is simply to play the A and K; today you still lose one trick because of the 4-1 split, but that's better than the 2 tricks that were lost by those who ran the J.

Contrast this hand with that of board 17. This time it's EW playing in Hearts, and this time, you CAN hope to pick up the Q and save a trick by leading the J, because you have the 10 as well. It's still best to play the HA first, which covers the extra possibility of picking up the Q

Bd: 17 Vul: None Dlr: North	♠ K4 ♥ Q84 ♦ J4 ♣ KQ9762	Optimum EW 3H: -140
♠ 853 ♥ JT6 ♦ 7652 ♣ AJ8	N W 17 E S	♠ 972 ♥ AK532 ♦ AKT9 ♣ T
11 6 HCP 14 9	♠ AQJT6 ♥ 97 ♦ Q83 ♣ 543	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 2 - - 1 - S 2 - - 1 - E - 3 3 - 2 W - 3 3 - 2

singleton offside, but when it isn't, go to the W hand with the CA and lead the HJ, and you find yourself with no Heart losers. Note that there are never guarantees, but this method is your best chance to bring in the suit with no losers. Playing out the A and K would work only if the Q is singleton or doubleton, and finessing the recommended way will still leave you with a loser if the Q is offside with another, or if the outstanding cards are split 4-1 instead of 3-2.

Bd: 15 Vul: N/S Dlr: South	♠ T632 ♥ J432 ♦ Q32 ♣ 93	Optimum EW 3N+1: -430
♠ AQ975 ♥ AK9 ♦ JT ♣ AJ2	N W 15 E S	♠ J84 ♥ T6 ♦ K964 ♣ T654
3 19 HCP 4 14	♠ K ♥ Q875 ♦ A875 ♣ KQ87	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - - - - - S - - - - - E 3 3 1 4 4 W 3 3 1 4 4

I will provide one slightly more complicated example; the Spade suit in board 15. From the bidding, you expect the SK to be in the South hand, and you would like to lead from the dummy (E) to pick it up. You only have one opportunity to access the E hand, and you might think it's ok to lead the J, because you also have the Q in your hand. But, again, consider what will happen if the J gets covered. Your A will win the trick, but now, if the 10 doesn't fall when you play the Q, you still have a loser in the suit. In other words, leading the J wins only if the 10 is doubleton and the K is onside. If, instead, you lead a small card to the Q and then play the A, you succeed if the K is doubleton - seemingly an equally likely event. But there's an additional possibility - you also succeed if the K is singleton - as it is here -, because now you can finesse the other way against the 10 in the N hand.

The message from all of these hands is: before you lead an honour, think hard about whether you will gain if your opponent covers it. Very often you do better to lead a small card towards your honour combinations.