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 March 15th , 2022, (Game #82581). Full results and game schedule at www.bridgecentreofniagara.com.

- 2 Slam Hands
- Which finesse?

We had two slam hands in the same round this week.

Bd: 6 Vul: E/W Dlr: East	♠ T854 ♥ K87 ♦ AK52 ♣ T2	Optimum NS 6N: +990
♠ 972 ♥ QT962 ♦ 9863 ♣ 3	N W 6 E S	♠ KJ63 ♥ 54 ♦ 7 ♣ 987654
10 2 HCP 4 24	♠ AQ ♥ AJ3 ♦ QJT4 ♣ AKQJ	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 3 6 4 5 6 S 3 6 4 5 6 E - - - - - W - - - - -

I'm looking at **board 6** first for a reason. South has a powerful 24 point balanced hand and opens 2C. Unless you play step responses to 2C - and none of our pairs alerted that system - the standard response to 2C with the North hand is 2D. It's either positive or waiting, according to your partnership agreement. I strongly discourage any system that forces North to respond 2NT - that makes it very difficult for either partner to assess the other's hand for the possibility of slam. And any suit response to 2C must always promise a five card suit, which you don't have.

After 2C - 2D, South's rebid is 2NT, showing 22-24 balanced. From here, all systems are on, just as if South had opened 2NT, so North can use Stayman if they are interested in a Spade fit, or can make a quantitative 4NT invitation, which South will accept and bid 6NT.

A tip for leading against a slam; play as safe as you can. Don't lead a suit where you have an honour, as this might be exactly the one card declarer needs to find. Honour sequences are good, because that establishes a trick for your side, but if you don't have one, look for something that looks safe. In this case, a Heart lead is out; in fact, the lead of a Heart gives declarer her 12th trick right away, and she can even afford to try the Spade finesse for the 13th trick. The D9 looks relatively safe.

When declarer makes her plan, she sees eleven tricks; 4 Clubs, 4 Diamonds, 2 Hearts and 1 Spade. Where is the 12th trick going to come from? Either the Heart or the Spade suit might provide it with a successful finesse; the good news is that you can afford to try one, and, if it fails, try the other. That gives you a 75% chance of making your contract.

There are only two things to watch out for. The first is transportation; both finesses require leading from dummy, so don't use up your limited entries there before you are ready. The more subtle point: If you try the Spade finesse and it loses, the opponents can lead another Spade and knock out your last stopper in that suit. Same thing if you play to the HK and then do a losing Heart finesse; they can play another and knock out your last stopper. In either case, you will now be even more uncomfortable trying the second finesse, because you would be down more than one if they both fail. So the best thing is to use a Diamond entry to dummy to take the Heart finesse; it loses, but you still have enough protection to try to Spade finesse, and, when it works, you make your contract.

On **board 5** East opened 2NT, showing a balanced 20 or 21 HCP. Not all did, but not opening 2NT shows a lack of planning. If you open 1C, no rebid you make on the second round can possibly convey the strength of this hand. What should West do? With 12 HCP opposite 20 or 21, a slam must certainly cross your mind. And yours are good, quality points; you may even have 5 Diamond tricks in your

hand. Most competitive players would go straight to 6NT with that hand, but if you are uncertain, you have that same 4NT quantitative invitation as a backup. And East should oblige.

Bd: 5 Vul: N/S Dlr: North	♠ QT ♥ T9732 ♦ T8 ♣ Q983	Optimum EW 6N: -990
♠ K86 ♥ 654 ♦ AKQ63 ♣ T4	N W 5 E S	♠ AJ9 ♥ AKJ ♦ 75 ♣ AKJ65
4 12 HCP 21 3	♠ 75432 ♥ Q8 ♦ J942 ♣ 72	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - - - - - S - - - - - E 6 6 5 5 6 W 6 6 5 5 6

The play on this hand takes a little more care, but it should be made. Some got a Spade lead, and some got the D2. The Spade helped, as it happens, by picking up the Q. At first glance, the play looks easy; 3 Spades, 2 Hearts, 5 Diamonds and 2 Clubs. But always ask yourself what could go wrong. Here, the obvious answer is a bad split in Diamonds. So, before you start running the Diamonds, you should generate a 3rd trick in the Club suit by playing to your J; you aren't very worried that it might lose to a Q in the South hand, because you would still have a good chance of setting up either the long Diamonds or the long Clubs to go with your 3 Spades and 2 Hearts. As it happens, the Club finesse wins, and you can now start cashing your top tricks, hoping for 13 if the Diamonds split. They don't, but you can lose the 4th Diamond trick and still have a good one - you DID leave that SK in the dummy for transportation, didn't you? You will make 12 tricks via 3 Spades, 2 Hearts, 4 Diamonds, and 3 Clubs.

Note that, if you get too casual and play the Diamonds first, you now have South sitting with a good trick in hand, which will make you very nervous when you are forced to try a finesse for the 12th trick.

Anyone who got a Diamond lead instead of the Spade should see the problem right away. If South is leading a 4-card suit, you know you have a bad split there, and you should immediately start on the Clubs to generate that 12th trick. But, even with the successful Club finesse, you can set up 4 Diamond tricks and 3 Clubs, OR 4 Clubs and 3 Diamonds, so you will have to find one of the Major suit Qs to make the contract. And this situation is not as comfortable as on the previous hand, because you can't afford to lose either finesse, as you will have already had to lose 1 Diamond. So which finesse should you try?

It seems like a 50-50 guess, but you can increase your odds slightly with this little trick. Before trying one finesse, play the top two cards in the other suit, just in case the Q falls. Usually your two suits will not be the same length; in that case, cash the AK of the longer suit, and if the Q doesn't fall, try the finesse in the shorter suit. In this case, both suits are just six cards, but it's still worth trying one; against the odds, either one works and you make your contract.

Bd: 16 Vul: E/W Dlr: West	♠ J643 ♥ JT2 ♦ A82 ♣ QT3	Optimum EW 1N+1: -120
♠ A85 ♥ K73 ♦ KJ3 ♣ AJ87	N W 16 E S	♠ Q9 ♥ AQ54 ♦ Q74 ♣ 9642
8 16 HCP 10 6	♠ KT72 ♥ 986 ♦ T965 ♣ K5	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - - - - - S - - - - - E 3 1 2 1 2 W 3 1 2 1 2

I always like to feature a defensive point if I see one, and this week it's on **board 16**. Most tables played this in 3NT from the West after a Stayman sequence in which West denied holding a 4-card Major. In most cases, North led the S3, and I was happy to see that, when the 9 was played from dummy, South played the 10. In these cases, West rightly ducked. This was a good start for the defence, but before South returns the suit, she should think about where the other important cards are. How many Spades does each hand hold? If partner's 3 is 4th best, then North has 4 and West has 3. Where are the A and J? It's very unlikely that West has both; wouldn't she have taken the 10 with the J if she had it? (Wouldn't you? It's the only chance to make it good.) Does partner have both A and J? Also unlikely, but, if she does, it doesn't matter which Spade you lead back; you will take four tricks. But consider the case where West has the A and North has the J. Now it matters; you must play the K, smothering the Q, and establishing partner's J. This is, after all, the reason you held back the K on the first trick, isn't it? It's to capture - or at least neutralize - the Q.

Of course, if the Q had been played from dummy, South must play the K - that's what it's there for. "Cover an honour". And if West ducked that, South should now return the 10, smothering the 9, under the same principle. ♠