

The art of finessing

Two hands from Sunday's match between Oxfordshire and Worcestershire set me thinking about the art of finessing. Everybody knows how to take a finesse – I remember reading one book that described it as the only expert manoeuvre that everybody knows. The Hideous Hog, though, in one of Victor Mollo's Bridge in the Menagerie series, describes finessing as something that should be left to the experts, while lesser players confine themselves to simpler plays like squeezes and endplays. The reason for this (no doubt tongue-in-cheek) comment is that the art of finessing is not about how to finesse, but about when to finesse, or at least as importantly when not to finesse....

This was #21 from the match. (Dealer N, NS Vulnerable)

♠ K107	
♥ Q96	
♦ A94	
♣ QJ109	
♠ 65	♠ J832
♥ 10853	♥ KJ42
♦ Q765	♦ 82
♣ K86	♣ A32
♠ AQ94	
♥ A7	
♦ KJ103	
♣ 754	

The hand was played at 16 tables in the match, and all of them reached a normal 3NT contract by NS – 12 of them by North in the lead of H2, which everybody ran to HQ of course. That gives you 7 tricks in top (3S, 2H and 2D). So you need 2 more. There are possible finesses either way in both spades and diamonds. Which one is best? Well, you can only get 1 more trick in the spade suit, whether you take a successful finesse or successfully play for the drop, so that won't be enough on its own. So perhaps you want to start with diamonds, where you may be able to generate two extra tricks with a successful finesse, and even if you fail you will still generate one extra trick and have time to try to get an extra spade trick too before the defence can cash their heart tricks?

I firmly believe that the answer is not to take any finesses at all! How many hearts do you think East has? I suspect at every table where H2 was led, EW were playing 4th-best leads against NT – certainly they were at my table. If so, doesn't it look almost a certainty that the hearts are 4-4? If that is the case, you can be sure of the contract by playing on clubs at trick 2 since you can afford to lose two club tricks and two heart tricks – provided, of course, that you don't create an extra loser by risking a finesse elsewhere that may not work. As far as I can see, only 4 of the 12 declarers in this exact position actually played on clubs, though, rather than trying spades or diamonds. (Incidentally, there is one other point that might be worth mentioning on this hand. If you are going to play the spade suit, it costs nothing to unblock S10 under the ace. That gives you the option of finessing later against SJ if you decide you want to do so without the need to retain an outside entry to dummy to cash the last spade. In practice I don't think any declarer who played on spades did this, but at least two were saved by East very carelessly covering S10 with SJ, even though East could clearly see S9 in dummy.)

#16 was another one with finesses available in multiple suits (Dealer W, EW Vulnerable):

♠ AQ75	
♥ Q103	
♦ K9	
♣ AQ98	
♠ 1092	♠ 43
♥ 86	♥ K972
♦ 842	♦ AQJ10
♣ KJ1073	♣ 542
♠ KJ86	
♥ AJ54	
♦ 7653	
♣ 6	

Here, the popular contract was 4S by N, which, like several others, I played on a trump lead (S4). I am less confident about the right line on this one, and with the club finesse and the heart finesse both working nobody went off. But the trouble with taking a finesse is that it might lose! It seems to me that if you take either the club finesse or the heart finesse and it loses then you will be in some difficulty. How many tricks do you have if none of the finesses work? It looks like 4 in spades, 3 in hearts and 1 in clubs. So if you can take two club ruffs in dummy then you will have the necessary 10 tricks. Of course you need to be a little bit careful about which spades you use to take any ruffs – if you end up ruffing with dummy's high spades then you will probably create a trump loser. With that in mind, I chose to win the trump lead with SJ, retaining the small trumps for ruffing. That means that entries to hand were required outside the trump suit, and there is clearly an entry available in hearts once HK is knocked out. So I played a club to A, ruffed a club, and played a heart to HQ, rejecting finesses in both suits! East took HK and played his second trump, but I could win that in hand, and now knowing that trumps were 3-2 I could ruff another club with dummy's remaining SK. Then I could cross back to H10, draw the last trump, and cash my H winners to discard the remaining club in my hand. Finally, with the contract secured, I was happy to lead up to DK for a possible overtrick. This finesse failed, but I still had 10 tricks without taking a single successful finesse. I would have had to change tack if trumps had been 4-1, and I might have been in trouble if hearts had been 5-1, which is why I am not entirely sure whether this was the best line or not, but on normal breaks this line ensured 10 tricks even if all three finesses weren't working.

So next time you have the opportunity to take lots of finesses, don't forget to consider whether you actually need to take any of them.....

Alan Wilson, Feb 2026