Seminar

**DECLARER PLAY**

**TECHNIQUES**

**IN NO TRUMP CONTRACTS**

by Stefan Skorchev

**Declarer play – how to plan**

After the opening lead is made and dummy is revealed, spend some time considering the following questions:

1. How many tricks do I need to make?

*Add 6 to the level of the final contract.*

1. How many tricks can I cash immediately?

*Count only tricks you can make from the top;*

1. How can I develop more tricks?

*Promote high cards or/and establish long suits;*

1. How does the opening lead help me?

*Have they led to show a specific count or honour holding?*

1. What’s my PLAN???

-*which card do you play from dummy after the opening lead?*

*-are you going to use Hold-up play?*

*-is there an opponent to whom you want to prevent giving the lead?*

*-which suit should you start playing on?*

*-what is the best way to play that suit?*

Tip: keep count of the suit(s) you are most interested in.

♠ K76

♥ AK7

♦ QJ5

♣ 9764

N

W E

S

♠ A84

♥ Q62

♦ AK6

♣ 8532

We open 1NT as South and get raised quickly to 3NT. The opening lead is the ♥J. How should we play the hand?

**Establishing a suit**

We can count 8 tricks from the top – 2 spades, 3 hearts and 3 diamonds – 1 short to make 3NT.

As we have solid stoppers in all suits, we need to explore our only chance to make the contract – developing the club suit. Although we have no big cards in clubs, we have lots of cards in the suit which may allow us to set up a trick if clubs are behaving (splitting 3-2 in opponent’s hands).

The best execution of this plan is if we start playing clubs immediately, while in control of the other suits, otherwise defenders may promote a couple of winners in the side suits and beat the contract before we have developed the ninth trick.

♠ K76

♥ AK7

♦ QJ5

♣ 9764

♠ J92 N ♠ QT53

♥ JT98 W E ♥ 543

♦ T84 S ♦ 9732

♣ AQT ♠ A84 ♣ KJ

♥ Q62

♦ AK6

♣ 8532

♠ Q5

♥ JT72

♦ 7654

♣ AQ2

N

W E

S

♠ A76

♥ K8

♦ AK2

♣ KJT43

You (South) opened the bidding with 1♣, partner responded 1♦, RHO overcalled 1♥, you went to 2NT and partner raised to 3NT. The opening lead is ♠J. How can you make the contract?

(East will cover the ♠Q with the ♠K)

**Hold-up play**

You’ve got 8 tricks from the top - 5♣, ♠A and ♦AK. After the overcall the ♥K looks well-placed and this is where the ninth trick can come from. The problem is that as they led a spade, knocking out your ♠A, they can eventually win 4♠ and the ♥A to beat the contract before you get a chance to establish the ♥K for the ninth trick.

Your only chance is to break the communication between the defenders leaving West with spade winners but no entry to cash them.

Cover the Jack of spades with the Queen and when East plays the King, don’t win it – play low. If East continues with spades, play low one more time. If East plays a 3rd spade, win it leaving them with no communication to cash the spade winners when you establish your ♥K.

♠ Q5

♥ JT72

♦ 7654

♣ AQ2

♠ JT932 N ♠ K84

♥ Q3 W E ♥ A9654

♦ QT3 S ♦ J98

♣ 765 ♠ A76 ♣ 98

♥ K8

♦ AK2

♣ KJT43

♠ AK3

♥ 76

♦ QJ6

♣ KT654

N

W E

S

♠ 652

♥ AQ92

♦ K54

♣ AJ2

After 1NT opening by you (12-14), your partner raises you to 3NT. The lead is ♥4. You follow from the dummy and East plays the Jack. Plan your play …

**Avoidance finesse**

After taking the ♥J with the Queen, you need to decide whether to play on diamond or clubs.

Playing diamonds at this early stage, before the ♣Q is out, might help the defenders to establish the diamonds, before you set up the clubs. That’s why you must start with the clubs. Which way should you finesse the Queen? Obviously the chance is 50/50, but the point is that if you decide to finesse towards dummy, you may have problems if you get it wrong - East can play a heart and if the ♦A is in the same hand as the long hearts, you may even go down losing 3 hearts, ♣Q and ♦A. That’s why you must finesse towards your hand.

Even if the finesse is wrong, your ♥9 is protected and they cannot establish 3 heart tricks. On the other hand, you will be able to establish your diamond tricks, making 2 spades, 2 hearts, 2 diamonds and 4 clubs, losing only 1 heart, 1 club and 1 diamond. 10 tricks. As you can see the full board below, if you finesse towards dummy you are going one off, if you finesse towards your hand you will be rewarded with 11 tricks.

♠ AK3

♥ 76

♦ QJ6

♣ KT654

♠ 874 N ♠ QJT9

♥ KT843 W E ♥ J5

♦ A32 S ♦ T987

♣ 98 ♠ 652 ♣ Q73

♥ AQ92

♦ K54

♣ AJ2

♠ K76

♥ Q2

♦ AKT32

♣ J87

N

W E

S

♠ AQ5

♥ K43

♦ 984

♣ A654

You opened 1NT and partner went straight to game – 3NT.

The opening lead is the ♥J, which you cover with the ♥Q and that holds the trick. How do you plan to play?

**Avoidance duck**

It looks like West has the ♥A as East didn’t overtake dummy’s Queen. This leads us to the conclusion that if East eventually wins a trick, he will play a heart back, finessing our King and West will cash all his hearts. That’s why we need to set an objective not to let East win a trick.

The problem is that we only have 3♠ to win, 1♥, 2♦ and 1♣. A total of 7 tricks. It looks almost impossible to establish two more tricks and not let East win a single trick. But there is a way:

Play a spade to get in hand and play a small diamond towards dummy. If West plays low, win with the ♦A. Return to hand and play one more ♦ towards dummy. If the Queen appears from West, let it win, then on the next round when you cash the ♦K, East’s Jack will drop and you have established two diamond tricks from length without East getting on play.

\*If the ♦Q doesn’t appear, just win with the King and play a third diamond hoping that West started with 3 diamonds originally.

♠ K76

♥ Q2

♦ AKT32

♣ J87

♠ 832 N ♠ JT94

♥ AJT98 W E ♥ 765

♦ Q7 S ♦ J65

♣ QT2 ♠ AQ5 ♣ K93

♥ K43

♦ 984

♣ A654

♠ A85

♥ Q87

♦ A65

♣ JT74

N

W E

S

♠ K42

♥ KJT3

♦ K87

♣ Q62

As South you opened weak NT and partner invited with 2NT. Although you trust your declarer abilities, there are only 12 HCP in your hand and the shape is the flattest possible, so you pass. The lead is the ♠Q. What’s your plan?

**Establishing two suits**

From the top you can only make 4 tricks - ♠AK and ♦AK. You need to establish 4 more.

Three tricks will come when you knock out the ♥A and another one or two will come when you establish… the clubs! Although opponents will establish their spades, they cannot take more than 5 tricks - 2♠, ♥A and ♣AK, so don’t cash out, before establishing both ♥ and ♣.

♠ A85

♥ Q87

♦ A65

♣ JT74

♠ QJT3 N ♠ 976

♥ 6542 W E ♥ A9

♦ Q32 S ♦ JT96

♣ K3 ♠ K42 ♣ A985

♥ KJT3

♦ K87

♣ Q62

♠ 972

♥ JT64

♦ KQ9

♣ K85

N

W E

S

♠ AK4

♥ KQ7

♦ JT54

♣ AQ3

We open 1♦ as South and West overcalls 1♠, our partner doubles (suggesting 4 cards in ♥ and 8+ HCP) and as we have a balanced hand, and a stopper in spades with 19 points, we jump straight to 3NT.

The opening lead is the ♠Q. How shall we play the hand?

**Hold-up play with two stoppers**

To begin with we can count 5 top tricks – 2 in spades and 3 from the club suit, therefore we have some work to do to develop an extra 4 tricks to make our contract!

Obviously, there is no extra tricks to be gained from the black suits, so we must be looking to the red suits for these extra tricks. As we can see there is only the Ace missing in either suit, and we hold the remaining high cards. We can also see that once an Ace is knocked out in either of the suits this will bring us an extra 3 tricks, so not enough in isolation to make our contract.

We should now realise that playing simply on one suit will not create enough tricks, we must need to play on both suits in order to make our contract. As usual there is a danger, as in NT it is always a race to establish our winners, the opponents have led a spade and should they knock out our Ace and King their small cards will be winners (we also know the suit will break at best 5-2 as West overcalled spades during the auction). Therefore, it looks like the opponents are going to win the race and establish their small spades before we can set up both of our red suits (they will get 3 spades and 2 red Aces).

After counting out tricks and realising that they are ahead in the race to create winners we need to formulate or amend our plan. Fortunately, there is a chance for us to set up our tricks first, we need to block their communication in the spade suit.

If West holds both Aces we will not be able to make our contract as they will continue spades and end up with 3 spade tricks and 2 Aces, however what if they only hold one or neither Ace? Well, this would be enough to allow us to make our contract.

So, knowing we need West to hold at most one Ace the correct play is to hold-up (duck) the first round of spades. This makes a big difference, as by winning the second round, if East ever gets in again they will not have a spade to play back to their partner. This will stop the opponents from establishing their spade suit, and therefore we will win the race to set up our tricks and in doing so make the contract.

♠ 972

♥ JT64

♦ KQ9

♣ K85

♠ QJT63 N ♠ 85

♥ 52 W E ♥ A983

♦ A862 S ♦ 73

♣ 74 ♠ AK4 ♣ JT962

♥ KQ7

♦ JT54

♣ AQ3

♠ QJ64

♥ AK5

♦ 863

♣ AK4

N

W E

S

♠ A32

♥ J32

♦ KQJT4

♣ J7

After no bidding by opponents, we get to declare in 3NT as South.

The opening lead is the ♠T. How would you plan the play if the top spade you play from dummy gets covered by the ♠K?

**Keep the entry**

So as usual after seeing dummy we count our top tricks – we can see 6 on top: 2 spades, 2 hearts and 2 clubs. We can also quickly develop 4 tricks in diamonds by knocking out the Ace, so it looks like we will make an overtrick! Easy?

Well, there is a problem and this is a deceptively difficult hand. If we win the first spade trick with the Ace and plan to set up our diamonds the opponents can beat the contract! The defender holding the Ace may hold-up the suit twice, winning the third one. On a quick look it seems like all is going to plan as we have set up our diamonds, so are on route to 10 easy tricks. However, the defenders have managed to cut our communications – a disaster, we cannot now get to our winning diamonds. So, from looking like an easy contract, the play of the Ace of spades combined with a thoughtful defence has stopped us from making the contract.

There is a way to ensure that we will make the contract, which is to resist the routine habit of winning big cards without having a plan of action. The winning line is to duck the ♠K at trick one, the reason being is that should the opponent return another spade you can win it in dummy. Why does this help? Well now once we set up the diamonds we still have an entry to our hand with the ♠A. Note that ducking the ♠K doesn’t cost us a trick. We will still make two tricks in spades, hearts and clubs and four in diamonds – a total of 10 tricks.

♠ QJ64

♥ AK5

♦ 863

♣ AK4

♠ T987 N ♠ K5

♥ Q87 W E ♥ T964

♦ 92 S ♦ A75

♣ 8632 ♠ A32 ♣ QT95

♥ J32

♦ KQJT4

♣ J7

♠ AQT6

♥ 752

♦ AQ6

♣ K83

N

W E

S

♠ 43

♥ KQ83

♦ K732

♣ AQ6

We are declaring 3NT as South, the opponents silent throughout.

The opening lead is the ♣J. How should we play the hand?

**Play towards strong holdings**

We have 7 tricks on top - ♠A, ♦AKQ and ♣AKQ. We need to establish at least two more tricks to make our contract of 3NT. There doesn’t seem to be any immediate dangers of failing, so we need to explore as opportunities as possible to get extra tricks.

The easiest and most obvious way to get an extra trick is the diamond suit – if they split 3 and 3, then the last diamond in our hand will be a winner. This is a great chance, which we will explore … but last! There are a few reasons why not to play the diamonds yet:

* If they don’t break, we will set up an immediate trick for the defence. A trick which otherwise they would not get;
* We may ruin the communications between our hands;
* By not playing the suit, the opponents won’t know we have that many cards in diamonds and may discard some.

The best plan is to immediately start developing the major suits. We need to play towards the strong holdings, i.e. play spades from hand towards AQT6, intending to double-finesse (if no honour appears, first finesse with the T, regardless of the result, finesse with the Queen later). While in hearts we need to start playing from dummy toward ♥KQ83, so if the Ace is onside (in East), we can protect the ♥KQ.

As the cards are placed, this line will make at least 2 spades, 2 hearts, 3 diamonds and 3 club tricks – an overtrick!

♠ AQT6

♥ 752

♦ AQ6

♣ K83

♠ J987 N ♠ K52

♥ J6 W E ♥ AT94

♦ 85 S ♦ JT94

♣ JT952 ♠ 43 ♣ 74

♥ KQ83

♦ K732

♣ AQ6

♠ AK

♥ Q3

♦ AQ985

♣ KJ65

N

W E

S

♠ Q2

♥ AKJ

♦ 642

♣ AT842

We open 1NT as South, and our partner has jumped to 4NT to show a quantitative raise. With a maximum hand, we accept the invite and bid 6NT.

The opening lead is the ♥T. What’s the best way to play the hand?

**Know suit combinations**

We have only 8 tricks on top – 2 spades, 3 hearts, a diamond and 2 clubs. There is certainly work to do to make 6NT, thankfully we have great potential to create tricks in both minor suits. Unfortunately, we can only create an extra 3 tricks in each, which means that developing only one of those suits won’t be enough, therefore we need to play on both suits.

To maximise our chances, we need to know what’s the best line of playing these two suits. In diamonds it seems like we can only finesse with the Queen, hoping the King is sitting onside. However, having the ♦98 accompanying the AQ, we can get 4 tricks even if the diamond suit does not behave. We should play a diamond and if West follows with a small card, insert the ♦9! This will help us get four tricks even if diamonds are JTx opposite Kx (behind the Queen), JTxx opposite singleton King or even if there is ♦KJTx in front of the AQ.

The best way to play the club suit is to rely on the old rule – 8 – ever, 9 – never, regarding whether to take a finesse or not. This means whenever we are missing only the Queen and have 9 cards between both hands, we should NOT finesse, but rather play the AK, hoping the Queen will fall in 2 rounds.

So, we know how we want to play the suits, but does it make a difference which one to play first? It might be a clever idea to start playing on diamonds first, the reason being it may give us clue about the shape of the defenders’ hands, and in turn cause us to change our mind on how to play the club suit (eventually we may take a finesse, if an opponent is likely to have length in the side suits).

♠ AK

♥ Q3

♦ AQ985

♣ KJ65

♠ T98 N ♠ J76543

♥ T9876 W E ♥ 542

♦ JT3 S ♦ K7

♣ 97 ♠ Q2 ♣ Q3

♥ AKJ

♦ 642

♣ AT842

♠ KQJ

♥ 64

♦ A974

♣ K763

N

W E

S

♠ A74

♥ AT

♦ KQT3

♣ AQJ8

As South we opened 2NT (20-22 HCP, balanced hand). West overcalled 3♥, our partner doubled (negative), East passed and we bid 3NT, which our partner raised to 6NT.

West leads the ♥K, what’s your plan?

**Discovery play**

We can count 11 top tricks – 3 spades, a heart, 3 diamonds and 4 clubs, so we need to find one more. The extra trick must come from the diamond suit – if they split 3-2, it will be an easy task, but if they are 4-1 we need to find the missing ♦J.

As there was an overcall of three hearts, we correctly assume that it is much more likely for East to have four diamonds to the Jack, however, it isn’t impossible for West to have that holding either.

This might seem like a guess, however that is far from true. If we play on the other suits and watch to see how many times West follows we can work out how many diamonds, they are likely to have. We can also increase our chances by ducking the first heart trick, this will enable us to try and count the heart suit too.

So, the plan: We should duck the first heart trick and win the second one. We should then cash our winners in both clubs and spades. This will show us that West has only 1 card in each black suit, therefore 11 cards in the red suits. As we saw that West has no more than 7 hearts (East followed twice), then there must be at least 4 cards in diamonds in West’s hand. So, the correct play will be to cash ♦KQ from hand and when East shows out, we will only need to finesse the ♦J for the 12th trick.

♠ KQJ

♥ 64

♦ A974

♣ K763

♠ 6 N ♠ T98532

♥ KQJ8732 W E ♥ 95

♦ J865 S ♦ 2

♣ 4 ♠ A74 ♣ T952

♥ AT

♦ KQT3

♣ AQJ8