Seminar

**DECLARER PLAY**

**TECHNIQUES**

**IN SUIT 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; ruff losers;*

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.

♠ A84

♥ K42

♦ JT32

♣ Q74

N

W ퟸ E

S

♠ KQJ32

♥ A87

♦ KQ5

♣ 98

In a non-contested auction, we end up in 4♠. You are declarer and West leads the ♠7. How would you play the hand?

**Draw trumps, then establish a suit**

We need to make 10 tricks to make our contract. 5 will come from spades, 2 from hearts and we can establish 3 diamond tricks to win 10 tricks overall. There is a small problem – we could lose 2♣, 1♦ and 1♥ but we can eventually discard the heart loser on the diamonds.

The best way to play the hand is to win the ♥ lead with the Ace, draw trumps and then establish the diamonds. We need to keep the ♥K on the table to use as an entry to the winning diamond in case the defenders duck diamonds a couple of times thereby breaking the communication between our hand and dummy.

♠ A84

♥ K42

♦ JT32

♣ Q74

♠ 75 N ♠ T96

♥ QJT9 W ퟸ E ♥ 653

♦ 76 S ♦ A984

♣ A6532 ♠ KQJ32 ♣ KJT

♥ A87

♦ KQ5

♣ 98

♠ --------

♥ 7532

♦ QT98

♣ AQJT9

N

W ퟸ E

S

♠ J7

♥ K864

♦ AKJ762

♣ 5

The bidding went: 1♦ from you, 4♠ by West and partner sets the final contract of 5♦. The opening lead is ♠A. How do you play?

**Ruffing finesse**

If we choose to ruff spades on the table we can make 2 ruffs, 6 trumps from your hand and the ♣A, giving you a total of 9 tricks – 2 short. We could go for a 3-2 heart break to set the 11th trick with the Ace in East, but if hearts do not behave, we will fail.

The best chance of making the contract is to cash 2 rounds of trumps followed by the ♣A and then play a ruffing finesse – run the ♣Q and unless East puts the King up, throw a heart loser. If the ♣Q holds, keep running clubs and discarding heart losers until the King shows up, at which point we ruff it and then return to the table using the last trump and run the remaining club winners. This way we can make 8 diamonds (6 from our hand and two spade ruff) and 4 clubs. Even if West holds the ♣K and our ruffing finesse loses, we will be able to make 11 tricks.

♠ -------

♥ 7532

♦ QT98

♣ AQJT9

♠ AKT9865 N ♠ Q432

♥ AQ9 W ퟸ E ♥ JT

♦ 3 S ♦ 54

♣ 64 ♠ J7 ♣ K8732

♥ K864

♦ AKJ762

♣ 5

♠ AKQ6

♥ A765

♦ A832

♣ 6

N

W ퟸ E

S

♠ JT97

♥ K98

♦ 4

♣ A8743

North opened 1♥ and you (South) replied 1♠, West came in with 3♦ and partner ended the auction with 4♠. The opening lead is the ♦K. What’s your plan?

**Cross-ruff**

Besides the trumps, we’ve got 4 top tricks to cash - ♥AK, ♦A and ♣A. Instead of cashing trumps and wasting two trumps for one trick, we are better off playing for the cross-ruff in an attempt to score all our trumps separately.

Please note that it is very important to cash all the winners we’ve got outside the trump suit **before** starting the cross-ruff, otherwise the opponents may get rid of a suit and trump our winners when we try to cash out later. In this particular hand don’t forget to cash out ♥AK first.

♠ AKQ6

♥ A765

♦ A832

♣ 6

♠ 4 N ♠ 8543

♥ QJT2 W ퟸ E ♥ 43

♦ KQJ9765 S ♦ T

♣ K ♠ JT97 ♣ QJT952

♥ K98

♦ 4

♣ A8743

♠ KJ9

♥ AKQ

♦ A8765

♣ 32

N

W ퟸ E

S

♠ AQT87

♥ 432

♦ 4

♣ Q654

With opponents not bidding, your side gets to play in 4♠. West leads a spade and you have to come up with a plan to make 10 tricks…

**Dummy reversal**

From the top we can count 9 easy tricks - 5♠, 3♥ and 1♦ - but the 10th trick looks a distant possibility. We could eventually ruff a club on the table to get an extra trick, but as the opponents have already attacked the trump suit, we cannot establish a club ruff as the defenders will always return a spade after they win the club.

To make the contract, we need to reverse the dummy. This is when we shorten the long trump holding such that the dummy eventually becomes longer in that suit. How should we execute this?

Win the spade from whichever hand, cash the ♦A and ruff a ♦. Then return to dummy via a ♥ and trump another ♦. Do it again. And again!

We have four entries to the table in the ♥AKQ + ♦A, enabling us to ruff all four little diamonds and score 4 ruffs in hand + 3 trumps from the table + ♥AKQ + ♦A= 11 tricks. We even made an overtrick!

♠ KJ9

♥ AKQ

♦ A8765

♣ 32

♠ 654 N ♠ 32

♥ 987 W ퟸ E ♥ JT65

♦ KQJT S ♦ 932

♣ KT7 ♠ AQT87 ♣ AJ98

♥ 432

♦ 4

♣ Q654

♠ --------

♥ AQJ2

♦ QT9432

♣ 432

N

W ퟸ E

S

♠ K32

♥ KT96

♦ AK

♣ A765

You (South) opened 1♥ and LHO pre-empted with 3♠; partner raised you to 4♥, which remained the final contract. The opening lead is ♠A. How do you plan the play?

**Loser on loser**

The contract looks pretty easy if the diamonds run – we can make at least 4♥, 6♦ and the ♣A and, after the lead, the ♠K gets promoted. It looks like 12 tricks but stop dreaming now!

To win trick one, we have to ruff in the dummy, which creates a potential problem if there is an unfriendly trump split (e.g. 4-1, especially likely after the pre-emptive bid of 3♠), as we will lose the trump length on the table, which is our only entry to the table to cash the diamonds.

To keep trump control, it is better to throw a club from the table, which is a loser anyway. That way we will be able to keep all our trumps on the table and will be able to handle a 4-1 trump break. Don’t forget to cash the ♦AK first (unblocking) before ending up on the table with the last trump.

♠ ---------

♥ AQJ2

♦ QT9432

♣ 432

♠ AQJ9854 N ♠ T76

♥ 3 W ퟸ E ♥ 8754

♦ J87 S ♦ 65

♣ QJ ♠ K32 ♣ KT98

♥ KT96

♦ AK

♣ A765

♠ Q98

♥ 53

♦ A853

♣ A654

N

W ퟸ E

S

♠ AKJT3

♥ A42

♦ K76

♣ 32

After some uncontested auction you get to declare 4♠. West leads a trump. How would you play the hand?

**Ruff from the shorter trump holding**

We can count 9 top tricks – 5♠, ♥A, ♦AK and the ♣A. The 10th trick may come if the diamonds split 3-3, but this depends on luck. If we want to make the 10th trick for sure, it is better to duck one heart, win whatever they return then play ♥A and make ♥ ruff in the shorter trump holding. This will guarantee the 10th trick needed to make the contract.

♠ Q98

♥ 53

♦ A853

♣ A654

♠ 742 N ♠ 65

♥ KJ76 W ퟸ E ♥ QT98

♦ J9 S ♦ QT42

♣ QT87 ♠ AKJT3 ♣ KJ9

♥ A42

♦ K76

♣ 32

♠ KJ76

♥ 65

♦ KQ7

♣ K963

N

W ퟸ E

S

♠ AT854

♥ A3

♦ A42

♣ A42

You open 1♠ as South, West jumps to 3♥ (Pre-emptive, weak) and partner raises you to 4♠, which becomes the final contract. West leads the ♥K. How would you play the hand?

**Consider opponents’ bidding**

When counting your losers, we can see one club, one heart and possibly a trump. This makes it obvious that we will make the contract, however we do need to remember we are playing pairs, every trick matters especially when we expect most people will reach the contract of 4♠. It is possible that the difference in the scores will come down to the number of tricks taken. We cannot do much about the losers in clubs and hearts, so we need to focus on playing the trump suit to take the most possible tricks - to try and find the ♠Q.

In the spade suit we are only missing the Queen holding 9-cards between our pair in the spade suit. There is a saying regarding to how to play such suit combination - “eight – ever, nine – never”, meaning with 8 cards in the suit, you stand best chance to catch the Queen if you finesse; alternatively, if you have 9 cards in the suit, the best chance is to cash the Ace and the King and hope that the Queen will fall. This is a good piece of advice, it is very useful when deciding on how to play a trump suit and hopefully it is relatively easy to remember too!

Remember rules are there to be used as guidelines, and as most rules have an exception, this one does too. The best line as stated above is true if there is no information about the opponents hands. On the bidding West has shown a long suit (probably 7 cards), which means that the remaining suits are rather short (usually 0-3 cards in each, remember they only have 6-cards outside of hearts), therefore East becomes more likely to have the length in the side suits. This causes the odds to change; despite the rule above, even with a 9-card fit, it is better to finesse the Queen rather than play for the drop.

Our best play is to cash the King first, so you can pick a singleton Queen and if this doesn’t work - play the Jack intending to finesse!

♠ KJ76

♥ 65

♦ KQ7

♣ K963

♠ 9 N ♠ Q32

♥ KQJT982 W ퟸ E ♥ 74

♦ 83 S ♦ JT965

♣ 875 ♠ AT854 ♣ QJT

♥ A3

♦ A42

♣ A42

♠ A3

♥ KQJT8

♦ KJ9

♣ A42

N

W ퟸ E

S

♠ 86

♥ ---

♦ AQT7642

♣ 9763

You open 3♦ as South, West jumps to 4♠ and partner raises you to 5♦. West leads the ♠K. How would you play the hand?

**Loser on loser / The Ruffing finesse**

There are 9 guaranteed tricks at the start of the hand– 7 diamonds and the two black Aces. We can eventually establish a trick in clubs, but this would only give us 10 tricks, leaving us one short of our contract.

The best source of tricks is the heart suit, as we have all the top cards apart from the Ace. We therefore need to establish tricks in the heart suit by taking a ruffing finesse, this is similar to a normal finesse in being that we are playing for a card to be in the right position. We all know that playing up to the AQ and inserting the Queen will win 2 tricks if the King is onside. This theory can be taken further when looking at this hand, should we play East to hold the Ace of hearts.

The correct play is – win the lead with the ♠A and cash as many trumps as needed to draw their trumps, we need to be careful to remain in dummy at the time we are cashing the last trump. Now play the ♥K – if East covers, trump it, and get back to the dummy with the ♣A. We can now cash our heart winners, throwing as many black losers as possible (in this particular case you can cash 3 heart winners – QJT, but not the 8 as the opponent’s 9 will beat it) this means we will take 7 diamonds, 2 black Aces and 3 hearts; so 12 tricks.

If East doesn’t cover the ♥K with the Ace, you must NOT ruff, but throw the spade loser instead. If West wins, you have three more heart winners to throw all your losing clubs and score 12 tricks, losing only the ♥A.

If your ♥K wins the trick, then repeat the exercise running another top heart… So as you can see we “finessed” against the A♥.

♠ A3

♥ KQJT8

♦ KJ9

♣ A42

♠ KQJT542 N ♠ 97

♥ A63 W ퟸ E ♥ 97542

♦ --- S ♦ 853

♣ JT5 ♠ 86 ♣ KQ8

♥ ---

♦ AQT7642

♣ 9763

♠ QJT6

♥ AKQ72

♦ ---

♣ A642

N

W ퟸ E

S

♠ AK94

♥ 6

♦ 96432

♣ J85

You reach 4♠ and have to declare as South, the opponents passing throughout. West leads the ♦A, what is your plan?

**The Cross-ruff**

This is a tricky hand as on the face of it we have only 2 losers so surely, we should make our contract? However, there is an easy way to fail and that is by drawing trumps. Although the trumps are split 3-2, if we choose to draw them, we will only make 9 tricks - 3♥, 1♣ and 5 trumps (draw three trumps and when they drop, score the other two separately through ruffing).

Your best source of tricks is the trump suit and more of them we can make separately, the more tricks we will make.

We should trump the diamond lead and start organising our cross-ruff. Although our short suit is hearts, we have tricks in the suit because of the top cards. The clever thing to do is to cash ♥AKQ and discard two clubs, shortening the clubs and creating the possibility for a cross-ruff. Unfortunately, as often happens in life, the third big heart gets ruffed and they continue by playing another trump (best defence). We should still make our contract by ruffing clubs and diamonds in each hand – 1 club trick, 2 hearts and 7 trumps (one when they returned a trump and three from each hand by cross-ruff).

♠ QJT6

♥ AKQ72

♦ ---

♣ A642

♠ 52 N ♠ 973

♥ 83 W ퟸ E ♥ JT954

♦ JT875 S ♦ AKQ

♣ KQT9 ♠ AK94 ♣ 73

♥ 6

♦ 96432

♣ J85

♠ KJ6

♥ 5

♦ K83

♣ J75432

N

W ퟸ E

S

♠ AQT92

♥ A87

♦ AQ9

♣ 96

You get to declare 4♠ as South. West leads the ♠7. How do you plan the play?

**Ruff in the shorter trump holding**

As we can see there are 9 top tricks – 5 trumps, the ♥A and 3 diamonds. To get the extra tricks we need to either develop and establish clubs (a long and dangerous journey), or be more practical and before drawing trumps make the most of them by ruffing hearts.

We should win the lead and cash the ♥A and then trump a heart. We can now draw trumps and make 10 tricks (3 diamonds, ♥A and six trumps – one extra for the ruff).

As we remember that we are playing pairs, we can decide to try and make even more tricks. After trumping the heart, there is still no rush to draw trumps – we can play A ♦ to get back to hand and ruff another heart!

Now get back to your hand on the ♦Q and cash the trumps. Playing this way we made two trumps from the shorter holding, five trumps from our own hand, three diamonds and a heart – an overtrick!

♠ KJ6

♥ 5

♦ K83

♣ J75432

♠ 7 N ♠ 8543

♥ QT942 W ퟸ E ♥ KJ63

♦ JT74 S ♦ 652

♣ KT8 ♠ AQT92 ♣ AQ

♥ A87

♦ AQ9

♣ 96