

Some Declarer Problems are as Clear as Mud

Thank goodness some are simple:

HAND 1

West
♠ K3
♥ KJ653
♦ T8
♣ AKT9

East
♠ J64
♥ AQ43
♦ Q9
♣ Q6543

West plays in 4♥ on a spade lead

TOP TRICKS

♠ = 1 (thanks to the lead)

♥ = 5

♦ = 0

♣ = 4 (likely 5)

TOTAL = 10 (likely 11)

The spade lead goes to South's ♠10 and your ♠K.

With 11 likely tricks and 10 for sure, what will you do now?

It's obvious, no? Drawing trumps is the right move. But it's worth noting why.

Here's why: TOTAL = 10

Instead of asking "where can we do better?", we're asking "where could something go wrong?". And the answer here is - our winners could be ruffed - a threat we quash by drawing trumps.

We have enough top tricks so we become conservative.

HAND 2

West
♠ 43
♥ AKJ32
♦ A75
♣ K87

East
♠ Q876
♥ Q76
♦ 86
♣ A643

West plays in 3♥ on a ♥ lead

♠ = 0

♥ = 4 (likely 5)

♦ = 1

♣ = 2

TOTAL = 7 (likely 8)

When everybody follows to trick 1, there are 8 top tricks. We need 9. What should we do?

The answer may have jumped out at you again. We can ruff a diamond in the short hand without much risk. We mustn't draw trumps.

With an extra trick(s) needed, DELAY DRAWING TRUMPS

With only one extra trick needed, ruffing in the short hand is *often* the best plan.

HAND 3

West plays in 3♠ on ♣Q lead

| West | East | |
|---------|----------|-----------------------------|
| ♠ K8732 | ♠ A654 | ♠ = 4 likely (maybe 3 or 5) |
| ♥ 6 | ♥ KT7532 | ♥ = 0 |
| ♦ AJ2 | ♦ 5 | ♦ = 1 |
| ♣ T653 | ♣ K2 | ♣ = 0 |
| | | TOTAL = 5 |

South takes dummy's ♣K with the ace and returns the ♠Q, North following suit.

With much work to do, where do we go for 4 extra tricks?

Let's look first at the chance of ruffing our way home: We can ruff one diamond now, but we can't get back to hand unless we first play a heart. Even then, we may only be able to ruff one heart back to hand before the over-ruffs begin. In any case, even if we could use ALL of dummy's small spades as ruffs, we would still need another extra trick from somewhere. We won't be so fortunate, however, as the defenders will get at least one more chance to lead trumps at us.

What else?

We could play a heart, hoping to set up dummy's long suit. What are our odds of achieving that?

Well, we have 7 cards in the suit, the defenders have 6. They might break 3-3 or 4-2. On a terrible day, they might be 5-1. Most of the time, however, they'll be 4-2 or 3-3. When that's the case, we need to ruff hearts once, twice, or three times, depending on whether the ♥A is onside and which break occurs.

Let's try this: Win the ♠K and lead a low heart. If the ace appears and a trump comes back, win in dummy, cash the ♥K and ruff a heart. If they broke 3-3, you're home. If 4-2, cross via a diamond ruff and ruff another heart. If anyone dares over-ruff, you're home. If they can't or won't overruff the heart lead, then when you next ruff a diamond in dummy and lead a winning heart, discarding a club, you're home.

When the ♥A is off-side, you need more luck in the heart break - a 3-3 break in hearts will see you home, or a 2-2 spade break will do the same.

What are the odds of one of these scenarios being the case?

All up, about 75%.

But only if you give yourself the best chance - by leading hearts early.

Often a complex hand is best begun by leading dummy's long suit

Here are more examples where the best line involves playing dummy's long suit early

HAND 4

West
♠ KQ952
♥ J84
♦ K3
♣ K82

East
♠ A76
♥ A2
♦ QJ52
♣ 7654

West plays in 3♠ on a heart lead to the ♥K, and a trump return.

It looks like ruffing a heart is the key job here. It's more urgent, however, to set up the diamond trick(s). To play hearts is to spend an entry.

HAND 5

West

♠ Q
♥ KQJ764
♦ K76
♣ AQ2

East

♠ K7654
♥ A2
♦ 9843
♣ 76

West plays in 3♥ on the ♦Q lead - to the ♦A. And back comes a heart. It's natural, easy, to run this to the ♥A and take a club finesse, scoring an overtrick via a club ruff when the finesse works. But that's INSANE, when winning in hand and playing a less glitzy spade will all but guarantee the contract.

HAND 6

West

♠ AK2
♥ A532
♦ 5
♣ JT932

East

♠ J53
♥ 6
♦ Q9743
♣ KQ85

West plays in 4♣ on the ♠7 lead; ♠J-Q-2. And a spade comes back. You're desperate to ruff hearts, but look ahead! After 2 ruffs, you'll be halted with no way back to hand. You'll finally play a diamond but the defenders get the gag by that stage. Don't fail this way - put them to the test now! Play a diamond now. There's more than a good chance they'll send another spade back - as long as you perform this early enough, before they know what's going on.

We can summarise the conclusion like this:

Short on tricks in a suit contract and in doubt?

Try dummy's long suit.

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