
F O C U S O N

Declarer Play



D A N N Y R O T H

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Foreword

Are you one of those players whose partners continually hog the bidding? Perhaps there's a reason — your declarer play! The most common mistakes made in this area can be summarised under three headings:

Poor use of options

Many declarers fail to realise that a hand may offer several chances of making a contract. All too often, they go for one specific line and then complain bitterly when the appropriate suit splits badly and/or a finesse fails. They then proceed to the next hand blissfully unaware that another, more successful line was available. The top-class declarer is continually on the look-out for ways to combine available chances to maximise his overall percentage of success.

Mishandling of communications

Many declarers underestimate the importance of communications between their own hand and dummy's, not to mention the possibly greater consideration of making life in this area difficult, if not impossible, for the defenders! An alarming number of players are simply unaware that it can even be worth sacrificing a trick to ensure good communications. The trick will usually be returned with interest.

Errors involving ruffing

The trump element is a complex factor in the game and is very often poorly understood. The purposes, uses and misuses of ruffing need to be studied in detail in the many situations in which there is scope for error. We shall start with some basics but then learn that knowledge in this area has to be handled with discretion. That is where the trouble arises.

Choosing the Best Line



1

Playing the Odds

Here we shall look at various suit combinations, first considering them in isolation and then understanding to what extent, if at all, our knowledge applies in the context of a whole hand.

Gravity precedes the coin toss!

Play for the drop before taking a finesse.

This position often arises in no-trump contracts where there are two long suits as possible sources for tricks. We shall start with this simple example:

Dealer South
Neither vulnerable

<i>W</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>S</i>
pass	1♦	pass	1♣
pass	3NT		

North

♠ A Q 10 2
♥ J 5
♦ K 5 4 2
♣ K 8 3

South

♠ J 9 3
♥ A 6
♦ A 7 3
♣ A J 10 9 7

West leads the ♥4. You try the ♥J from dummy but East produces the ♥K. How do you play?

It is of little relevance whether you win the first or second round of hearts; the question is: "What then?" You have three top tricks in the red suits and thus six more are required. Two approaches are possible:

hope to find the ♣Q to bring in five clubs and one spade, or hope for a successful finesse against the ♠K to pick up four spades and two top clubs. How do you combine the chances? Looking at the clubs alone, it is a better chance to play one top card and then finesse against the queen (about 53%) rather than to play for the drop (about 30%). But these figures consider the club suit in isolation. Playing for the drop entitles you to hold the lead, after which you still have a 50% chance in spades. If you finesse clubs unsuccessfully, four quick heart tricks will defeat you immediately. Thus playing for the drop first (in clubs) followed by a finesse in spades will give you a $(30 + 0.5 \times 70) =$ about a 65% chance for the contract. This is, therefore, the best line.

	North	
	♠ A Q 10 2	
	♥ J 5	
	♦ K 5 4 2	
	♣ K 8 3	
West		East
♠ 8 7		♠ K 6 5 4
♥ Q 10 8 4 2		♥ K 9 7 3
♦ J 9 8 6		♦ Q 10
♣ Q 2		♣ 6 5 4
	South	
	♠ J 9 3	
	♥ A 6	
	♦ A 7 3	
	♣ A J 10 9 7	

Points to remember

1. Playing for the drop wins over an immediate finesse in the important respect of enabling you to hold the lead.
2. Note how the technique of combining chances increases the overall chance of making the contract markedly. This is worthwhile, even at pairs, taking into account the risk of conceding an extra undertrick.

Be the greediest pig in the sty!

Do not ignore those little extra chances — plan your play to take advantage of them.

Many players take the view that the odd one per cent or so

matters little. Over the short term, they are probably right but, in the long run, cents add up to dollars or, depending where you are, pence add up to pounds:

Dealer South				North
Neither vulnerable				♠ A Q 10 4 2
W	N	E	S	♥ Q 9 4 2
				♦ 6 3
			1♣	♣ 10 2
pass	1♠	pass	2NT	
pass	3♥	pass	3NT	
				South
				♠ K 7
				♥ 10 6 3
				♦ K Q 4
				♣ A K Q 6 4

West leads the ♦J to his partner's ♦A and East returns the ♦5. How do you play?

Well, which black suit do you prefer? In fact, spades offer the slightly better chance in that, with the ♠10 in the long hand, you will gain if the ♠J drops on the second round; this does not apply in clubs. But take no credit if you played on spades right away. It costs nothing to play one top club first to be able to take advantage of a singleton ♣J. If it does not appear, revert to spades. If they do not break, you will have to try the clubs, prepared to give up the fourth round. You will hope that the hand with the long club has both top heart honours and does not hold the ♠J. You may then get a diamond entry back to hand or two heart tricks and the fifth spade.

		North		
		♠ A Q 10 4 2		
		♥ Q 9 4 2		
		♦ 6 3		
		♣ 10 2		
West			East	
♠ 8 6			♠ J 9 5 3	
♥ A 8			♥ K J 7 5	
♦ J 10 8 2			♦ A 9 7 5	
♣ 9 8 7 5 3			♣ J	
		South		
		♠ K 7		
		♥ 10 6 3		
		♦ K Q 4		
		♣ A K Q 6 4		