

Making Sure of Your Contract



**PLAY
IT SAFE!**

Barbara Seagram & David Bird

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David

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INTRODUCTION

The term ‘safety play’ covers two different situations. It can mean ‘the best way to play a particular suit’. This may vary according to how many tricks you need from the suit to make your contract. Alternatively, ‘playing safe’ may describe a way to give yourself the best chance of making a particular contract.

When you are playing a team game, rubber bridge or social bridge, your main aim is to make the contract. Overtricks do not matter much compared with the game or slam bonus that comes your way if the contract is made. The use of safety plays is commonplace.

When instead you are playing matchpoints (duplicate pairs), an overtrick can be very valuable. You will sometimes reject a safety play, even perhaps taking a small risk of going down to give yourself a good chance of an overtrick.

In the first two parts of the book, we assume you are playing IMPs, social or rubber bridge. However, many of the safety plays described in Parts I and II are in fact valuable at both IMPs and matchpoints. In Part III we will see some deals where you might choose to play differently at matchpoints.

Barbara and David



Playing it Safe in a Single Suit

FINESSING – THE RIGHT WAY

In this chapter we will start by looking at some familiar single-suit positions. For each one, you must find the appropriate play. In other words, you must determine the best chance of creating an extra trick or two.

Let's start with some positions where you hold the ace and queen, but are missing the king.

♠ K 10 4 2	♠ A Q 6 □ ♠ 8 7 3	♠ J 9 5
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On the very first day that you played bridge, you were introduced to the 'piece of magic' that happens when you play a low card to the queen and this wins the trick. You conjure an extra trick out of thin air! The queen wins here because it is positioned over the king.

Should I Lead an Honor when I Take a Finesse?

Here's a slightly more complex position where players go wrong time and again. Suppose you need four spade tricks:

♠ K 4	♠ A Q 6 5 □ ♠ J 8 3 2	♠ 10 9 7
-------	-----------------------------	----------

You should lead a low card to the queen and then cash the ace. Here, West's king falls and your jack will win the third round. If instead you mistakenly lead the ♠J on the first round, West will cover with the king and East will win the third round with the ♠10. You will make only three tricks from the suit. Note also that leading the ♠J would reduce your tricks from three to two when West holds a singleton king.

Here you have more intermediate cards:

♠ K 8 7 4	♠ A Q 6 5 []	♠ 3
	♠ J 10 9 2	

You can afford to lead the ♠J on the first round. If West covers with the king, you will win with the ace and make the next three tricks with the ♠Q, ♠10 and ♠9, even if the suit breaks 4-1.

If instead West followed with the ♠4, you would play low from dummy. Conveniently still in the South hand, you would lead the ♠10 next.

The situation is different here:

♠ 9 4	♠ A 7 6 []	♠ K 10 8 5
	♠ Q J 3 2	

You would like to make three tricks from these North-South cards. Because you do not hold the ♠10, it would be quite wrong to lead the ♠Q on the first round. West would cover if he held the king, and you would make two tricks with the ace and jack but would lose the third round to the ♠10 or ♠9. You would make three tricks only when the suit broke 3-3.

Instead, you should play the ♠A and lead towards the honors in the South hand – twice if necessary. You will make three spade tricks whenever East holds the ♠K. You can still think of this as a sort of finesse; you are playing East (instead of West) for the king.

It's an important lesson to learn. Unless you have sufficient middle cards to make the lead of an honor worthwhile, you will do better to lead towards the honor card(s) that you hope will give you an extra trick.

If you are uncertain whether to lead a low card or an honor for a finesse, ask yourself: "Will I be happy if I lead an honor and it is covered?" In the position above, you would not be happy; it would not help you at all. So, you will generally fare better to lead towards the ♠QJ. (An exception would be if you needed only two tricks from the suit and did not want to lose the lead to the defenders.)

Now let's look at some other positions where you may need to finesse more than once in a suit.

♥ K 8 2	♥ A J 10 5 []	♥ Q 7
	♥ 9 6 4 3	

You lead the ♥3 and finesse the ♥J, losing to the queen. Later, you will lead the ♥4 to the ♥10. This second finesse wins and you continue with the ♥A to drop West's king. You make three tricks from the suit.

This is called a double finesse, because you are finessing against two missing honors. Note that it would be wrong to lead the ♥9 on the first round. This would cost you if West held a singleton king or queen. You would then lose two tricks to East's ♥Q872 or ♥K872.

Finesse the Lower of Two Honors First



Here you start with a low card to the ♠10. On this occasion you are lucky, because West holds both missing honors. The ♠10 wins and you return to the South hand in a different suit to finesse the queen. Three spade tricks are yours. If the suit had broken 3-3 as well, you would score four tricks.

Note that it is important to finesse the lower honor first (the ♠10 here). If you mistakenly finesse the queen first, West's ♠KJ will be worth a trick against dummy's remaining ♠A103.

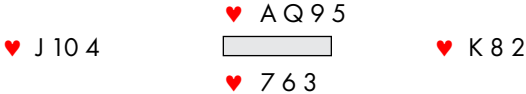
This is a similar position:



You lead low to the jack (again the lower honor). If West held the ace and queen, you would make tricks with both the jack and the king.

When Holding the Nine Makes a Difference

Let's look at some positions where the nine becomes important:



Dummy's ♥9 gives you an extra chance. On the first round you should finesse this card (even though it is not an honor). When West holds both the ♥J and ♥10, the ♥9 will force East's king. Since the suit is also 3-3, you will make three heart tricks. If instead the ♥9 lost to the ♥J or ♥10, you would finesse the queen on the second round.

♥ Q 10 6 5		♥ A J 9
		♥ K 8 3
		♥ 7 4 2

Here you would like to make a second heart trick. What is the best chance?

You should lead low to the ♥9. Here, East wins with the king and you will be able to finesse the jack successfully on the next round. You will score two heart tricks.

Suppose instead that you decided to finesse the ♥J on the first round. This would work well when West held the ♥KQ, but it would fail to produce two tricks when West held the ♥K10 or the ♥Q10 (which is twice as likely).

Counting the Combinations where You Will Succeed

Let's look in detail at a combination where you will be able to compare two possible lines of play. You need three tricks from this club suit:

♣ A 6 5 2		
		♣ Q 10 9 3

You do not have enough middle cards to consider starting with an honor from the South hand. You begin with dummy's ace and both defenders follow with a low card. When you lead the ♣2 next, East produces yet another spot card. Should you play the ♣Q or finesse the ♣10?

If East began with a doubleton club, the matter is already determined. West will make two tricks. (If instead East started with ♣Kx or ♣Jx, his honor would appear on the second round. You would have no guess to make and three tricks would be yours.)

So we need look only at the situations where East began with three or four cards. We will see whether the queen or ten is the better play.

East holds

- ♣KJxx
- ♣Kxx
- ♣Jxx

You play the ♣Q

- two tricks
- three tricks
- two tricks

You play the ♣10

- three tricks
- two tricks
- three tricks

When East holds three cards, it's a complete guess whether to play the queen or ten. However, the ♣10 is the better card because you will make three tricks when East holds ♣KJxx.

INTERMEDIATE

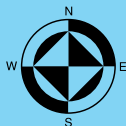
At rubber bridge or teams scoring, declarer's objective is to make the contract – nothing else matters. Playing it safe is of vital importance. Yet playing safely can take many forms – it might involve simply choosing the best percentage line of play, or keeping one opponent off lead, preserving entries, or even giving up a trick you don't have to lose, all in the cause of bringing that contract home securely. Even at matchpoints, there are times when safety is more important than anything else. Recognizing all these situations, and knowing what to do when you encounter them, will improve your bridge scores by leaps and bounds.



BARBARA SEAGRAM (Toronto, Canada) travels the world teaching bridge. She is the author or co-author of dozens of well-known books, the most popular being *25 Bridge Conventions You Should Know* (with Marc Smith).



DAVID BIRD (UK) is the world's most prolific bridge author, with numerous ABTA Book of the Year awards. His most recent book with Seagram is *Planning the Defense: the Next Level*.



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