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In this series we look at how certain suit combinations should be handled and what are the best odds.

Percentage plays series II. ACOL.	Contract: 4H By: South
Date: 07/10/2015	Board #: 1
Dealer: North	Vulnerable: None
Play this hand online!	

North
- ♠ Q6
- ♥ 42
- ♦ KQT2
- ♣ J7632

West
- ♠ AKT52
- ♥ 3
- ♦ 75
- ♣ QT985

East
- ♠ J987
- ♥ Q876
- ♦ 984
- ♣ A4

South
- ♠ 43
- ♥ AKJT95
- ♦ AJ63
- ♣ K

This set of deals continues the theme of "Percentage plays"; that is - what is the best way to handle certain card combinations?

You have to give yourself the best chance when faced with various card layouts.

Beware, though - these deals are tricky and need careful thought. You have been warned!

On this deal you are buffeted by the opponents in the auction into a marginal contract.

What is the best play to make it? Remember - suits don't always break 3-2...

West	North	East	South
-	P	P	1♥
1♠	X	3♠	4♥
P	P	P	

Lead: ♠ A

Here you reach 4♥ after the opponents have pushed you around in the auction.

West cashes two top Spades and switches to a Club. East takes the ♣A and suddenly the contract is "tight", requiring the rest of the tricks. So how are you going to play trumps? Cash the ♥A first? Well, on many of the deals in the previous series that was the right play but not here. Can you see why not? It's a subtle but important argument.

By cashing the ♥A you are playing for Hearts to break 4-1 (and hoping for a singleton ♥Q). However, if trumps are 4-1 it is four times as likely that West has a singleton low card as the the singleton ♥Q. If he **does** have a singleton low card then you can't finesse against the ♥Q if you cash a top honour first because you don't have enough trumps in dummy.

So the correct play is to ruff the second round of Clubs, cross to dummy and finesse in Hearts. When it wins you have to take the risk that Diamonds are 4-1 by crossing to table with a second Diamond and finesse Hearts again. Now you can draw trumps and claim.

Try and play the hand if you had cashed that ♥A as the first play in the suit. You'll find that East will always make a trick with his ♥Q × × ×

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Percentage plays series II. ACOL.	Contract: 4S By: South
Date: 07/10/2015	Board #: 2
Dealer: East	Vulnerable: N / S
Play this hand online!	

North
♠ T632
♥ KJ98
♦ K9
♣ K53

West
♠ 4
♥ 752
♦ QJT63
♣ J872

East
♠ Q975
♥ A43
♦ A752
♣ T9

South
♠ AKJ8
♥ QT6
♦ 84
♣ AQ64

Well, if you have worked your way through the first series on this topic, you may know the odds by now.

So how **exactly** do you handle the trump suit here?

West	North	East	South
-	-	P	1♠
P	3♠	P	4♠
P	P	P	

Lead: ♦ Q

On this deal you reach 4♠ in quick time and receive an unwelcome lead of the ♦Q, bumping off dummy's ♦K. Ho-hum.

The defenders cash the first two Diamond tricks and exit with a Club. With the ♥A a certain loser the important thing is **not** to lose a trump trick. So, you have to pick the Spade suit up without loss. This cannot be guaranteed, of course; what you have to do is to find the play that gives you the best chance. This hand is remarkably similar to Hands 1 & 3 from the previous series, which may give you a clue to the correct line of play.

Here, cashing the ♠A first is a good idea as the singleton ♠Q coming down would be good news. When everyone follows with small Spades you still have to take the Spade finesse. This is a better proposition than trying to drop the ♠Q doubleton, although the possession of the ♠10 on table and the ♠8 in hand makes this deal more subtle than previous examples.

Anyway, you must again cross to dummy (with the ♣K) and take the Spade finesse – but you must do this by leading the ♠10. If East has ♠Q × × it doesn't matter what you do but what if they are 4-1 – as here? If you were to lead low to the ♠J you'd have a Spade loser (play it through mentally and see). However, when you lead the ♠10 East is helpless. His best defence is to cover the ♠10 with the ♠Q, which you win with the ♠K.

Now, though, you now have the ♠J 8 poised over the ♠9 7. All you need at this point is another Spade finesse. Two finesses in the same suit – fun, eh?

To finesse Spades again you have to reach dummy so you have to lead a Heart. East takes his ♥A and is stuck. Anything he leads puts you on the table with fatal consequences for his side. When he chooses to lead a Diamond (a useless ruff-and-discard) you must discard from hand and ruff in dummy. Now you can lead the last trump from dummy to the ♠8, draw the last trump and claim. Phew!

Did we mention the word "tricky"?

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Percentage plays series II. ACOL.	Contract: 3N By: South
Date: 07/10/2015	Board #: 3
Dealer: South	Vulnerable: E / W
Play this hand online!	

North
- ♠ A42
- ♥ 43
- ♦ AJT2
- ♣ A763

West
- ♠ 853
- ♥ QJT8
- ♦ Q984
- ♣ QT

East
- ♠ QJT7
- ♥ 9762
- ♦ 7
- ♣ K982

South
- ♠ K96
- ♥ AK5
- ♦ K653
- ♣ J54

Here you have a classic two-way finesse.. Or do you?

West	North	East	South
-	-	-	1NT
P	3NT	P	P
P			

Lead: ♥ Q

Here you arrive in 3NT after a brief auction and West leads the ♥Q.

You can see seven top tricks (two Spades, two Hearts, two Diamonds and the ♣A) and need two more. There is no chance of an extra trick in Spades or Hearts and little prospect of getting anything out of Clubs so the focus of the deal is on playing the Diamond suit to your advantage. If you can make four tricks here you are home and dry.

So what is the right way to play Diamonds? You need to know (all right, make that "guess") which opponent has the ♦Q and to play the suit to finesse against him. So is the play a straightforward 50-50 shot? You just have to guess who has the ♦Q and take the finesse through that opponent?

The answer is that some "guesses" are better than others. Suppose you choose to play East for the ♦Q. You would cash the ♦A first (just in case the ♦Q fell singleton, ending your problems). Then you lead the ♦J and run it, hoping East has her ladyship. However, when does this play work? If you work it out, in these positions only:

West	East
♦× × × ×	♦Q
♦Q	♦× × × ×
♦× ×	♦Q × ×
♦× × ×	♦Q ×

Note that you will fail to make four tricks if Diamonds are 4-1 with East having length. It is an important point this and needs careful consideration. If the Eastern opponent has ♦Q 9 × × he can foil any plans you have by covering the ♦J with the ♦Q. This way he will promote his ♦9 into winning rank and hold you to three Diamond tricks.

Now look at the alternative. Suppose you choose to play **West** for the ♦Q. You cash the ♦K first (you never know, the ♦Q might appear on this trick, clearing your headache) and play a Diamond to the ♦10. Now you will make four tricks whenever the Diamonds are divided in the following way:

West	East
♦× × × ×	♦Q
♦Q	♦× × × ×
♦Q ×	♦× × ×
♦Q × ×	♦× ×
♦Q × × ×	♦×

And you will make four tricks even if West has all five Diamonds (unlikely, given that he didn't lead one).

Since there are more layouts where you will be successful when West has the ♦Q than when East has it you should play West for the Queen (and ignore partner's pained expression when East does turn up with that card and the finesse fails. This is a *percentage play*, remember, not a sure thing).

Put another way, you can cater for a 4-1 break when *West* has the four Diamonds but not if *East* has them. So the finesse through West is the percentage play, picking up four Diamond tricks just over 50% of the time.

Playing the Diamonds the other way needs East to hold the ♦Q *and for Diamonds to break 3-2*, reducing your chances to about 35%.

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Percentage plays series II. ACOL.	Contract: 3N By: South
Date: 07/10/2015	Board #: 4
Dealer: South	Vulnerable: All
Play this hand online!	

North
♠ Q3
♥ AKQ
♦ 9763
♣ KT52

West
♠ JT985
♥ 942
♦ KQT8
♣ 7

East
♠ K762
♥ T865
♦ J
♣ Q964

South
♠ A4
♥ J73
♦ A542
♣ AJ83

This hand has similarities with the previous deal. Can you land 3NT here?

West	North	East	South
-	-	-	1NT
P	3NT	P	P
P			

Lead: ♠ J

Again you arrive in the world's most popular contract (3NT) and West starts off by leading the ♠J. That's bad news for your side with mutual shortage in Spades and the ♠Q unlikely to be worth much.

You try the ♠Q at trick one, of course, as players have been known to lead from ♠K J 10 × but East dashes your hopes by covering with the King. So, having taken the ♠A you are wide open in Spades and must run for home with the next eight tricks.

Counting your tricks you can see seven: one Spade, three Hearts, one Diamond and two Clubs. There is no time to set up a long Diamond, even if Diamonds were 3-2; the opponents would run through you in Spades. Your only chance is to pick up four tricks in Clubs to up the winner count to nine. So, the crux of this hand is to play the Club suit for four tricks.

We know by now that the right play in Clubs is to take the finesse rather than to lay down the ♣A and ♣K in the hope of catching a doubleton Queen. However, which way should we finesse? Through East or through West? It's a dilemma – or is one of the horns less sharp than the other?

The possession of the ♣8 gives you the correct play. Just as in previous deals in this set you should take into consideration the possibility of a 4-1 Club break. If West has ♣Q 9 × × you simply cannot make four Club tricks. If you try to lead off the ♣A and follow it with the ♣J West would cover with the ♣Q and could not be prevented from taking a fourth round trick with the ♣9. You cannot make four tricks on this layout. So, to play West for the ♣Q you'd need West to hold the ♣Q and for Clubs to break 3-2.

However… if East were to hold the ♣Q you could pick the suit up for four tricks no matter how many Clubs East had.

Correct technique is to lead to the ♣K (just in case the ♣Q is singleton). Now comes the crucial card – the ♣10. East has no counterplay – if he ducks you run the Ten and have an easy route to four tricks. If, as happens here, East

covers the ♣10 with the ♣Q you win the ♣A and note the 4-1 break. This gives you a *marked finesse* in Clubs – so you cross to a top Heart and play a Club to the ♣8.

Game, set and match to your side.

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Percentage plays series II. ACOL.	Contract: 4S By: South
Date: 07/10/2015	Board #: 5
Dealer: North	Vulnerable: N / S
Play this hand online!	

North
- ♠ J763
- ♥ T73
- ♦ QJT
- ♣ AK9

West
- ♠ QT
- ♥ AK65
- ♦ 752
- ♣ T642

East
- ♠ 54
- ♥ Q92
- ♦ 643
- ♣ J8753

South
- ♠ AK982
- ♥ J84
- ♦ AK98
- ♣ Q

Here you are in a suit contract. What is the best play in the trump suit?

West	North	East	South
-	P	P	1♠
P	3♠	P	4♠
P	P	P	

Lead: ♥ A

In a change from playing in 3NT you reach 4♠ here. This would have plenty of tricks if West led a Spade, a Diamond or a Club but your evil-minded left-hand opponent unerringly finds your weak spot with the ♥A lead. East enthusiastically encourages with the ♥9 so the defenders have three tricks in the bag before you can blink.

Now, at least this is an easy hand to analyse. Simply put, you need to pull in the trump suit without loss. You have nine trumps without any finesse available so you have to hope the ♠Q falls in one or two rounds.

So you lead off the ♠A and… West drops the ♠10. This opens up an intriguing possibility as you now have a finesse position in trumps. You could cross to dummy and run the ♠J, playing West for the singleton ♠10 and East for ♠Q 5 4.

So which is more likely? That West was dealt ♠Q 10 doubleton or the singleton ♠10?

The odds are close but it is fractionally better (a couple of percentage points) to play off the ♠K hoping for an original 2-2 break. That works here and the rest of the hand is child's play.

(*If you hate statistics and probability you might skip this paragraph. Still, it is interesting… Honest*!) Players are often confused when they look at a table of odds. A 3-1 break (50%) is more likely than a 2-2 break (40%), even if that in itself is counterintuitive. Here, having cashed the ♠A and seen the ♠10 why shouldn't we take the Spade finesse as the 3-1 break is more likely than a 2-2 break? **Good Question**! Well done for asking it (!) The answer is that the odds change with every card played. Once the ♠A has bought forth the ♠10 (LHO) and the ♠4 (RHO) it is no longer possible that Spades are 4-0 nor that they are 3-1 with the singleton ♠Q. The odds now say that the remaining cards are more likely to break 1-1 than not – although it is close.

So, by following the original plan of cashing the ♠A K you bring home the bacon in 4♠.

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Percentage plays series II. ACOL.	Contract: 4S By: South
Date: 07/10/2015	Board #: 6
Dealer: East	Vulnerable: N / S
Play this hand online!	

North
♠ T763
♥ J73
♦ QJT
♣ AK9

West
♠ J
♥ AK65
♦ 752
♣ T7642

East
♠ Q54
♥ Q92
♦ 643
♣ J853

South
♠ AK982
♥ T84
♦ AK98
♣ Q

This deal looks suspiciously like the last one. Is the play identical? If not, why not?

West	North	East	South
-	-	P	1♠
P	3♠	P	4♠
P	P	P	

Lead: ♥ A

As in Hand 5 you reach 4♠ and your dastardly opponents cash the first three tricks in Hearts. That leaves the contract precariously placed as you need the rest of the tricks.

Again, this is an easy hand to analyse; you need to pull in the trump suit without loss. You have nine trumps without any finesse available so you have to hope that Spades break 2-2.

With that in mind you cash the ♠A and… West drops the ♠J. This gives you the option of taking a second round finesse in trumps. You could cross to dummy and run the ♠10, playing West for the singleton ♠J and East for ♠Q 5 4.

So which is more likely? That West was dealt ♠Q J doubleton or the singleton ♠J?

You may feel that this layout is identical (or, at least, equivalent) to that of Hand 5. No, not a bit of it. Oddly, the finesse is now twice as likely to succeed as the drop!

How can this be? Well, it's called the *principle of restricted choice* and has caused consternation and confusion for many bridge players over the years. There isn't space for the full analysis here - if you are really interested you may care to read Reese's *The Expert Game* (borrow it from a library - it's tough going) or read about it on the internet.

The basic argument runs like this: West has played the ♠J. With the ♠Q J he would have a free choice of playing the ♠Q or the ♠J; with the ♠J alone he can only play the ♠J. It is always better to assume that a player's choice was restricted than that he had a free choice. Clear? No, we thought not.

Put it another way... the odds say that West holding a singleton honour is twice the chance of him holding precisely ♠Q J alone. Thus, if you were always to finesse in these positions, you would be right twice as often as you are wrong.

You can't ask for better odds than that.