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This is a series for V-Blue Year 2. Although a "general series" there is a theme running through - that of how to play suit combinations at trick one.

VB#10 8 General deals Y2 ACOL	Contract: 3N
Date: 07/10/2015	By: South
Dealer: East	Board #: 1
Play this hand online!	Vulnerable: None

	North	
	♠ AQ5	
	♥ 742	
	♦ KQJ4	
	♣ 853	
West		East
♠ J9732		♠ K8
♥ QT5		♥ J963
♦ 7		♦ A862
♣ QT62		♣ J94
	South	
	♠ T64	
	♥ AK8	
	♦ T953	
	♣ AK7	

This series of eight deals is our general series of hands, usually a random mixture. This time, though, there is a theme to them – and it is to do with "first trick crisis". We won't explain further, we will just ask you to put your thinking caps on

In all these deals you are declarer, playing in 3NT. Just how are you going to play the hand?

Hand 1 sets the scene.

West	North	East	South
-	-	P	1NT
P	2NT	P	3NT
P	P	P	

Lead: ♠ 3

You reach 3NT after an invitational sequence and West leads a Spade from his five-card suit. You can't immediately divine the Spade position, of course, your task being to play the suit to best advantage within the context of the hand.

Your essential **count of tricks** shows there to be five on top (one Spade, two Hearts and two Clubs) with three Diamonds waiting in the wings after you have knocked out the ♦A. So if you were to make two Spade tricks then 3NT would be easy.

What is the correct play at trick one? Put in the ♠Q? After all, after the opening lead, West is strong favourite to hold the ♠K.

The answer is that you should hold fire by running the lead to the ♠10, just to see what happens. If East were to win the ♠J you'd still have the chance of playing a Spade to the ♠Q later in the piece. So playing low from dummy gives you a 75% chance – if West has either honour you will succeed in making your contract. In fact, 75% is underplaying your chances – surely West has a Spade honour to lead the ♠3? So you are almost certain to make 3NT by running the Spade to your ♠10

As the cards lie you have an armchair ride – East takes his ♠K at trick one, playing it on dummy's ♠5, and you have little to do but knock out the ♦A for nine easy tricks.



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VB#10 8 General deals Y2 ACOL	Contract: 3N
Date: 07/10/2015	By: South
Dealer: East	Board #: 2
Play this hand online!	Vulnerable: N / S

West	North	East	South
-	-	P	1NT
P	2NT	P	3NT
P	P	P	

Lead: ♠ 3

You reach 3NT and dummy appears – with strange similarities to the dummy of Hand 1. Thanking partner courteously you embark on your **Count** and **Plan**.

Here (in terms of easy winners) you can see one Spade, five Diamonds and two Clubs, making a total of eight *top tricks*. Where's the ninth? Well, a second Spade trick would be nice and that surely must be achievable. Should we run the Spade round to the ♠10 (in similar vein to Hand 1)?

Well, the difference between this deal and the last is that you are wide open in Hearts. Should East win trick one he would undoubtedly switch to that suit and you'd lose the next four or five tricks (five on this layout). However, we do need two Spade tricks so we have to take some risk.

Best play is to insert the ♠Q at trick one, playing West for the ♠K. This isn't a bad shot, given that West has led from a long suit. We need to balance the need for two Spade tricks with the danger of allowing East on lead.

On this deal we simply cannot afford the luxury of running the Spade lead to the ♠10. The way the cards lie here there is little doubt that East would play the ♠J and switch his attention to Hearts. And that would be two down instead of making.

The message of this hand is that suit combinations (Spades in this case) need to be handled ***in context of the overall hand***.

North

♠ AQ5

♥ 742

♦ KQJ5

♣ 853

West

♠ K9732

♥ KJ6

♦ T

♣ QT62



East

♠ J8

♥ AT985

♦ 873

♣ J94

South

♠ T64

♥ Q3

♦ A9642

♣ AK7

This hand has similarities - and differences - with Hand 1.


What should you do here?



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VB#10 8 General deals Y2 ACOL	Contract: 3N
Date: 07/10/2015	By: South
Dealer: South	Board #: 3
Play this hand online!	Vulnerable: E / W

	North	
	♠ AQ5	
	♥ 742	
	♦ KQJ5	
	♣ J83	
West		East
♠ J9732		♠ K8
♥ T96		♥ AKQ85
♦ T		♦ 873
♣ T652		♣ 974
	South	
	♠ T64	
	♥ J3	
	♦ A9642	
	♣ AKQ	

You may think that dummy on this deal is starting to look a little familiar.

However, does that mean you should handle it in the same way as before?

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

Lead: ♠ 3

You reach 3NT by the now familiar route and dummy displays an increasingly familiar hand. Weird, eh?

West leads a Spade (is he always going to lead those?) and we contemplate how to make the hand. In passing, you may note the benefits of a rapid auction - a Heart lead defeats 3NT but East can't bid them at the four-level after 1NT-3NT

Well, **Counting tricks** is a must - you should never neglect this duty. Here you should be able to see one Spade, five Diamonds and three Clubs without effort. That totals nine tricks - so your contract is available in *top tricks*. When this rare state of affairs manifests itself you should just take what's on offer. Grab the goodies and get on with the next deal.

Were you tempted to play the Spades differently in an attempt to make an overtrick? If so, you would have suffered an embarrassing two-trick defeat. Had you played low from the table at trick one (or tried the ♠Q as a finesse) East would have grabbed the ♠K and rattled off his Hearts. Oops!

You should not succumb to temptation when all you can gain is an overtrick.


"Oh partner", says East, plaintively, "couldn't you have led a Heart?"



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VB#10 8 General deals Y2 ACOL	Contract: 3N
Date: 07/10/2015	By: South
Dealer: South	Board #: 4
Play this hand online!	Vulnerable: All

	North	
	♠ AQ5	
	♥ 742	
	♦ KJ95	
	♣ K53	
West		East
♠ J9732		♠ KT6
♥ A65		♥ T93
♦ 8		♦ Q7642
♣ QJ96		♣ T2
	South	
	♠ 84	
	♥ KQJ8	
	♦ AT3	
	♣ A874	

Again, you may recognise your problem at trick one.

How should you play this time?

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

Lead: ♠ 3

3NT it is again and, just for a change, West leads a Spade (!) What's the best line of play now?

This is an altogether trickier hand than the three previous deals. First, let's **count our tricks**. We have one Spade, no top Heart (but two slow ones after the ♥A has gone), two top Diamonds and two top Clubs. So we have just five top tricks with possibilities for developing extras in Spades, Hearts and Diamonds.

The first point is what to play at trick one. Well, the answer is **not** to put up the ♠A nor to prematurely finesse the ♠Q. We should play low, forcing East to take the trick.

On some days a naïve East would fly in with the ♠K, solving many of our problems, but not here. Instead East takes his ♠10 and is now on lead. A Spade return is hopeless for him so he has to find a switch. A Club is best but with only ♣10 × he prefers the near sequence holding of ♥10 9 × around to the rubbish on table – and who can blame him?

This is all the help you need. You cover that, forcing the ♥A (and this way you now have two Heart tricks set up. That makes seven top tricks). West takes his ♥A and continues Spades. You try the finesse now and East takes his ♠K to return a Spade.

You may as well try Diamonds at this point but you are well aware that West has two winning Spades. With that in mind you take the two-way finesse into the **safe hand** – East. Irritatingly, East has the ♦Q but West's discard of a Heart suggests that suit will break. Sure enough, the innocent ♥9 continuation from your right gives you the nine tricks you need.

You might have survived playing the ♠A at trick one (although you have a minefield to negotiate thereafter) but you would certainly have gone off had you tried the ♠Q. East would have taken the ♠K and returned the suit and West would have set up four Spades and the ♥A before you got going.


Playing low gave you the all-important **tempo**



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VB#10 8 General deals Y2 ACOL	Contract: 3N
Date: 07/10/2015	By: South
Dealer: East	Board #: 5
Play this hand online!	Vulnerable: N / S

	North	
	♠ AQ5	
	♥ 742	
	♦ KQJ5	
	♣ Q53	
West		East
♠ JT964		♠ K82
♥ KJ5		♥ T986
♦ 3		♦ A72
♣ JT62		♣ 974
	South	
	♠ 73	
	♥ AQ3	
	♦ T9864	
	♣ AK8	

What's the percentage shot here?

Should you go for the 50-50 choice now or later?

Why?

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

Lead: ♠ J

3NT again and West leads the ♠J. With a sense of foreboding you await dummy and YES! It's the same Spade layout as before. Welcome to the X-Files.

Our **Count of tricks** shows there to be just five on top (one Spade, one Heart and three Clubs) with four slow Diamond tricks easy to make once the ♦A has been driven from its hidey-hole. So – what is the best line of play?

What should we do at trick one? We strongly suspect from this opening lead that the ♠K is offside (It's not exactly unheard-of for someone to lead the ♠J from ♠K J 10 × but it's rarer than from ♠J 10 9 ×). Ducking is no answer – West will just plug away in Spades.

If we try the ♠Q we'd be in the do-dos if East were to take the ♠K and either return the suit or switch to a Heart. If he cleared the Spades and West had the ♦A we'd be in a mess. If East had the ♦A and West the ♥K a Heart switch would be very nasty.

The best play (not guaranteed to make the contract but the best play nonetheless) is to play the ♠A immediately. Now the ♦A is knocked out and we have to see what's what. On this lie of the cards everything is hunky-dory. East takes the ♦A and can do nothing. We gobble up the ♥10 switch (you didn't think of finessing, did you?) and run for home with alacrity.


Suppose West had taken the ♦A and had persisted with the ♠10. Now we'd have a nasty guess. It could be right to try the ♠Q (had West had the ♠K) or it could be right to play the ♠5 (if Spades were laid out as in the actual deal). Luckily we weren't put to that guess!



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VB#10 8 General deals Y2 ACOL	Contract: 3N
Date: 07/10/2015	By: South
Dealer: East	Board #: 6
Play this hand online!	Vulnerable: E / W

	North	
	♠ J5	
	♥ AK5	
	♦ KJ95	
	♣ K853	
West		East
♠ AQT32		♠ 976
♥ T863		♥ J97
♦ 83		♦ Q74
♣ 62		♣ QJT9
	South	
	♠ K84	
	♥ Q42	
	♦ AT62	
	♣ A74	

A different dummy. (At last!)

What's the best line of play?

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

Lead: ♠ 3

We reach 3NT and partner finally puts down a different Spade suit. Hurrah! West still leads a low Spade, though, and we have to put some thought into the play of the hand.

Our **count** reveals that we have eight certain tricks (to wit: one Spade after this opening lead, three Hearts, two Diamonds and two Clubs). Where's the ninth? And how should we play the Spades?

Well, the Diamonds are laid out in the manner of a classic two-way finesse. We could play either East or West for the ♦Q and finesse against that player. In short, it's a straight 50-50 guess.

What about the opening lead – does that give us any help? Well, there is no cost in trying the ♠J. 75% of the time East will put the ♠Q or the ♠A on that and make the play redundant but here West has led from the ♠A Q so the ♠J holds.

This now makes 3NT secure. The ♠K is protected should West lead the suit – West is the **safe hand** (and East is the **danger hand**).


Accordingly, we must take the Diamond finesse ensuring that East cannot gain the lead. This means cashing the ♦K first (you never know, the Queen might fall) and then running the ♦J. As the cards actually lie that wins the trick but 3NT would have been secure had West been able to take the ♦Q. That player could not have attacked Spades again and you would have still had nine available tricks. As it is, you have ten.



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VB#10 8 General deals Y2 ACOL	Contract: 3N
Date: 07/10/2015	By: South
Dealer: South	Board #: 7
Play this hand online!	Vulnerable: All

	North	
	♠ J5	
	♥ AQ4	
	♦ KJ95	
	♣ Q853	
West		East
♠ KT632		♠ A97
♥ T83		♥ J976
♦ Q83		♦ T7
♣ 62		♣ KJT9
	South	
	♠ Q84	
	♥ K52	
	♦ A642	
	♣ A74	

What should you do here?

Does this deal have echoes of Hand 6?

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

Lead: ♠ 3

We reach 3NT and partner puts down a similar dummy to Hand 6. Hmm. West still leads a low Spade and we have to make the best we can of this one.

Our **Count** reveals that we have six top tricks (discounting Spades) in three Hearts, two Diamonds and a Club. Where are the other three tricks coming from?

The Diamonds might come in for four tricks – we'd have to hope for a bit of luck here, though – and what about the Spades? What should we play at trick one? Is it right to try the ♠J from dummy?

In reverse order – certainly not! As declarer you have a certain Spade trick by playing small from dummy at trick one. The play of the ♠J can only jeopardise that – should you play high from the table you might lose the first five Spade tricks. Study the layout here – playing the ♠J is fatal to your side. In Hand 6 the play of the ♠J cost you nothing. Here, it gains you nothing. An interesting and instructive contrast.

East takes the ♠A at trick one and returns one (the ♠9). To maintain communications with his partner West astutely ducks that to the ♠J on the table, while following suit with the ♠2. You now should realise that Spades are 5-3 and that allowing the opponents on lead would be fatal.

Any attempt to make tricks in Clubs is futile – if you play up to the ♣Q you'd go down even if West held the ♣K.

The only chance is to rely on four Diamond tricks. The best play in the suit is the finesse-and-break, that is: play for West to have started with ♦Q × ×. It's not a great chance but it's the best one you have – significantly better than cashing the ♦A K and hoping the ♦Q falls.

So you play the ♦A and play a Diamond to the ♦J (you are allowed to cross your fingers as you do so). Today is your lucky day. West has the hoped-for combination and you have your four Diamond tricks.


That's enough for game so you can run for home.



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VB#10 8 General deals Y2 ACOL	Contract: 3N
Date: 07/10/2015	By: South
Dealer: South	Board #: 8
Play this hand online!	Vulnerable: None

	North		
	♠ Q6		
	♥ K8		
	♦ J85		
	♣ KQT653		
West		East	
♠ AK952		♠ J74	
♥ 97653		♥ T42	
♦ 4		♦ K762	
♣ 72		♣ AJ9	
	South		
	♠ T83		
	♥ AQJ		
	♦ AQT93		
	♣ 84		

Partner is very proud of his dummy here.

It's just what you want to see – right?

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

Lead: ♠ 5

You reach 3NT and partner's hand is something of a nightmare. There is nothing wrong – in theory – with raising 1NT to 3NT with that North hand but North's touching faith in the playing strength of his Club suit is not matched by the cards in your hand. Life's like that sometimes.

As well as having no Club fit you don't appear to have a Spade stop either – so at first glance it seems as though East-West will simply cash the first four or five Spades and follow that with the ♣A. However, you mustn't give up hope – if it breathes it isn't a corpse.

The first point is that you have no choice but to make the desperation play of the ♠Q at trick one. It may be unlikely that West has underled the ♠A K but it's not impossible either. There is no other holding where you might make a Spade trick (it's futile to play small from table as you would have done had dummy had ♠Q × × rather than ♠Q ×).

To your surprise the ♠Q holds. Now you need to turn your attention to Diamonds where five tricks would allow you to land this unlikely game. Yes, you need the Diamond finesse to be working but you shouldn't be careless. If you lead the ♦J from table you would have to remember to throw the ♦9 under that so that you could run the ♦8 next.

Slightly more elegant is to lead the ♦8 and run it on the first round. When that holds the trick you are conveniently placed to run the ♦J, revealing the 4-1 Diamond split. These machinations leave you still where you need to be – in the dummy – to take the third Diamond finesse.

After playing a Diamond to the ♦10 you can claim the necessary nine tricks (one Spade, three Hearts and five Diamonds) and can graciously concede the remainder.

Note that leading the ♦J on the first round and then playing a Diamond to the ♦9 would put you in the wrong hand. Oops. One down.

Note also that the defenders cannot beat 3NT on this layout of the cards. Even if West starts off with the ♠A K the suit is **blocked** and the defence cannot run five tricks there. You could

always establish an eighth trick for the ♣K Q
and take the Diamond finesse anyway.