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These hands practise spotting and taking a 'Marked Finesse'.
Part 1 of 2. ACOL version. Updated Summer 2015

VB#16 Y1 The Marked Finesse. Part 1 ACOL	Contract: 4H By: South
Date: 07/10/2015	Board #: 1
Dealer: North	Vulnerable: None
Play this hand online!	

	North		
	♠ A53		
	♥ J965		
	♦ 8643		
	♣ K4		
West		East	
♠ QJT4		♠ K86	
♥		♥ Q82	
♦ Q52		♦ KT97	
♣ JT9876		♣ 532	
	South		
	♠ 972		
	♥ AKT743		
	♦ AJ		
	♣ AQ		

A *finesse* is a technique where you attempt to nullify the power of a high card held by an opponent, by leading *through* it. In practice, it is easier to see an example than to describe it. Still, we'll give it a go...

One opponent has an important high card that can beat your second best card. By leading *through* that opponent you can force him to commit himself. If he plays high you can deal with it – if he plays low you can cope with that as well.

How do you *know* how the cards lie? Well, that's the whole point of this particular series. The cards will be marked...

Finesses come in many forms, shapes and disguises. You'll see the basic idea in this series.

Later series will expand on this idea, and allow you to employ what is one of the most important card-play techniques in bridge. This series lays down the foundation work.

In Hand 1 you discover something about the trump suit very early in the piece.

West	North	East	South
-	P	P	1♥
P	2♥	P	4♥
P	P	P	

Lead: ♣ J

Bidding.

After two Passes we have an obvious opening bid of 1♥, which partner raises gently to 2♥. Holding 18 points and a six-card trump suit there is sufficient for a shot at game.

Play.

West leads the ♣J against 4♥, presumably from a sequence in Clubs, and we pause to **Count** and **Plan**. As this is a suit contract we really ought to count *winners* and *losers*.

We can count six winners off the top (one Spade, two Hearts, one Diamond and, irritatingly, only two Clubs) and we can't avoid losing two Spades and a Diamond. Therefore, we must avoid losing any tricks in trumps. If we could manage to do that then the Heart suit would give us the extra four tricks we need.

We win the opening lead in the closed hand with the ♣A, to preserve the few entries to dummy that we have, then start drawing trumps by cashing the ♥A, hoping that the Hearts split 2-1. The odds, you may note, are heavily in our favour. A 2-1 break occurs 78% of the time so it's only about one time in five that trumps break 3-0.

This, though, is that 22% chance; we don't get the 2-1 split we were hoping for as West shows out on the Ace of trumps, leaving East with the ♥Q 8 remaining. We still can't afford a Heart loser and cashing the ♥K would set up the ♥Q as a winner for the opponents. We must nullify the threat of that errant Queen, and the (only) way to do that is to lead through it.

We cross to dummy with the ♠A. (We could use the ♣K as an entry instead if you feel strongly about it) Now we lead a Heart from the table, making East play second on this trick. This is the crucial point: we must make our victim play second on the trick. Whichever card East chooses to play we have a counterplay.

Here, after East elects to follow with the ♥8, we play the ♥10 knowing that this card will win the trick. At this point East only has the ♥Q left so we play the ♥K to stamp on it.

What can you do about it, though?

This technique of preventing an opponent making a trick with a high card, which is not an outright winner, by playing through the hand that holds it is called a *finesse*. It is one of the most important (and common) card-play techniques to master.

After we take three rounds of trumps we find ourselves with the first five tricks and all the trumps have been extracted. Our three remaining trumps plus the \spadesuit A and the \clubsuit K give us five more tricks and an easy route to the contract. In essence we make one Spade, six Hearts, one Diamond and two Clubs.


The contract is made by noticing West discard on the first round of Hearts, deducing that East has the \heartsuit Q, then crossing to dummy and finessing against the Queen.

Note that if West had started with the \heartsuit Q 8 2 then $4\heartsuit$ would have failed. If this were the case there would have been no way to finesse against West's irritating Queen.



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VB#16 Y1 The Marked Finesse. Part 1 ACOL	Contract: 3N
Date: 07/10/2015	By: South
Dealer: East	Board #: 2
Play this hand online!	Vulnerable: None

	North		
	♠ A52		
	♥ K9		
	♦ AQT53		
	♣ 843		
West		East	
♠ J9		♠ 87643	
♥ 643		♥ AQJ7	
♦ J984		♦	
♣ QJT5		♣ K976	
	South		
	♠ KQT		
	♥ T852		
	♦ K762		
	♣ A2		

We all like suits to break nicely for us. The trouble is, sometimes they don't.

When the Great Dealer in the Sky decides it's time for a suit to split badly you have to be ready and prepared.

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

Lead: ♣ Q

Bidding.

After East Passes as dealer we open 1NT with our 12 points and 4·4·3·2 shape. Partner raises to 3NT without further ado and that (unsurprisingly) ends the auction.

Play.

We get the ♣Q lead against 3NT, presumably from the ♣Q J 10, and take time to **Count** our top tricks and to make a sensible **Plan**.

We can count seven *top tricks* (three Spades, three Diamonds and the ♣A). Diamonds should provide two more (and five in all) provided that the suit behaves in a friendly manner.

Having taken the ♣A at trick one it doesn't matter in which hand we win the first Diamond trick. A four-card suit is not really "short" under the meaning of the act so the "*play the high cards from the short side first*" rule hardly applies in this case.

We are missing the ♦J 9 8 4. If East has them all we cannot avoid losing a trick. It is worthwhile checking this assertion out; provided East covers any Diamond we care to lead from dummy he could always force a trick for himself.

However, if West has them all (as is the case in this layout of the cards) then we have time to play the ♦A then cross back to the ♦K to take the finesse against the ♦J.

This is the play in detail. We win the first trick with the ♣A and hope to run off five Diamond tricks immediately. However, when we cash dummy's ♦A East, on our right, shows out. We now know West has the ♦J on our left (we say "West is marked with the ♦J") so we return to hand with the ♦K before leading a third Diamond **through** West.

What can the poor fellow do? When he follows suit resignedly with the ♦9 we confidently play the ♦10 from the table, *finessing against the ♦J*, before playing the ♦Q to drop the last remaining Diamond. That leaves dummy's last Diamond as a master.

At this point we are in sight of home and only need to cash the remaining Diamond and the three top Spades. As counted originally, 3NT makes via three Spades, five Diamonds and a Club.


The contract succeeds because we are able to use the **marked finesse** to stop West from gaining a Diamond trick despite holding ♦J 9 8 4.



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VB#16 Y1 The Marked Finesse. Part 1 ACOL	Contract: 4H By: South
Date: 07/10/2015	Board #: 3
Dealer: South	Vulnerable: None
Play this hand online!	

	North	
	♠ KJ	
	♥ KQ2	
	♦ QJ	
	♣ JT9543	
West		East
♠ T9872		♠ 6543
♥ 9		♥ J765
♦ 8543		♦ A97
♣ A87		♣ KQ
	South	
	♠ AQ	
	♥ AT843	
	♦ KT62	
	♣ 62	

Once again you need to deal with an annoying bad break, and cope with a defender's irritating holding.

The opposition will try to foil you, but we are sure you can handle it.

West	North	East	South
-	-	-	1♥
P	2♣	P	2♦
P	4♥	P	P
P			

Lead: ♠ T

Bidding.

As dealer we open 1♥ and see partner respond 2♣. With these moderate 5-4 hands it is best to show the second suit, provided it can be done cheaply (below the level of the first suit). Accordingly, we rebid 2♦.

Now, if partner hates the whole business he could retreat to 2♥ (giving *simple preference*) and we'd Pass. However, partner does **not** hate the whole business – on the contrary, he has a good hand (13 points) with useful Heart support. Therefore he leaps to 4♥ and we have nothing further to add.

Play.

West, predictably, leads a Spade (the unbid suit) and selects the ♠10, presumably the top of some sort of sequential holding.

Our **Count** and **Plan** reveals three inescapable *losers* (two top Clubs and a Diamond) so we cannot afford to lose a trump trick.

In terms of *winners* we can count five top tricks (three Hearts and, annoyingly, only two Spades), leaving Diamonds to provide three more once the ♦A is knocked out.

Hearts will be worth five tricks in all on a normal 3-2 break, so there are sufficient winners in sight. We expect to make two Spades, five Hearts and three Diamonds. With sufficient winners the normal plan is to draw trumps, and here there is little reason to defer extracting the enemy's trumps.

We choose to win the ♠K first. It's not critical (we could take the ♠Q or ♠A in hand), but we like the extra entry in the long Diamond hand. Next come the ♥K Q (*play the honours from the short side first*).

We get a small disappointment when West shows out on the second Heart but it is a cloud with a silver lining. If West has no trumps then we know East has the ♥J × remaining, and we can finesse against East for the Jack on the third round of trumps.

When we play the ♥2 from the table we crucially make East play next, the second player to this trick. With a shake of his head, East plays the ♥7 so we content ourselves with the ♥8, knowing that West on our left has nothing with which to beat it. Now there is but one Heart left, the ♥J, and we play the ♥A to squash it.

With trumps extracted the hand becomes easier and easier. All we need to do is to knock out the ♦A, so we play a Diamond towards the ♦Q J on the table. When the ♦A doesn't appear on either of these we play dummy's ♠J to our ♠A, to gain entry to our hand, and then play yet another Diamond (the ♦K) to set up the ♦10.

The defence finally take their ♦A and cash two Clubs, but then are forced to give us the lead back. We have a trump trick and the last Diamond for ten tricks and the game bonus.


4♥ comes home by seeing West show out of Hearts, marking East with the ♥J, allowing us to finesse against it. We take two Spades, five Hearts and three Diamonds.



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VB#16 Y1 The Marked Finesse. Part 1 ACOL	Contract: 3N By: South
Date: 07/10/2015	Board #: 4
Dealer: West	Vulnerable: None
Play this hand online!	

	North		
	♠ 843		
	♥ J72		
	♦ K9532		
	♣ A4		
West		East	
♠ KT72		♠ QJ6	
♥ K94		♥ QT85	
♦ J874		♦ T	
♣ 86		♣ QJT95	
	South		
	♠ A95		
	♥ A63		
	♦ AQ6		
	♣ K732		

These deals are designed to show you that you can often deal with opponents' high cards by **finessing** against them.

This technique prevents an opponent's high card from becoming a winner, but it helps if you know the location of the opposition's cards.

West	North	East	South
P	P	P	1♣
P	1♦	P	2NT
P	3NT	P	P
P			

Lead: ♠ 2

Bidding.

After three Passes we open 1♣ with our 4·3·3·3 17-count and see partner respond 1♦. Our most accurate rebid is 2NT to show 17-18 points and a balanced hand, giving North an easy raise to 3NT.

Play.

West finds the ♠2 lead – so that is probably from a four-card suit. Time to **Count** and **Plan**.

We can see seven *top tricks* (one Spade, one Heart, three Diamonds and two Clubs). Diamonds would provide two more tricks if the suit breaks 3-2. Is there any possibility of scoring five Diamond tricks if the suit breaks 4-1? Yes, but only in very limited circumstances. It is important that you see that most 4-1 breaks would be fatal to the cause, but one or two of these splits allow us to run off five Diamond winners.

We win the opening lead with the ♠A and test the waters by making the obvious play of cashing the ♦A Q, (*play the honours from the short side first*).

On the third trick, Murphy's Law kicks in ("Whatever can go wrong will go wrong"). We see East show out on the second Diamond, telling us that Diamonds are breaking 4-1 (a 28% chance) instead of the more friendly 3-2 (a 68% chance). Ho hum. *C'est la vie*.

Notice, though, that East's singleton is the ♦10. This is crucial. Diamonds are not splitting 3-2 but can still be picked up for five tricks as West started with ♦J 8 7 4

We now play the ♦6 from the closed hand through West's ♦J 8 and wait patiently to see what he does. When that hapless, helpless opponent plays the ♦8 we cover that with the ♦9 in the dummy, secure in the knowledge that it must win the trick. Had West played the ♦J we'd have had a counter to that by smacking it with the King. Heads West loses, tails we win.

The ♦K from the table now drops the only outstanding Diamond, leaving the ♦5 as a winner (which needs to be cashed immediately before it gets stranded in the dummy). We have six tricks now and all that remains is to take the ♣A K and the ♥A to secure our contract before losing interest in the rest.

3NT makes because we pay attention to the spot cards. When we see the ♦10 is singleton we know where the rest of the Diamonds are. We don't let a little thing like a 4-1 split stop us.


We counted five Diamond tricks at the start and that is what we make – add those to a Spade, a Heart and two Clubs and we have the magic nine tricks.



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VB#16 Y1 The Marked Finesse. Part 1 ACOL	Contract: 3N By: South
Date: 07/10/2015	Board #: 5
Dealer: North	Vulnerable: None
Play this hand online!	

	North	
	♠ A3	
	♥ 942	
	♦ A42	
	♣ KT632	
West		East
♠ J6		♠ Q9872
♥ KJ7		♥ QT63
♦ QT65		♦ K97
♣ J975		♣ 8
	South	
	♠ KT54	
	♥ A85	
	♦ J83	
	♣ AQ4	

The more you see the idea of a **marked finesse** the easier the play becomes.

Tied in with this idea is the oft-encountered rule of "*play the high cards from the short side first*".

How does that apply here? Well, you're about to see...

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

Lead: ♦ 5

Bidding.

After two Passes we open 1NT with 14 points and a 4·3·3·3 shape. Partner raises that to 2NT (showing that he must have 11 points – he is a Passed hand, remember) and we go on to game on the basis we are maximum for 1NT.

Play.

West leads the ♦5, which is probably the fourth-highest card from his longest suit. Time, as ever, to study the dummy in order to **Count** and **Plan**.

We can count seven *top tricks* (two Spades, one Heart, one Diamond and three Clubs). The Club suit should provide two more provided that they break 3-2 – so there may well be nine easy tricks.

We may as well run the Diamond lead round to our ♦J at trick one (you never know... West might have led a low Diamond from ♦K Q × × ×, say) but East takes the ♦K and returns the suit to the ♦A.

Now we must test the Clubs by playing the ♣A Q (*play the honours from the short suit first*) hoping for both defenders to follow to two rounds. That hope is short-lived when we see East show out on the second round.

However, now we know where the ♣J is we should realise that it is trapped underneath dummy's ♣K 10 and can be finessed. Note that if **East** had started with four Clubs he could not be denied a Club trick. We can deal with a 4-1 Club break but not a 1-4 Club break... (if you see what we mean).

When we play the ♣4 from the closed hand through West's remaining ♣J 9 we wait patiently for our left-hand opponent to choose a card. When he shrugs and plays the ♣9 we cover that with the ♣10, certain that it will win the trick. The ♣K picks off West's remaining Club (the ♣J) and the ♣6 remains as the only Club in town – and hence is a boss.

Dummy's long Club gives us our sixth trick then we run for home by cashing the ♠A K and ♥A to


make our contract.

3NT makes by paying attention to the Club split. Noticing the Cubs breaking 4-1 we are able to use the **marked finesse** to pick up West's ♣J and still avoid losing a trick in the suit.



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VB#16 Y1 The Marked Finesse. Part 1 ACOL	Contract: 4S By: South
Date: 07/10/2015	Board #: 6
Dealer: East	Vulnerable: None
Play this hand online!	

	North		
	♠ K64		
	♥ AQ842		
	♦ J54		
	♣ K5		
West		East	
♠		♠ Q987	
♥ JT95		♥ 63	
♦ AKQ6		♦ T97	
♣ 96432		♣ QT87	
	South		
	♠ AJT532		
	♥ K7		
	♦ 832		
	♣ AJ		

Another day, another deal, another strange suit break.

(In point of fact, you're meeting more bad breaks in this set of deals than you will in the next month or so).

West	North	East	South
-	-	P	1♠
P	2♥	P	2♠
P	4♠	P	P
P			

Lead: ♦ A

Bidding.

After East Passes as dealer we have an obvious opening bid of 1♠. North responds 2♥ and we have to provide a rebid. With a minimum hand and long Spades that is easy enough – we simply bid 2♠. Partner (holding an opening bid himself) takes that to 4♠.

Play.

West (irritatingly) finds the ♦A lead and the defenders rapidly cash the first three Diamond tricks. After this poor start (for **us** – East-West are looking smug with three tricks under their belts) we need the rest of the tricks. Therefore we cannot afford a trump loser.

With nine cards in a suit headed by the Ace-King-Jack the percentage play is to play for the Queen to drop. In other words, we cash the two top Spades and hope that the ♠Q falls either singleton or doubleton. If one opponent started life with ♠Q × × then we'd lose a trick in trumps. Tough bananas – better luck next time.

However, we can improve our odds a little by taking out an insurance policy against East having all four Spades. It costs nothing to play the ♠K first (*play the high cards from the short side first* is good practice anyway) then if West shows out we can finesse against the ♠Q.

If Spades **are** 4-0 we'd need to take the finesse twice. What is more difficult to see, but is nonetheless important, is that if West started life with ♠Q 9 8 7 he could not be denied a trump trick no matter how we played.

After the defence take the first three Diamond tricks they switch to a Club which we win in the closed hand. We then start drawing trumps by playing the ♠2 to dummy's ♠K.

West does indeed show out on the first round of Spades but this marks the ♠Q as being in East's hand. We next play the ♠4 from the table (**through** our victim with the critical honour card) and East forlornly plays the ♠8, fully aware that we can beat whatever card he plays. We content ourselves with the ♠10, reserving

the ♠A for the job of taking the ♠Q later.

Since there are still two Spades outstanding we need to repeat the finesse. With that in mind we play the ♣J to North's ♣K purely to place the lead back in dummy. Now we play the ♠6 from the table – once again through our victim – and, once again, East has no winning option. When he plays the ♠9 we casually win with the ♠J before playing the ♠A to crush East's ♠Q.

That's job done. We dot the *is* and cross the *ts* by cashing the last two trumps and the ♥A K for ten tricks.

4♠ makes on this deal because we remember to play the high cards from the short suit first, identifying the 4-0 Spade distribution but positioning ourselves to overcome it. True, we need to finesse twice against East's ♠Q and that does need entries on the table. Problem? No problem!