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VB issue 17, year 2. The hold-up play revisited

VB#17 Y2 The hold-up (harder cases) Part 2 SA	Contract: 4S
Date: 07/07/2014	By: South
Dealer: North	Board #: 1
Play this hand online!	Vulnerable: None

North ♠ A983 ♥ A95 ♦ 854 ♣ K96			
West ♠ 4 ♥ KQT62 ♦ J76 ♣ T852		East ♠ K6 ♥ 84 ♦ QT932 ♣ A743	
South ♠ QJT752 ♥ J73 ♦ AK ♣ QJ			

We have already seen the idea of a *hold-up*; a simple play of not taking an early trick when we are able to do so.

The problem that most inexperienced players have with this play is that they hold up on all sorts of unsuitable hands – ducking becomes a reflex action. In these two series in this edition of V-Blue we are challenging you to get the early play right. Sometimes it will be right to hold up the first trick (or two) and sometimes it won't.

The hold-up is usually employed in No-trump contracts. Not always, though, as many of the following examples will show.

Here (Hand 1) you are playing in a suit contract. Should you just grab the first trick and draw trumps? If not, why not?

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

Lead: ♥ K

We reach game in Spades after an invitational auction of 1♠ – 3♠ – 4♠. Partner has his bid (11 points) but his hand is very flat. It's much nicer to see "shape" in the dummy in a trump contract – singletons, voids, even a doubleton. Still, you can't blame partner for what he doesn't have...

So, the first line of attack is to **Count, Plan, Execute**. Our Count shows one possible (make that "probable" with our finesse record) Spade loser, two Hearts and a Club. The *percentage play* in Spades is to take the finesse (twice as good as playing the ♠A, hoping to drop the ♠K singleton) but there are other considerations on this deal.

As always, the first part of our Plan is to **Read the Lead**. The opening lead of the ♥K promises the ♥Q also. If we go up with the ♥A at trick 1, we will be in danger if East gains the lead. He'll be able to lead a Heart through our remaining ♥J × into West's remaining ♥Q and ♥10.

If however, we hold-up at trick 1, we will have created a problem for West. Another Heart lead will give us a second winner. We still have our ♥A in dummy and the ♥J in our hand. This is a variation on the **Bath Coup** where declarer ducks the lead of a King holding ♥A J ×, hoping for a lead into the Ace-Jack tenace at trick two. In this precise version we have a *split tenace* in Hearts but the effect is the same.

At trick 1, East plays the ♥8, showing what we can assume to be the start of a High-Low. West may assume that his partner is showing him the ♥J – who knows? These are murky waters. Anyway, for better or for worse West decides to continue Hearts and leads the ♥Q. So at trick 2, we bash the ♥Q with the ♥A (and notice the master ♥J smiling at us in our hand).

Now, it may appear that the best play is to cross to hand (the ♦K is a handy entry) and to run the ♠Q. There is danger in that line, though. On other days, other layouts East might win the ♠K, play a Club to his partner's ♣A and get a Heart ruff. Oops! We can afford one Spade loser but not two.

So the best play is to get rid of as many trumps as we can as quickly as possible by playing the

♠A and another Spade. Some days the ♠K will fall singleton (at which point we would slyly wink at our opponent and advise him to "Keep your cards up!"). Here nothing so spectacular happens. Both opponents follow with low Spades. At trick 4, we let them take their ♠K. All that's left is to give the opponents their ♣A and we can claim the rest. We only lose the ♣A, the ♥K and the ♠K.

Now – a codicil. Suppose West had shifted suits at trick 2 (to a Diamond, say). No matter. Although we have no second trick in Hearts we can set up a Club winner in dummy on which to throw the losing Heart from hand. We'll leave it to you to work out the exact sequence of plays. It's a case of heads we win, tails they lose. (But not if you take the ♥A at trick one! Now it's heads you lose, tails they win).


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VB#17 Y2 The hold-up (harder cases) Part 1 SA
 Date: 07/07/2014
 Dealer: East
[Play this hand online!](#)

Contract: 4S
 By: South
 Board #: 2
 Vulnerable: N / S

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

Lead: ♥ 5


You are in a 4♠ contract against a low Heart lead, and are in danger of losing too many tricks (so what else is new?)

If you take the ♥A at trick 1, there is a possibility of losing four tricks (one Heart, one Club and two Diamonds). True, you'd be unlucky to lose all of that – East would have to be sitting with the ♣K, the ♦A and West with an all-important entry card (the ♥Q). Still – when you live in a country where it always rains, why not take an umbrella...?

Look at the full deal. If we take the ♥A, draw trumps and take the Club finesse, when it fails, (again, what else is new?) East will still have a Heart to lead to his pal in West. Then West switches to a Diamond, through the ♦K, and we lose two Diamonds to go with the ♣K and ♥Q. Not good.

We are too smart, now that we are learning about the hold-up and how it might be used in suit contracts. We duck the ♥K, preventing East from ever bouncing the lead to West. This way we avoid losing two Diamond tricks.

Notice how if East had not grabbed his ♦A, we could have taken an overtrick? Hmmm. He did his job, too.

North ♠ Q873 ♥ J7 ♦ K9 ♣ AJ965			
West ♠ T ♥ Q9653 ♦ J632 ♣ 743		East ♠ 62 ♥ K842 ♦ AQ74 ♣ K82	
South ♠ AKJ954 ♥ AT ♦ T85 ♣ QT			

Another suit contract.

Draw trumps, take finesses and claim, right?

Up to a point, maybe. Up to a point...


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VB#17 Y2 The hold-up (harder cases) Part 1 SA	Contract: 4H
Date: 07/07/2014	By: South
Dealer: South	Board #: 3
Play this hand online!	Vulnerable: E / W

North ♠ 653 ♥ 32 ♦ AJ86 ♣ A754		East ♠ KT987 ♥ 8 ♦ KQT3 ♣ KQ8	
West ♠ Q2 ♥ A54 ♦ 9742 ♣ J632		South ♠ AJ4 ♥ KQJT976 ♦ 5 ♣ T9	

This deal has problems in the bidding and problems in the play (so what else is new?)

Do you have any idea how to play the thing?

West	North	East	South
-	-	-	1♥
P	1NT	2♠	3♥
P	4♥	P	P
P			

Lead: ♠ Q

We open 1♥ and partner responds with the jack-of-all-trades 1NT, showing a poor responding hand (about 6-9 points). East decides he has enough to intervene with 2♠ and we have our first problem.

Surely we have a right to compete with 3♥ holding such a lovely suit? We can't sell out to 2♠, after all. Oops! Partner looks intently at his cards and decides we are showing a strong hand (maybe he's right). With two juicy Aces he thinks he has a sound raise to game. If this fails it will be our fault, that's for sure...

West leads the ♠Q and we count losers and winners. There are two losers in Spades, one in Hearts and one in Clubs. Hmmm. One too many. For winners there are three Aces and six trumps. Nine winners, four losers. Nothing new there...

Let's try visualizing the Spades. We know West only has two (or even a singleton, but probably a doubleton). His most likely holding is ♠Q ×

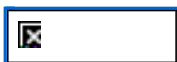
If we hold up on the first Spade trick, we can turn our ♠J into a happy winner, as we can take the ♠K with our ♠A and have the ♠J left for dessert.

If we were to take the ♠A at trick 1, when the opponents get in with their ♥A, whoever is on lead (and it won't matter) will lead another Spade and then give West a Spade ruff. Too sad to contemplate.

So at trick 1, we play low. At trick 2, we play our ♠A over East's ♠K, and it all comes together quickly. We will lose our ♥A, but West can't prevail, having no Spade to return. When we regain the lead on the next trick, we get back to our hand with a Diamond ruff. Then we pull the rest of the trumps, and with a smile, concede the lonely little club trick.


This hand does depend on a little luck. If East were to hold the ♥A, he would win that trick and give West a Spade to ruff. But, if there is only one line of play that wins, you have to pray to the card gods (who often ignore our pleas, just like the golf gods) and just go for it. Usually,

good things happen to people who do things
good.


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VB#17 Y2 The hold-up (harder cases) Part 1 SA	Contract: 4H
Date: 07/07/2014	By: South
Dealer: West	Board #: 4
Play this hand online!	Vulnerable: All

North		
♠ 94		
♥ 432		
♦ A763		
♣ K842		
West		East
♠ KQT872		♠ J5
♥ QT9		♥ J7
♦ J9		♦ QT852
♣ A6		♣ T973
South		
♠ A63		
♥ AK865		
♦ K4		
♣ QJ5		

Being a control freak isn't necessarily a bad thing.

The secret to making this contract is to lose your losers when you want to, not at the behest of the defenders.

West	North	East	South
1♠	P	P	X
P	2♣	P	2♥
P	3♥	P	4♥
P	P	P	

Lead: ♠ K

When we pick up our hand as South, we are delighted. It's a decent 17 count with a good suit. We plan to open 1♥ and then do something interesting with our rebid. But West beats us to it, and when the bidding gets around to us, we have a wee problem.

These are difficult situations, in the "balancing" seat. Quite often we would bid on thin air, just to prevent the opponents from stealing the hand at the one-level (or to push them beyond their comfort zone). So a simple 2♥ overcall doesn't do this hand justice. 1NT in this position shows a weaker hand than this, too.

So, with a choice of rotten apples, we Double, hoping the sun shines. When we rebid Hearts over North's 2♣ response, we are showing a good hand (with anything less we'd have Passed). Fortunately, partner realizes the significance of the sequence and raises Hearts, so we try game.

Initially, it looks like this will be simple. Our Count shows one Spade loser (the other being ruffed in dummy), a Heart loser (we have to bank on a 3-2 break) and the ♣A.

But, the best laid plans of mice and men... at trick 1, East's ♠J indicates that he'll be ruffing the third round of Spades also. And (unless he has only trumps lower than the ♥2!!) he'll be overruffing dummy. That might not matter if East started with three trumps (he'd be ruffing with a trick he'd make anyway) but it would be bad news if he could overruff with a doubleton Heart. We need to come up with Plan B.

If we hold-up on the first round of Spades and win the second, we will retain control of the suit.

At trick 3 and 4, we will pull two rounds of trumps, and then ruff our last Spade. If East overtrumps, it will be with the card we have already counted as a loser.

As luck would have it, we get our Spade ruff, as East started out with only two Spades and two trumps. We still have our ♣A to lose and the high Heart, but the rest are ours.

Another instance when the hold-up works – this time to retain control of the hand.


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VB#17 Y2 The hold-up (harder cases) Part 1 SA	Contract: 3N
Date: 07/07/2014	By: South
Dealer: North	Board #: 5
Play this hand online!	Vulnerable: N / S

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

Lead: ♠ 5

3NT is easy to reach – a drive along the freeway. What about the play, though?

The initial **Count** of top tricks shows that we are three tricks short of our needed nine for our 3NT contract. (We have three Hearts, one Diamond and one Club. A Spade trick is certain after the lead)

By the way, we'd like to thank North for recognizing the value of the diamond suit in a No-trump contract rather than in a diamond contract. The Equality Act does not apply in bridge – Diamonds and Clubs are definitely second class citizens...

Anyway, Diamonds is the obvious source of extra tricks in 3NT – and could pull in five tricks if the Diamond finesse succeeds. Even if it loses there are four tricks to be had.

However we need to protect ourselves from the upcoming Spade slaughter if we make a mis-step.

Our success begins when we recognize East as being short in Spades. The purpose of the hold-up is to rob the opponents (pun intended) of the ability to return the Danger Suit later in the hand.

Once East produces the ♠Q we can duck the first Spade trick. It is vitally important to note that the remaining ♠K J still acts as a certain stopper, so the opponents cannot run off the entire Spade suit.

When East is out of Spades, we don't really care **who** has the ♦K. If West has it, we have five Diamond tricks. If East wins the finesse, he can't lead a Spade through our winner because he doesn't have one.

Note that the hold up only works because East produced the ♠Q. Had he played, for example, the ♠10 at trick one then ducking would have been dangerous, even fatal (West would have been marked with ♠A Q × × (×) and a Spade continuation would sink 3NT).

North
 ♠ 842
 ♥ K97
 ♦ AQJ75
 ♣ T6

West
 ♠ AT753
 ♥ 864
 ♦ 82
 ♣ K94



East
 ♠ Q6
 ♥ T532
 ♦ K3
 ♣ Q7532


South
 ♠ KJ9
 ♥ AQJ
 ♦ T964
 ♣ AJ8

This is a subtly different hand from some of the others. There is still a decision to make early on, though.


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VB#17 Y2 The hold-up (harder cases) Part 1 SA	Contract: 4S
Date: 07/07/2014	By: South
Dealer: East	Board #: 6
Play this hand online!	Vulnerable: E / W

North		
♠ 64		
♥ QT52		
♦ KT53		
♣ Q62		
West		East
♠ 3		♠ A875
♥ J7643		♥ 8
♦ QJ76		♦ A984
♣ 873		♣ AT95
South		
♠ KQJT92		
♥ AK9		
♦ 2		
♣ KJ4		

Honors in the opponents' suit should cause you to downgrade your hand. They often serve no useful purpose and are wasted values.

Like here, maybe?

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

Lead: ♦ Q

We have a lovely hand, and are a little surprised when East opens 1♦. Too strong to overcall 1♠ we Double, intending to show Spades on the next round and (by implication) a very good hand.

West is the sort of player who would start an argument in an empty room and he is in there fighting, raising to 2♦. North (having heard us make a take-out Double) is fully entitled to enter the fray with 2♥ and now we have heard enough. Brushing partner's Hearts aside we take a pot at 4♠. West fishes out the ♦Q and we see whether we can reel this one in.

We **Read the Lead**, and see that West must have the ♦J as backup for the ♦Q and East is marked with the ♦A. Our ♦K is toast. We will revisit this suit, however.

Our loser Count shows one Spade, one Diamond and one Club (those seem to be the three aces we are missing). It looks too easy, in that initially it looks like we are going to ruff the second Diamond trick, pull trumps and then set up the Clubs.

The next question is "What can go wrong?" Let's consider the Diamonds. If East leads a Diamond every time he's on lead, he will **tap** us (make us trump in our hand) until we have the same number of trumps that he does. That means after we pull trumps, we'll be playing this in No-trumps, and they'll have a winning Diamond.

Plan A (covering the ♦Q lead with the ♦K) won't work.

Plan B. Let's look at North's Diamonds again. They are useless, right?

Wrong! What if we hold-up on the first Diamond trick and allow the ♦Q to win the trick? At trick 2, we'll cover whatever West leads. If he plays the ♦J we'll put the ♦K on that, which East will cover with the ♦A. If West leads a small Diamond we'll insert the ♦10, forcing the ♦A and leaving the ♦K as an established winner. Now if East leads them again he won't be tapping us and we can continue with our initial plan of pulling trumps and forcing out the ♣A.

The key to this hand is not to allow yourself to get forced to ruff Diamonds in hand. If you cover the opening lead (put the ♦K on the ♦Q) you cannot recover – you will go down. It is an instructive deal.