

This set of four deals looks at some subtle card combinations. You need to think carefully about your play on these deals...

Hand 1: We have seen this theme before but it is an important one so it bears repetition.

Besides, you may find it useful for the puzzle that is Hand 2...

| West | North | East | South |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| - | $P$ | $P$ | $2 N T$ |
| $P$ | $3 N T$ | $P$ | $P$ |
| $P$ |  |  |  |

## Lead: $\vee K$

You reach 3NT after opening 2NT and dummy has both good features and bad features. The Diamond suit (a five-carder headed by the $\forall A$ $K$ ) is very good news but the mutual Heart shortage is not. A Heart lead will leave you exposed to a further attack in that suit and sure enough - West leads the VK . What is the best line of play?

You may as well duck the first Heart. On some lucky days a confused defender may then try his luck elsewhere. Not here - West's Hearts are so good he persists with them enthusiastically. So you take the $\vee$ A at trick two and should realise that you need to cash the next eight tricks. If you allow the opponents to gain the lead they are sure to defeat you with their set-up Hearts.

Counting your winners you see three Spades (maybe four with a 3-3 break), one Heart, three Diamonds (maybe five if that suit comes in) and no Clubs. On a more friendly lead you'd be able to establish two Club tricks but here - with wide open Hearts - you can't afford to do that.

So the focus of the deal is Diamonds - can you make five Diamond tricks? On a normal 3-2 break it would be easy. Can you pick up a bad break, though? If East has long Diamonds (four or five of them) then the answer is no - it cannot be done. But what if West is hiding a guilty secret and has long Diamonds? Can we nullify them? Yes is the answer but we have to play with precision.

After taking the $\vee A$ we then cash the $\diamond$ Q. If East were to show out we could lead the $\$ 10$ next and pick up the entire suit, no matter how West defended. Here, though, that obscure chance does not materialise as both defenders follow suit. So we lead the $\$ 10$ next (an essential play) to unblock the suit in the event of a 4-1 break.

West plays low, naturally enough, and we take the $\nabla$. If East had followed we would have known the suit was splitting 3-2 and we'd have just cashed out the Diamonds. As it is, we have a textbook marked finesse. Returning to hand with a Spades we finesse against the $\downarrow$ J and the rest is easy.

Nine tricks come from three Spades (that suit does not break for us either), one Heart, five Diamonds and no Clubs.


You should notice that there is an identical suit combination in this deal to one that appeared in Hand 1.

So how do you play this deal? What makes this hand different?

| West | North | East | South |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| - | - | $P$ | $1 N T$ |
| $P$ | $2 N T$ | $P$ | $3 N T$ |
| $P$ | $P$ | $P$ |  |

Lead: 4
On this deal you reach 3NT after an invitational bidding sequence and West kicks off with a low Spade lead.

By the age-old practice of counting tricks you can see straight away that you have one Spade trick (you had no guarantee of that had you broached the suit yourself but you must make a trick in the suit once the defenders lead it), one Heart trick and three Diamond tricks. It's a simple matter to set up two Club tricks so your contract depends on picking up Diamonds for five tricks.

Is this deal a repeat of Hand 1? After all, the suit is identical. Well, maybe. However, we have other matters to attend to first.

East-West play three rounds of Spades, allowing us to take the $\stackrel{\wedge \text { Q on the table. When }}{ }$ East shows out on the third Spade we should realise that we cannot make this hand if West has the A. If he has that card then he will have one Club and four Spades to cash. Note that we simply have to play on Clubs to make sufficient tricks.

Que sera sera. We lead a Club off the dummy at trick two to the J and - when it holds - play another to the $\&$. This sets up the necessary two Club tricks. Note that we cannot afford to play Diamonds before Clubs as then we'd remove the essential link between dummy and the closed hand.

East takes the \& A and plays the Eschewing the tainted finesse (we don't need it for the contract and, anyway, West has signalled his liking for Hearts) we take the $\vee$ A and set about Diamonds. What is the best and most precise play to land five Diamond tricks?

Well, anything reasonable works if the suit splits 3-2 and nothing works if Diamonds are 5-0. If West has four Diamonds you cannot make the hand without a peek into his cards. So the focus here is picking up four Diamond tricks when East has $\uparrow \mathcal{J} \times \times$.

The correct (and only winning) line of play is to cash the $\star$ A first, unblocking the $\$ 10$ from dummy. Then you play a Diamond to the $\downarrow$ Q.

This way you have cashed two rounds of the suit and are still where you want to be - on table - to discover if the suit is splitting well or badly. Now you are over here you must take that $k$ and then you can revert to Diamonds, taking the marked finesse.

Not easy, and all but impossible if you have never seen this theme before. Well, now you have...


A long suit and plenty of tricks. A superfluity of winners, in fact. Unfortunately, you are in danger of losing too many tricks first.

How, precisely, should you draw trumps?

| West | North | East | South |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| - | - | - | 34 |
| $P$ | $4 a$ | $P$ | $P$ |
| $P$ |  |  |  |

Lead: A
Here you open 3s on your eight-card suit and partner - holding quick tricks in the form of the \& K K Q and the vA K - raises you to 4. Note that a bid of 3NT on the North cards would have been a truly awful bid - try playing that after East leads the J . When partner opens with a pre-emptive $3 \vee$ or $395 \%$ of the time your two choices of response are to raise him to game or to Pass.

Anyway, the play's the thing. On the sight of dummy you see that you would have an easy time making this contract had West led a Club or a Heart as you could have dumped your Diamond losers. Unluckily for you, fate dealt him the $\star$ A so he had an easy lead. After West cashes the top Diamonds you contemplate a dummy full of master cards but with the prospect of losing two trump tricks. The focus of this deal is how to play Spades so as to lose one trump trick only.

Now, with nine trumps missing the Ace-Queen it is normal to finesse against the Queen, which makes it hard to see why that would be the wrong play here. The point is that you cannot repeat the finesse as you only have one trump on table. By playing a Spade to the aJ (or equivalent) you would be hoping that East held precisely $\& \mathbf{Q}$. No other holding helps you. Were the Spades 3-1 then you would have two losers without the option.

Now consider the alternative play of a Spade to the $\Delta \mathrm{K}$. This works if East has $\Delta \mathrm{A} \times$ (an exactly equal chance to East having $\wedge Q \times$ ) and also if East has $\uparrow A \times \times$, giving West the singleton Queen. Note that the layout where West holds the singleton Ace is useless to you - there would be no way of avoiding two trump losers.

So putting up the $\boldsymbol{\Delta K}$ gives you two chances as against finessing the $\quad \mathrm{J}$ which gives you one. On that basis you should play a Spade to the aK and see how your luck is today.
"Good" is the answer as the $\triangle \mathrm{Q}$ comes down and you rack up your game for the loss of one trump and two Diamonds.


A game contract reached with a minimum of fuss. You have enough points for game but you have a lack of entries to the table. (That's the penalty for picking up too good a hand!)

So... what is the best way to go about the time-honoured line of "Draw trumps and claim"

| West | North | East | South |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| $P$ | $P$ | $P$ | $1 \downarrow$ |
| $P$ | $2 \vee$ | $P$ | $4 \vee$ |
| $P$ | $P$ | $P$ |  |

Lead: 2
This deal shows a near-identical theme to Hand 3 but in a more prosaic setting.

You bid rapidly $1 \vee-2 \vee-4 \vee$ and West has a disgusting choice of opening leads. Leading from $\mathrm{J} \times \times \times$ is a strong contender to cough up a trick to the opponents, a trump is out of the question and a Diamond could be too passive. So West decides, not unreasonably, to go on the attack and lead a low Club. Many players would rather sell their children into slavery than lead from a King but this West has no truck with such nonsense - a Club lead is as likely to be right (or wrong) as any other on his hand.

As the cards lie West could lead anything (bar a Heart) and it would make little difference. You are always going to lose two Club tricks (any potential discard on the $\$ \mathrm{Q} 9$ is of no use to you) and the focus of this deal is (as in Hand 3) the trump suit. How should you play Hearts so that you minimise the chance of losing two Heart tricks?

Now, if dummy had copious entries the correct play is - without argument - to lead Hearts up to the PK J 1097 and to finesse against the $\vee Q$. If that goes well (either by holding the trick or by forcing the $\vee \mathrm{A}$ ) then you would cross back to table and repeat the process.

However... the can be no repletion of procedure on this deal. Dummy has one entry (the $\uparrow \mathrm{A}$ ) and no more. After you have taken your Heart finesse, then what? Suppose you crossed to the $\uparrow A$ here and played a Heart to the $\vee 9$ and West played the $\vee A$. Now what? The answer is that you would have no option but to lead Hearts from hand and that means laying down the $\vee K$, hoping and praying East started with $\vee Q \times$. If he started with $\vee Q \times \times$ then you would fail; indeed you cannot make your contract.

So we need to look again at this suit combination. If we can play it only once from the dummy is it right to finesse the $\vee \mathrm{J}$ ? Why not play the $\vee K$ ? That works if East were to hold either $\vee A \times$ or $\vee A \times \times$, giving you two chances as against one. The arguments are precisely the same as on Hand 3.

It's the lack of entries to dummy, note, that forces you into this unnatural play.

