



A series of deals all about the hold-up. When and why (and also when not) to hold up. Standard American version.

VB#23 Year 1 The Hold-up I. Part 1 SA.	Contract: 3N
Date: 20/10/2014	By: South
Dealer: North	Board #: 1
Play this hand online!	Vulnerable: None

North		East
♠ 73		♠ QJ6
♥ K8		♥ 942
♦ AT952		♦ K83
♣ K753		♣ QT86
West		South
♠ KT842		♠ A95
♥ QT73		♥ AJ65
♦ 74		♦ QJ6
♣ J4		♣ A92

This series (and its close relative to be found elsewhere in this edition of V-Blue) is focusing on *hold-up plays*. A hold-up play is when declarer refuses to win the first trick but instead retains his stopper (usually an Ace), saving it for later use.

Used wisely hold-up plays can reduce or eliminate the damage the defense can do to declarer. Be careful, though, because using a hold-up play in the wrong circumstance might make things worse for declarer, sometimes much worse.

You are used to the principle of pausing when you see the dummy to *Count and Plan*. Now, as well as counting your top tricks and looking for opportunities to make more tricks, you must consider what could go wrong. Here, in these deals, you will have to decide whether to win the first trick or not.

Hand 1. On this deal you have the opportunity to **hold-up** at trick one. You need to work out whether that will reduce the risk to your contract, or make things worse.

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

Lead: S

You reach 3NT rapidly having opened 1NT in third seat. Dummy has a perfectly acceptable raise to 3NT, despite being 5-4-2-2 (so not exactly classically balanced). West's lead of the ♠4 lead looks like being the fourth-highest from a long suit.

You can count six *top tricks* (one Spade, two Hearts, one Diamond and two Clubs) and therefore need three "extras".

The obvious plan, maybe, is to grab the ♠A at trick one and run the ♦Q, taking the finesse. Well, that's half a good idea. The Diamond finesse is certainly the right approach (it would give you five tricks in the suit should West have the ♦K) but taking it at trick two would be premature.

You can see now (after the event) what would have happened had you adopted this line of play. East would have taken the ♦K at trick two and fired back a Spade. West would have cashed out his long suit and you would have lost four Spades and a Diamond before you got into the act.

West is a danger to you with his long suit – indeed, we call him the *danger hand*. Your task is to isolate the danger hand and keep him off lead. How? By running his partner out of Spades and cutting the link between the opponents' hands.

So you need to *hold-up* your ♠A until the third round. The effect of this is to remove all of East's Spades from his hot little hands. Now East, once on lead with the ♦K, has no entry to his partner's long suit. West has two Spade winners but no way of gaining the lead.

When a player has no link with his partner and has no lead to do you damage then we call him (logically enough) the *safe hand*.

On this deal a hold-up play is vital. Were you to take the ♠A at tricks one or two you would fail in 3NT. Here, though, you don't mind losing the lead to East at trick four. What can the poor guy lead now? Nothing that causes you the slightest concern.


Did somebody ask "What if East still has a Spade left?" Well, sir, the answer is then that Spades must be breaking 4-4. If that were the case the defenders would be welcome to take three Spade tricks and the ♦K. We would then mop up the rest.

The essence of the hold-up play, you should note, is to break the *defensive communication*.



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VB#23 Year 1 The Hold-up I. Part 1 SA.	Contract: 3N
Date: 20/10/2014	By: South
Dealer: East	Board #: 2
Play this hand online!	Vulnerable: N / S

	North		
	♠ T4		
	♥ QT7		
	♦ QJ975		
	♣ 853		
West		East	
♠ KQJ96		♠ 732	
♥ 8532		♥ 964	
♦ 8		♦ A643	
♣ K94		♣ JT7	
	South		
	♠ A85		
	♥ AKJ		
	♦ KT2		
	♣ AQ62		

This deal has echoes of the previous one. However, if the cards lie in one way you have no chance of making your contract.

On the other hand, if the cards lie in a more friendly fashion you can cut the ties that bind East and West...

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

Lead: ♠ K

You end in 3NT after opening 2NT and dummy puts down a useful Diamond suit. West's lead of the ♠K (a typical top-of-a-sequence effort) is none too welcome as you have only one stopper in the suit.

Counting up you can see only five *top tricks* (one Spade, three Hearts, no Diamonds and one Club) so need four "extras" to swell the total to nine.

You could win the first trick with the ♠A then knock out the ♦A and set up four more Diamond tricks. That isn't the best thought out plan and you ought to think again.

If the Spades split 5-3 (or 6-2) you are in danger of losing at least four Spade tricks and the ♦A. If the player with the long Spades (the *danger hand*) has possession of the ♦A you are doomed to failure. As soon as you play a Diamond that defender will grab his Ace and reel off his Spades. Tough.

However, you can – and should – neutralize the threat of the long Spades if they lie in the hand without the ♦A. If that were the case we can snip the defensive link. How? By refusing to release the ♠A until the third round of the suit. The idea is to run the player holding the ♦A out of Spades.

This is the play in detail: you duck the first two Spades and take the third (there is no better defense for East-West, by the way). Now you play on Diamonds and await your fate. On some days you will be just a spectator as the opponents take the ♦A and some Spade winners. Not here on this deal, though.

The defense attempts give you a dose of your own medicine by ducking the first two rounds of Diamonds and taking the third. Eventually the ♦A appears on your right where you expect the short Spades to be.

Sure enough, East can do no better than to lead a Club. You hastily grab the ♣A (finessing into the *danger hand* would be an unnecessary risk), cross to the ♥Q and run off the two remaining Diamond winners. The ♥A K complete the bag of booty and the defenders can have trick thirteen with the ♠K.

As in Hand 1 you can cut the *defensive communications* in Spades by holding up the ♠A for two rounds. As the play goes, when East wins his ♦A he has no Spade to lead while West stares sorrowfully at two winning Spades with no easy way of gaining the lead. If East had produced a Spade after taking the ♦A, by the way, then the suit would have been 4-4 and you would only have lost four tricks (three Spades and a Diamond).

If West had produced the ♦A and had started with five Spades then you were fated to go down. But then no line of play would have worked so ducking the first two rounds of Spades would have cost you nothing...



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VB#23 Year 1 The Hold-up I. Part 1 SA.	Contract: 3N
Date: 20/10/2014	By: South
Dealer: South	Board #: 3
Play this hand online!	Vulnerable: E / W

North
 ♠ T53
 ♥ AJ4
 ♦ 975
 ♣ AJ73

West
 ♠ QJ82
 ♥ 752
 ♦ 642
 ♣ 864



East
 ♠ K74
 ♥ 863
 ♦ KQJT3
 ♣ K5

South
 ♠ A96
 ♥ KQT9
 ♦ A8
 ♣ QT92

Now you have played two hands with the theme of the hold-up the play is becoming routine.

What about this deal?

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

Lead: S

You end up in 3NT after the briefest of auctions and West innocently leads the ♠2, presumably his fourth highest Spade. East, despite his 12 points, has no way into the auction after 1NT from South and 3NT from North. From his perspective that's annoying, because a Diamond lead would have been fatal to your cause.

In 3NT you can see seven *top tricks* (one Spade, four Hearts, one Diamond and one Club) and the Club suit (via the finesse) should give you at least two more.

Now, given the theme of these hands you ought to consider whether to hold up your ♠A for a round or two. When East produces the ♠K do you duck or win? **Why?**

It is very easy to get into the habit of ducking early tricks just for the sake of it and many textbooks make the mistake of giving examples on the hold-up play and do not offer counterexamples. We are attempting to redress that imbalance here at VuBridge. It would be a mistake to duck the ♠K on this deal – can you see why?

If you duck two Spades you will certainly wreck the link between East and West in Spades. However, look outside the narrow confines of the Spade suit. You are equally weak in Diamonds – in fact, weaker in that quarter. If you allow East to hold trick one he would seize the opportunity to switch to Diamonds, driving out the ♦A. Now you would be at the mercy of the Club finesse.

As the cards lie, you would lose a trick to the ♣K and East would cash out his long Diamonds – two down.

In these cases, where you fear a switch to an equally weak suit, you should be very wary of holding up. Here, you should grab the ♠A and immediately run the ♣Q. If West held the ♣K you would secure an overtrick. If East has it (as here) then you will just have to grin and bear it as the defenders cash out their Spades.

If Spades are 5-2 and West cashes four of them then you are down. Tough luck. If, though, they split 4-3 then the defense runs out of

steam and can only cash three Spades and the ♣K. You can then mop up the rest.


Note (an important point, this) that West led the ♠2. Does this not strongly suggest that he only has four Spades? If West has deceived you by leading the Two from a five-card suit then he deserves credit for fooling you.



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VB#23 Year 1 The Hold-up I. Part 1 SA.	Contract: 3N
Date: 20/10/2014	By: South
Dealer: West	Board #: 4
Play this hand online!	Vulnerable: All

	North	
	♠ 752	
	♥ KT6	
	♦ T986	
	♣ AK3	
West		East
♠ QJT98		♠ 64
♥ Q73		♥ J852
♦ K75		♦ A42
♣ J4		♣ T986
	South	
	♠ AK3	
	♥ A94	
	♦ QJ3	
	♣ Q752	

Is there a trick one decision to be made here?

This deal doesn't really look like Hands 1, 2 or 3, does it?

So what's the catch?

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

Lead: ♠ Q

We present this deal to show you that it can be right to hold up when you have **two** stoppers.

You reach 3NT in time-honored fashion and West has an easy ♠Q lead from his sequential five-card suit. Now – how should you play?

The all-important **count of tricks** shows that you have seven on top (two Spades, two Hearts no Diamonds and three Clubs). You might make an extra trick if Clubs were to break 3-3 but...

(a) that's only one extra trick and...

(b) the equal split is against the odds (36%, give or take a rounding error).

You do, though, have two cast-iron tricks in Diamonds – albeit slow ones. You can drive out the ♦A K using your ♦Q J and then the ♦10 9 will be sitting pretty on the table. So **what's the problem?**

Well, as ever at bridge (at especially at No-trumps) it's all a matter of **timing**. East-West are racing to drive out your ♠A K and you are racing to force out their ♦A K. The problem is that they get to go first in this race.

Play it through in your head... You take the first Spade and lead the ♦Q. West plays low and lets East win the ♦A. Another Spade drives out your ♠K and you now play the ♦J. West pounces on that with the ♦K and triumphantly cashes three Spades. One off. Curses!

Try playing this again, only this time by **holding up** Spades on the first round. The danger to your contract, you see, is if Spades split 5-2 (a 4-3 break is innocuous) and if the defender with five Spades (the *danger hand*) has an entry.

What happens with correct play? West leads the ♠Q and you let it win. Another Spade is taken by the ♠K and you play the ♦Q. West ducks that to East's ♦A and...?

What a difference a duck makes! East looks forlornly at his hand and checks his cards carefully. No Spade appears, though, no matter how hard he looks so he has to lead something else. A Heart lead will only help you so he gets off lead with the ♣10. You can win that to carry


on with the Diamond attack and now have the **tempo**. West cannot set up his Spades and get in to cash them.

Game, set and match.



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VB#23 Year 1 The Hold-up I. Part 1 SA.	Contract: 3N
Date: 20/10/2014	By: South
Dealer: North	Board #: 5
Play this hand online!	Vulnerable: N / S

	North	
	♠ T5	
	♥ A73	
	♦ KQT86	
	♣ J63	
West		East
♠ K8632		♠ Q97
♥ Q965		♥ JT4
♦ A2		♦ 743
♣ 74		♣ QT98
	South	
	♠ AJ4	
	♥ K82	
	♦ J95	
	♣ AK52	

So, you have the same decision to make here as you have had in four previous deals. Win or duck trick one?

Why?

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

Lead: ♠ 3

This is a simple hand – once you **see** it.

You arrive easily enough in 3NT and West leads a low Spade (the ♠3, to be precise). How should you play?

As ever, you **count your tricks**. You can see five “toppers” (one Spade, two Hearts and two Clubs) so need four more to fill the bank account. That’s easy enough – Diamonds will provide four tricks once the ♦A has been dislodged from its hidey-hole.

Right – so we now have to ask, “Do we take the ♠A at trick one or do we duck two rounds?” Well?

Players have been known to go wrong here – in two ways. The Spade pips are important (and here we mean the ♠10 on table and the ♠J in hand). By correct play you can **guarantee** two Spade stoppers (and two tricks to boot) and holding up is therefore wrong.

You must play low from dummy at trick one (there is no point in playing the ♠10 – indeed, it would be a bad error). That’s potential mistake #1. Having played small from dummy you await East’s card. If it’s a low card you win the ♠J and the hand is easy. East produces the ♠Q on this layout, though, so you smack that with the ♠A and set about Diamonds. Note that the combination of the ♠10 on table and ♠J × in hand acts as a sure second stopper as they are equals against the ♠K. Ducking the ♠A is potential mistake #2.

On this layout of the cards West takes the ♦A and forlornly continues with a low Spade. He is hoping, no doubt, that East will get on lead in a few tricks time and lead a third Spade. Nice try, sir, but definitely no cigar.

It is now a trivial matter to cash out the Diamonds and take the ♥A K and the ♣A K. That totals ten tricks so you score an overtrick.



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Date: 20/10/2014	By: South
Dealer: East	Board #: 6
Play this hand online!	Vulnerable: E / W

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

Lead: ♥ 6

Once again you arrive rapidly in 3NT and West leads the fourth highest of his longest and strongest, the ♥6 in this instance.

How should you play your game after East produces the ♥Q at trick one?

Let's start at the very beginning by counting our *top tricks*. There are one Spade, one Heart, three Diamonds and one Club – six on top. The Club suit is an obvious source of extras and we may make six tricks there.

To make six Clubs we really ought to take the finesse against the King – laying down the ♣A (hoping His Majesty is a singleton) is an inferior play with only half the chance that His Highness lies in the East hand.

Right – that's lots of tricks to take so we must consider what to do at trick one. Win or duck? **Why?**

Well, the ♥J is an important card here – in fact it acts as a *semi-stopper*. If we took the ♥A over the ♥Q we would be left with ♥J ×. If West were to lead the suit again we would make a trick with the ♥J regardless of who has the ♥K. On the other hand, a Heart lead from East, *through* the ♥J ×, would be decidedly unpleasant. In a curious reversal of the normal state of affairs East (the player with short Hearts) is the **danger hand** and West is the **safe hand**.

Now, you should appreciate that – on this layout – East is never going to get the lead. You can take the ♥A at trick one, you can cross to a Diamond (there are three entries in that one suit) and you can run the ♣Q. If East has the ♣K you have six Club tricks. If West has the ♣K (as here) he is welcome to it. A further Heart lead only aids your cause and a switch to Spades (or Diamonds) holds no terrors. In fact, you make an overtrick.

There is another very good reason not to hold up the ♥A at trick one. Can you see it? Well, East might not return his partner's suit at trick two; he might find a switch to the ♠K. Now the defenders would make three Spades, a Heart and the ♣K.

North
 ♠ J6
 ♥ 85
 ♦ AQT
 ♣ QJT743

West
 ♠ 8742
 ♥ KT762
 ♦ 62
 ♣ K6



East
 ♠ KQT9
 ♥ Q93
 ♦ 98743
 ♣ 8

South
 ♠ A53
 ♥ AJ4
 ♦ KJ5
 ♣ A952

This deal introduces you to the idea of a *semi-stopper*.

What's one of those when it's at home? Well, it's a card (or combination of cards) that is impervious to attack from one defender but vulnerable to attack from the other.

Consider this layout of Spades:

	Dummy	
	♠ 7 4	
West		East
♠ A Q 5 3		♠ J 10 9 8
	Declarer	
	♠ K 6 2	

Declarer is happy enough if West is on lead – a Spade lead (high or low) would allow South to score the ♠K. However, if East were on lead the ♠J would skewer the King and East-West would pick off four tricks giving South none.

In this case the ♠K is a *semi-stopper*.

Holding up is dangerous when you are equally weak in another suit (see Hand 3 for comparison).