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In this series we look at how certain suit combinations should be handled and what are the best odds.

| | |
|--|------------------|
| Percentage plays: SA. | Contract: 4S |
| Date: 13/06/2014 | By: South |
| Dealer: North | Board #: 1 |
| Play this hand online! | Vulnerable: None |

North
 ♠ T984
 ♥ KT72
 ♦ K9
 ♣ A53

West
 ♠ 76
 ♥ 95
 ♦ QJT63
 ♣ J872



East
 ♠ Q52
 ♥ A864
 ♦ A752
 ♣ T9

South
 ♠ AKJ3
 ♥ QJ3
 ♦ 84
 ♣ KQ64

This set of deals is about "Percentage plays"; that is - what is the best way to handle certain card combinations?

Success cannot be guaranteed but you have to give yourself the best chance.

This deal sets the scene. How should you play the trump suit so as to avoid a loser in the suit?

| West | North | East | South |
|------|-------|------|-------|
| - | P | P | 1NT |
| P | 2♣ | P | 2♠ |
| P | 4♠ | P | P |
| P | | | |

Lead: D

Here you reach 4♠ as South after a simple Stayman auction and West finds an annoying ♦Q lead, crushing dummy's ♦K.

The defense cash two Diamonds, then take the ♥A and exit with a Heart. So, can you take the rest of the tricks?

With three tricks already lost the important thing is **not** to lose a trump trick. Therefore, you have to pick the Spade suit up without loss. This cannot be guaranteed, of course, what you have to do is to find the play that gives you the best chance.

Here, that's cashing the ♠A first (you never know, the ♠Q might fall singleton, ending all of your problems). When everyone follows with small Spades you have to take the Spade finesse.

This is twice as good a play as trying to drop the ♠Q doubleton. So you must cross to dummy (with the ♣A) and run the ♠10. When this wins you can draw the last trump and the rest are easily yours.

Note that this play works whenever East has ♠Q x x and ♠Q x x x, a much greater chance than ♠x x x (giving West ♠Q x).



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| | |
|--|-------------------|
| Percentage plays (SA) | Contract: 4S |
| Date: 13/06/2014 | By: South |
| Dealer: East | Board #: 2 |
| Play this hand online! | Vulnerable: N / S |

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

Lead: ♦ Q

Here you reach 4♠ as South after a simple bidding sequence and West again finds an annoying ♦Q lead, trapping dummy's ♦K.

The defense cash two Diamonds, before forcing you to ruff the third round. Now, with a Heart to lose it is essential to pick up the trumps without loss. With nine trumps the opponents (of course) only have four so the odds shift somewhat from Hand 1.

First you must cash the ♠A (the singleton ♠Q would be a Godsend) but what do you do when both opponents follow small? You could continue with a high Spade or you could cross to dummy and take the Spade finesse. Decisions, decisions.

Well, although the chances of a 3-1 break outweigh those of a 2-2 break (this surprises many players, incidentally) the odds are for playing for the drop. If you want an explanation for this apparent paradox you'll have to look elsewhere (or consult a statistician). Anyway, we suggest that you trust us – after all, we're ~~bankers~~, er – bridge teachers.

The way many players remember this is via the adage, "Eight Ever, Nine Never" meaning that with eight cards it is better play to finesse for a missing Queen but with nine cards it is better to try and drop it. Be careful with this "rule" however. It gives you sensible guidance but is by no means a sure thing...

Anyway, once you have drawn trumps in two rounds the hand is pianola - you can knock out the ♥A and the rest of the tricks are easily yours.

North
♠ T984
♥ KT42
♦ K97
♣ A4

West
♠ Q6
♥ 975
♦ QJT3
♣ JT73



East
♠ 75
♥ A863
♦ A652
♣ 865

South
♠ AKJ32
♥ QJ
♦ 84
♣ KQ92

This hand is similar to the previous one. However, now you have nine trumps rather than eight - how does that affect your thinking?



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| | |
|--|-------------------|
| Percentage plays (SA) | Contract: 4S |
| Date: 13/06/2014 | By: South |
| Dealer: South | Board #: 3 |
| Play this hand online! | Vulnerable: E / W |

North
 ♠ 7642
 ♥ KT72
 ♦ K9
 ♣ A53

West
 ♠ T8
 ♥ 95
 ♦ QJT63
 ♣ J872



East
 ♠ Q95
 ♥ A864
 ♦ A752
 ♣ T9

South
 ♠ AKJ3
 ♥ QJ3
 ♦ 84
 ♣ KQ64

Although this deal may look like Hand 1 the trumps are, in fact, significantly weaker. So does that affect your line of play?

| West | North | East | South |
|------|-------|------|-------|
| - | - | - | 1NT |
| P | 2♣ | P | 2♠ |
| P | 4♠ | P | P |
| P | | | |

Lead: ♦ Q

Here you reach 4♦ as South after a simple bidding sequence and West finds an annoying ♦Q lead, sandwiching dummy's ♦K.

The defense cash two Diamonds, then take the ♥A and exit with a Heart. So, can you take the rest of the tricks?

With three tricks already lost the important thing is not to lose a trump trick. So, you have to pick the Spade suit up without loss. This cannot be guaranteed, of course, what you have to do is to find the play that gives you the best chance. This hand is remarkably similar to Hand 1, of course, the difference being the quality of the intermediate cards. In Hand 1 dummy's Spades were ♠10 9 8 5, here they are four rags.

On this deal, you may as well cash the ♠A first (although it is important to note that dropping the ♠Q singleton is **not** what you want to see. You cannot cope with a 4-1 Spade break). When everyone follows with small Spades you still have to take the Spade finesse. This is a better play than trying to drop the ♠Q doubleton, although the difference between the two plays is not as clear-cut as it was on Hand 1.

Anyway, you must again cross to dummy (with the ♠A) and lead a low Spade to the ♠J. When this wins you can draw the last trump and the rest are easily yours.

Here it is simply more likely that East has ♠Q × × than West has ♠Q ×. (The odds are roughly 34% to 26%)



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| | |
|--|-----------------|
| Percentage plays (SA) | Contract: 3N |
| Date: 13/06/2014 | By: South |
| Dealer: West | Board #: 4 |
| Play this hand online! | Vulnerable: All |

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

Lead: ♠ 5

On this deal you reach 3NT after the most straightforward of auctions.

Dummy isn't quite what you wanted (4-3-3-3 hands facing 4-3-3-3 hands don't always play that well) but your task is still to find nine tricks. You get a fortunate start as West makes an entirely reasonable opening lead that gives you a cheap trick with the ♠J. Now you can count three tricks in Hearts, three in Spades and, therefore, need three in Diamonds. (Clubs are a real no-no with this sort of combination. If you lead them you'll make no tricks – if the opponents lead them you'll make one trick).

| | | |
|---------|---|---------|
| | North | |
| | ♠ 742 | |
| | ♥ A64 | |
| | ♦ KQT6 | |
| | ♣ J52 | |
| West |  | East |
| ♠ QT653 | | ♠ 98 |
| ♥ 95 | | ♥ T8732 |
| ♦ J74 | | ♦ A2 |
| ♣ AT6 | | ♣ K984 |
| | South | |
| | ♠ AKJ | |
| | ♥ KQJ | |
| | ♦ 9853 | |
| | ♣ Q73 | |

We switch here to No-trumps. However, you still have to set up a suit for tricks and need to know the odds. So do your opponents - maybe they should have read this first...!

So, how do we play the Diamonds? Well, the first shot must be to lead low to the ♦Q. East artlessly takes his ♦A and returns a Spade. So you lead a second Diamond and play...? Well, this position is analogous to that of Hands 1 and 3. It is better to finesse the ♦10 (actually in this case run the ♦9) than rise with the ♦K, hoping the ♦J will fall.

When the ♦9 wins it's all plain sailing. You can cash the last Diamond to draw the ♦J and you have nine tricks.

Note that East would do a lot better to duck the ♦Q smoothly. This gives you the chance of playing the next round of Diamonds to the ♦K, playing West for the ♦A. Remember this position next time you are a defender. Furthermore, duck in tempo – don't stare at the ceiling and scratch your head before slowly playing low – any declarer will know what you are up to. (*Important note: You are not allowed to pull faces, look at the ceiling and scratch various parts of your anatomy when you have nothing to think about. Such histrionics are considered to be pure gamesmanship – the lowest of the low.*)



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| | |
|--|-------------------|
| Percentage plays (SA) | Contract: 3N |
| Date: 13/06/2014 | 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: ♠ T

Here, again, you reach 3NT after your opening bid of 1NT is raised to game.

Dummy is better than that of Hand 4 as there is a fine five-card suit to play. However, the Spade lead isn't good news – at least, it isn't worth three tricks when East produces the ♠Q on dummy's ♠J.

So, how do we play the Diamonds? Well, the first shot must be to lead low to the ♦Q. East takes his ♦A and returns a Spade. So you lead a second Diamond and play...? Well, this deal has echoes with Hand 2. With nine cards in the suit it is better play to play for the drop in Diamonds (by trying the ♦K) rather than taking the finesse. Should we say "*Eight Ever, Nine Never*"? Maybe...

Note that East had no scope for deceptive play here. He couldn't duck the first Diamond as that would have revealed the location of the all-important ♦J. The choice you had was to decide whether East started with the ♦A alone or with ♦A J and the odds (just) favour the latter.

North
 ♠ J3
 ♥ A64
 ♦ KQT62
 ♣ 752

West
 ♠ T9876
 ♥ 953
 ♦ 74
 ♣ AK6



East
 ♠ Q52
 ♥ T872
 ♦ AJ
 ♣ T984

South
 ♠ AK4
 ♥ KQJ
 ♦ 9853
 ♣ QJ3

A similar deal to the last hand. Here, however, the situation is different - but is your play?



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| | |
|--|-------------------|
| Percentage plays (SA) | Contract: 3N |
| Date: 13/06/2014 | By: South |
| Dealer: South | Board #: 6 |
| Play this hand online! | Vulnerable: E / W |

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

Lead: ♠ 3

Here (as in Hand 4) you reach 3NT rapidly.

Dummy isn't quite what you'd hoped for (4-3-3-3 hands facing 4-3-3-3 hands don't always play that well) but your task is still to find nine tricks. You get a fortunate start as West makes an entirely reasonable opening lead that gives you a cheap trick with the ♠J. Now you can count three tricks in Hearts, three in Spades and, therefore, need three in Diamonds. (Clubs are untouchable with this sort of combination. If you lead them you'll make no tricks – if they lead them you'll make one trick).

So, how do we play the Diamonds? Note that the Diamond combination is subtly different from Hand 4, of which this deal is nearly a clone. Well, the first shot must be to lead low to the ♦Q. East follows low, so the ♦Q wins the trick and you are stuck in dummy.

You must lead a second Diamond from the closed hand so have to return there with a Heart. Now a low Diamond produces the ♦9 from West and you play...? Well, this position is analogous to that of Hands 1, 3 and 4. It is better to finesse the ♦10 than rise with the ♦K, hoping the ♦J will fall. Note that you have no idea of the location of the ♦A nor of the ♦J. East may well have the ♦A and have learnt a lesson from our strictures in the commentary to Hand 4.

When the ♦9 wins the trick (and East shows out) it's relatively easy. You can return to hand to play a third Diamond up to dummy's remaining ♦K to establish a third Diamond trick and now you have a total of nine tricks.

North
♠ 742
♥ A64
♦ KQT6
♣ J52

West
♠ QT63
♥ 95
♦ AJ98
♣ AT6



East
♠ 985
♥ T8732
♦ 3
♣ K984

South
♠ AKJ
♥ KQJ
♦ 7542
♣ Q73

The hands are similar but the suits are getting weaker. How should you play the main suit here?