

Declarer Play in NT

Last time, we looked at declarer play in suit contracts. This time, we are exploring declarer play in **No Trump contracts**. Many of the principles are similar to declaring suit contracts, but you don't have a trump suit to cut off the opposition from cashing their long suit winners.

For example, often the result will depend on timing – can you establish and cash your long suit winners before the opposition can?

Let's look at how to go about things.

Just like I said last time for declaring in suit contracts, the fundamental message is

COUNT AND PLAN

Your side has won the auction, and you are declarer in a NT contract. The opponents have made the opening lead, and dummy is tabled.

The first thing you do is **count and plan**. Even if the opening lead happens to be a suit where dummy holds a singleton, so there is no decision to be made about what card to play, **DO NOT PLAY IT!! WAIT**, while you assess. Even the seemingly simplest hands take a few moments to work out your plan.

If you play from dummy, and opponent follows promptly, it's near impossible to then stop and do your planning – indeed, you shouldn't, because play to any trick, once a card has been led, should be as far as possible "in tempo". The **ONLY** exception is play after the opening lead, when planning time is normal, and accepted. Of course, you need to be flexible and change your plan if things develop in an unforeseen way, but your plan must be thought through. Many contracts fail because of a wrong play on **trick one**, for example because you've used up an entry in one hand that is essential to cash some length winners, or to play a finesse.

The first part of the plan, just like for a suit contract, is **how many tricks am I aiming to make?**

This is often not as simple as just the number of tricks to make your contract exactly. Why is that?

Example 1: You have bid to the full extent of your hands. When dummy goes down, you are a touch disappointed- you were hoping for something a bit better, or a better fit with your hand. Your contract looks tough: you will be trying very hard to come up with a plan that gives you the best chance of getting home. This is a very common scenario. Proper planning will be critical. Your target is clearly to make exactly. If the defence misplay and give you a gift of an overtrick, so much the better, but you can't count on it.

Example 2: Dummy looks great! It's pretty clear your contract is going to make.

Say you're in 3NT, and you can see an easy 9 tricks.

The temptation here is to just play off the 9 tricks and congratulate yourself on bidding and making game. But think. It's likely that most other pairs playing your hand will also be in 3NT. In duplicate pairs, if everyone else makes 10, you have scored an outright bottom- you might as well have gone 1 off.

If you can see your 9 tricks, try to work out a line of play so you can make 10, without risking going off. If you can see 10, work out how to make 11. Overtricks are very important in duplicate bridge.

For example, if you could take a finesse which if successful gives you an overtrick, and it has zero risk of causing you to go off if it fails, try it, don't ignore it!

Try to get used to this mindset. It's very different from what's required in other forms of scoring, such as rubber bridge, or IMP's scoring in teams.

Example 3: Your contract looks hopeless! You might have opened a 12-point 1NT, and everyone passes. You are now declaring in 1NT, but can't see any realistic possibility of 7 tricks. Don't let that sinking feeling dominate your thoughts. Think— if most other pairs are also playing a weak NT, the chances are that quite a few others sitting with your hand are facing the same problem.

Also remember why we play a weak NT – it has great pre-emptive value. We have to accept that sometimes we'll be playing a contract that has no chance to make. Your 1NT bid might have kept the opposition from bidding a part score: if they'd bid and made 2♥ or 2♠ for example, they'd make 110, or 3♥ or 3♠, 140. In such cases, if you are vulnerable, 1 off for -100 could be a great score, but 2 off for -200 a very poor one. The important thing to do is to plan to maximize your tricks – don't just give up. If you can see a way to make 6 tricks, go for it.

Your AIM *can* sometimes be to go down in your contract, but by the minimum amount!

So the first thing we've done as declarer is work out our AIM – how many tricks we need to make.

Now let's look at the rest of our **STRUCTURED APPROACH** to planning our play of the hand.

It is very similar to what we looked at last time, when we talked about declaring in suit contracts, but with some obvious differences.

It does take practice – but when you've worked through it a few times, it becomes second nature. And hopefully you will banish forever that plaintive cry I hear so often: "I hate playing in NT".

Yes, often 1NT can be one of the hardest contracts to play, because the opposition will usually have some chances, and you will need to keep track of all 4 suits and where missing cards might lie. But with a structured, systematic approach, suddenly it all seems so much easier! We'll come on to just that in a moment.

I'm going to use the same mnemonic here as for suit contracts, to help you remember.

Those of you who follow Bernard Magee (of Mr Bridge) might recognize it.

Plan the play with "**ATTITUDE**"

When making your plan, think

A The A is for aim – how many tricks am I aiming to make?

We've already talked about how to work out your aim.

TT: the TT is for top tricks. How many tricks can I take off the top, **without losing the lead?**

I: The I stands for Increasing your tricks over and above your Top Tricks, to reach your Aim.

Examples are

- **High card combinations**, eg KQx opposite Jxx will yield 2 tricks once the A is gone
- **Long suits** – can you establish a long suit to yield extra tricks? For example, A K 8 7 4 opposite 6 5 3 2 has only 2 top tricks, but will make 5 tricks if the missing cards split 2-2, or 4 tricks if 3-1, even though you're missing the Q, J, 10 and 9. In fact, long suits are often the primary source of extra tricks in NT contracts, but sometimes aren't very obvious. We will look at this aspect later in the lesson.
- **Finesses** (as described last time, in our lesson on declarer play in suit contracts).
- A **throw-in play**- conceding a trick you are going to have to lose anyway, but at the right time so that the opponent then on lead has no option but to give you an extra trick. This is usually later on in the play of the hand, once some suits are exhausted. Avoid, if you can, leading a "frozen" suit: that's a suit where the honours are spread one to each of the 4 hands. Whichever side first leads in a frozen suit will give a trick away, so try to force the opposition to do it.

T This T is for threats:

Is there a suit where the opposition can damage you, for example if led from one hand but not the other? For example, if dummy holds K x x and you have x x x in hand, you are happy for the lead in that suit to come from your RH opponent, up towards your K, so that the K will always make, whichever opponent holds the A. But if the lead comes from your LH opponent, through your K, your K might be swallowed by the A, and you're in trouble – opponents can run the suit and take 4 tricks in it, or even 5 if the split is 5:2.

Therefore, if you have a finesse to do, and you have a choice of finesses or of direction in which to take a finesse, play so that the non-danger hand wins the trick if the finesse fails. Do try to think: is there a danger hand, one that I don't want to get on lead? If I need to take a finesse, can I do it so that the non-danger hand is on lead if my finesse fails?

Another very common threat in a NT contract is the opposition having a long suit, and you only have one stop. An essential technique here is the **HOLD-UP play**. Say you have the Ace in that suit, but no other high cards in it. If you play your A on the first trick in that suit, then it's likely both opposing hands will still be able to lead the suit back if they get on lead. If that's going to scupper your contract, you want one of them to have to play their last card in that suit on the trick where you play your A, thus making that opponent a "non-danger" hand, a hand that you can safely allow to win the lead.

How can we work out when to play our Ace? ie how many times to hold up?

There's a very useful rule to help you here: the "**Rule of 7**" (a hold-up play)

Subtract the total number of cards in the suit you have between yourself and dummy, and take it from 7. The answer is the number of times you should hold up.

For example: you hold x x x in hearts opposite A x x, and the opposition lead a heart. You hold up once (7 minus 6) and take your ace on the second heart trick. This caters for a 5-2 distribution, when one opponent will then be out of hearts, and the defence won't be able to cash hearts if that opponent wins the lead. You are untroubled if the hearts actually split 4-3, as then they're only able to win 3 tricks in the suit.

Note: if you have 2 stops in a suit, and a hold up play is necessary, you must hold up on the first round.

Back now to our mnemonic, "ATTITUDE"

We're now at the **U**, which stands for Unhelpful distribution.

Sometimes it might appear that you can run a suit, for example, holding 9 cards between yourself and dummy, but missing the J and three small ones. That will work fine if the missing cards split 2-2 or 3-1.

But sometimes you will be faced by a pesky 4-0 split. Can you cater for this possibility so that you still succeed?

Imagine one hand holds all 4 missing cards: eg if you hold A Q 9 5 4 opposite K 10 3 2, don't unthinkingly play the K first, play the A (or Q) first, and if either opponent shows out, you have a marked finesse against the J, so by careful play you can **GUARANTEE** picking up the suit without loss, even with a 4-0 split.

But if you have A Q 9 5 4 opposite the K 8 3 2, you are missing the J and the 10, so you can't pick up the suit if RHO holds all 4 cards. So play for LHO to hold all 4, and cash the K first; you'll pick up the suit if it splits no worse than 3-1, or LHO holds all 4.

The key thought here is: can I play so as to preserve a finesse position?

D The D stands for Defence:

Think about what options the defence have to defeat you. You might have a weak suit, where the opponents can cash a string of winners if they get on lead. You might be fortunate, and they didn't lead that suit on trick 1, but now they've seen dummy, and worked out what's going on, they are likely to make the killing switch as soon as they regain the lead.

In such a case you mustn't take unnecessary risks. Delay losing the lead as long as you can, cashing tricks in your own long suit(s) first. You never know, that might force the opponents into an invidious choice of discards, where they have to (eg) bare a King, or discard in their good suit. If you can "run for home", ie take the requisite number of tricks to achieve your Aim without losing the lead, do so, and ignore trying to take more than that by, for example, attempting a finesse.

Now we've done our planning- ie worked through the **ATTITUDE** it's time to put it into action: the **E** is for execute. Execute your plan, but remain vigilant about what happens as the play proceeds, and be prepared to change your plan if necessary.

For example:

- you might get a friendly discard, which enables you to establish a suit you otherwise couldn't have
- you might get a free trick by an opponent leading a frozen suit
- you might get a free finesse by an opponent, leading up to your tenace (tenace= a holding of two high non-touching cards, such as A Q, or K J)
- opponents might inadvertently establish a suit for you by cashing their high cards, leaving you a nice suit to run.

As declarer, cashing a long suit early is often helpful, as the discards your opponents make can give you useful information, or force them into discarding something they wanted to hold on to.

I said we'd have a look at **playing in 1NT**. It's an extremely common contract, and many players dread it, because it can seem there's so much going on, and so much to keep track of.

Of course the same principles apply as we've just been through, but there is one additional point: **PATIENCE!**

In 1NT, it's quite likely that opponents will establish one suit, but that won't on its own defeat you, as you only need 7 tricks. Try to prevent them establishing two suits, and be patient! Avoid opening up a frozen suit, such as J x x opposite K x x. Let the opponents open such a suit, thereby conceding an extra trick to you.

Here's an example, where you are West, declaring 1NT. :

West	East
♠Q 7 5	♠J 9 6 2
♥A 6 3	♥K 8 4
♦A K 9 2	♦Q J 10 7
♣J 8 3	♣K 6

North leads 2♥.

You recognize from the lead of the 2♥ (4th highest) that hearts are splitting 4:3. You have 6 top tricks, 4 diamonds and two hearts, but you must be patient rather than rushing to try to cash a 7th. Take your 6 top tricks, then lead a HEART! North can win, and cash his 4th heart, but then must lead a club or a spade, giving you your 7th trick. Elegant!

Finally, I want to look in more depth at establishing **long suits**.

The key thing you have to consider is **losing the lead**:

1. Can you afford to lose the tricks you need to lose in the suit you're trying to establish, without the opposition using their opportunities on lead to establish a long suit of their own, and defeat you before you can cash your established winners?
2. Do you have enough entries to establish the suit AND get back to the hand with the long cards, to cash those established long cards?

If the answer is **yes to both**, you can embark on establishing the long suit.

If the answer to either is no, then establishing the long suit won't work, and you will need to find another plan.

The one most people find tricky is No2. To help you, you need to know the **ENTRY RULE**.

Don't worry if this is a bit hard to grasp straight away – it isn't easy. You will probably need to go back and study the notes and work through the examples a few times. But it's worth it – establishing tricks from little cards in long suits is a vital technique, and very satisfying when it works.

The **ENTRY RULE**: in order to establish a suit by force, ie not assisted by a helpful play from opponents, you need **one more entry than the number of times you have to give away the lead**.

Note (1) you can count only one high card entry in the long suit itself. This might not be obvious, so you might want to try it and see!

Note (2) you can save entries by ducking; the number of entries this can save is the number of spare low cards in the shorter holding.

Note (3) you don't know how the suit will break, so plan for the most common break. For an odd number of cards missing, the break is likely to be as even as possible, ie 2-1, 3-2. For an even number of cards missing, it's most likely uneven, ie 2-0, 3-1, 4-2. If you have two possible suits to work on, a 3-2 break (68%) is nearly twice as likely as a 3-3 break (35%).

The best way to get a handle on this is to study some examples.

Examples:

1. ♥4 in hand ♥A 9 8 7 5 3 in dummy

You are missing 6 cards, so assume a 4-2 split. You have only one card in the short hand, so ducking is not an option. The ace is one entry, but you need to lose three heart tricks before the 5th and 6th hearts are established, so you need the A♥ plus 3 more entries. Work it out- lead to the A♥ (entry #1), play another heart, and lose that trick. Entry #2 to dummy, then play a 3rd heart trick, and lose that trick. Entry #3 to dummy, then play a 4th heart, and lose that trick. Entry #4 to dummy, and cash the two long hearts. Four entries required: if you don't have them, don't start trying to establish the hearts.

2. ♣4 3 in hand ♣A 9 8 7 6 2 in dummy

Here you are missing 5 cards, so assuming a 3-2 split, you need to lose the lead twice in clubs to establish the suit, so need 3 entries. But you can duck once, reducing the entries required to two; the A♣ is one, so you only need one outside entry (ie an entry outside the club suit itself).

3. ♠6 4 2 in hand ♠A 9 8 7 5 3 in dummy

You are missing four spades, so assuming they split 3-1, you need to lose the lead twice in spades to establish the suit, so need 3 entries. But you have spare cards in hand, allowing you to duck twice and reduce the entries required to 1: the A♠ is that entry. So you don't need any outside entries to establish the spades. Just duck two rounds, then lead up to the A♠, and cash 3 further spades. You can see that the spade suit here yields 4 tricks, despite missing K, Q, J and 10 (unless you are very unlucky and the suit splits 4-0).

4. ♦6 3 in hand ♦A K 8 7 4 in dummy

This common situation is when you want to generate a trick from a small card in a 5-card suit. You are missing 6 cards, so you assume they're splitting 4-2. You will have to lose the lead twice in diamonds, so you need 3 entries. You can duck the first diamond trick, reducing the entries required to 2. A top diamond provides another entry, so you need only one outside entry, to reach your established diamond length winner – the 5th card of a 5-card suit.

Very often, establishing the 5th card in a 5-card suit is the only way of making your contract. But many declarers would overlook the diamonds except the top two winners, and fail to spot the potential for an extra diamond trick!!

5. ♠K Q 5 4 ♠A 3 2
 ♥A K Q 4 ♥7 6 5
 ♦A K 4 ♦3
 ♣8 2 ♣A 7 6 5 4 3

Contract 3NT by W, lead J♥

9 tricks is easy, off the top, but is it a good score? Always check if a long suit can be established before starting to play the hand. Here, you have 8 clubs. If the missing clubs split 3-2, you need to lose the lead twice to establish them, so need 3 entries. You only have two, the two black aces. But you have one spare club in hand, so you can duck once, saving an entry. Win the heart lead and immediately duck a club. Win the return in hand, and lead to the A♣. Play another club from dummy, the 3rd club trick. Opponents will win, but if the split is 3-2, they're now out of clubs. Win the return, and the A♠ is your entry to cash 3 small clubs. 11 tricks made, losing only two club tricks. Would you have spotted that line at the table, before reading this lesson? Or would you have happily recorded 9 tricks and game made, only to be astonished to later find that other pairs have made 11 tricks ("How did they do that?").

6a. ♠K 8 3 ♠A 7 6b. ♠K 8 3 ♠A
 ♥A K 4 3 ♥8 7 ♥A K 4 3 ♥8 7 6
 ♦A K J 9 ♦6 5 4 ♦A K J 9 ♦6 5 4
 ♣K 2 ♣A 7 6 5 4 3 ♣K 2 ♣A 7 6 5 4 3

In both cases, the contract is 3NT by West, lead J♠.

If the clubs split 3-2, because you have A and K, you only need to lose the lead once (ie give up one club trick) to establish the clubs; so you need two entries, and you have them: the two black aces. In hand 6a, you win the spade lead with the K, carefully preserving A♠, and play K♣, then over to A♣, then a 3rd club. When the clubs break 3-2, your A♠ provides the entry to cash 3 long clubs.

But look what happens in 6b. The spade lead knocks out an entry, so you can no longer establish the clubs. Those long clubs are now useless, so your only chance is to try the diamond finesse. After winning the opening trick with the A♠, lead a small diamond towards the J♦. If the finesse wins, use the A♣ to enter dummy and repeat the diamond finesse. With the Q♦ onside, you make 9 tricks, and a bonus 10th if the diamonds also split 3-3.

7. ♠A Q 3 ♠K 5 4
 ♥A K Q 5 4 ♥7 6
 ♦A K 2 ♦5 4
 ♣7 3 ♣A 8 6 5 4 2 Contract 3NT by W, lead J♥.

It's tempting to play on hearts, and you make 10 tricks if they're 4-2 (likely from the lead). You need hearts to split 3-3 to make 11 tricks. But if you play on clubs, you make 11 tricks if clubs split 3-2 – almost twice as likely, even without the heart lead which skews the odds even further. Duck the first round, lead to A♣, play a 3rd club. Your K♠ is the entry to enjoy the 3 club-suit length winners. You lose only two club tricks. If you're unlucky and the clubs split 4-1, you can revert to hearts, and still make 11 tricks if hearts split 3-3. On this hand, your best plan is to start by playing on clubs! This hand again illustrates the importance of COUNT and PLAN.

8. ♠K 5 4 ♠A J 10
 ♥8 4 ♥A K Q 5 2
 ♦7 4 ♦A 8 2
 ♣K Q 6 5 4 3 ♣J 2 Contract 3NT by W, lead 7♠

A diamond lead would have been awkward, but you got a friendly ♠. Clubs is your trick source, and you must establish them while you still have a diamond stop. You must also preserve your precious K♠ as an entry to enjoy the clubs. So win the A♠ on trick one, then lead J♣. If clubs split 3-2, you're making 12 tricks. Whenever the opposition take their A♣, you have an entry to enjoy the rest of the clubs. How many declarers would **fail to plan, and go wrong on trick one by playing J♠??** If that's covered by the Q, you either withhold the K♠ and face a ♦ switch, or use up your precious entry, and the clubs are useless!

9. ♠ K 8 5 4 ♠ A 3 2
 ♥A K 9 4 ♥7 6 5
 ♦A K 6 5 ♦4 3
 ♣K ♣A J 10 9 8 Contract 3NT by W, lead Q♠.

You must preserve your A♠ to enjoy the clubs, but think. You have no suit with only one stop, so you're not worried about a switch. You don't need to win the first trick: if the spades split 3-3 you'll have an extra trick with your 4th spade. Duck the opening trick, then win the second trick- if they lead a second spade, take it with K♠. Lead the K♣, but use it as an entry, not a trick! Overtake with the A♣, and continue clubs. Whenever opposition take their Q♣, you have the A♠ to get back and cash the remaining clubs. An easy 10 tricks, with chances for an 11th in spades or hearts.

10. ♠5 4 ♠A K
 ♥A K 4 ♥9 7 6 5
 ♦A K Q ♦9 4 3 2
 ♣A 9 4 3 2 ♣8 7 6 Contract 3NT by W, lead Q♠.

To establish clubs, you'd need to lose the lead twice- by which time the opposition will have knocked out your spade stops, and will cash all their spades. No good! You have 8 tricks on top, but your only chance of a 9th is to cash AKQ of diamonds, then AK and a 3rd heart. If either red suit splits 3-3, you have a top spade to reach your winner.

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