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This Week in Bridge

(242) Trump Suit Management – Maintaining Control

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Level: 2

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General

When we are declaring a suit contract, the most important suit on the hand for us to consider and track is usually the trump suit. This is a suit that we cannot avoid playing and is one that if we play it incorrectly or at the wrong time will often cost us tricks. The trump suit can be used in a large variety of ways, more than simply drawing all of the opponents' trump, and it is important that we get what we need out of our trump suit. Here we look at how to manage our trump suit to get all tricks from it that we desire.

Drawing Trump Carefully

One of the most important aspects of managing our trump is to draw trump in a way that allows us to maintain control of the hand and of our remaining trump. Let's look at some examples of how to use our trump carefully.

Example 1

A5432 876

When drawing trump in this 8-card fit, the sloppy way to play the suit is to play the Ace and then another, planning to lose 2 trump tricks when the suit splits 3-2. There are a couple of things wrong with this play: first, if the suit splits 4-1, then the opponents will be able to draw most of our trump away. Second, even if trump are 3-2, the opponents will often win the second round and be able to play a 3rd round, drawing trump from both our hand and partner's. Instead, the usual best line of play is to duck the first round of the suit, giving up a loser early, and then regain the lead and play the Ace. If the suit splits 3-2, then we can leave the master trump outstanding and go about playing on other suits – maintaining as many trump as possible in both hands.



Example 2

AK432 65

When playing this 7-card trump fit, which is common when partner takes a preference to our first bid suit, the proper line of play is usually to duck the first round of the suit and later play the Ace and King. If the suit splits 3-3 then it usually does not matter how we play the suit (we will have only 1 loser), but if the suit splits 4-2, we do not want to play Ace, King, and another round, because the opponents can win the 3rd round and use their 4th trump to draw more of our trump away. This is particularly dangerous if we already had to ruff in once to gain the lead. Play this trump suit carefully.

Keeping Control

Another important aspect of keeping control of the trump suit is being careful about having all of our honors captured by the opponents. In particular, if we release the Ace of trump, then we are no longer in complete control of the hand. The trump Ace is the most valuable card and we should spend it carefully.

Example 3

A32 Q7654

With this trump suit we usually cash the Ace first (in case the King is singleton) and then lead up to the trump Queen. This is safe, because even if second hand shows out (the KJT_x is behind the Queen), we do not have to play the Queen and our opponents cannot draw most of our trump away.

Example 4

Q32 A7654

With this trump suit we may take a similar approach, but it has much more danger if we do. If we cash the trump Ace and then lead up towards the Queen, then if the KJT_x is behind the Queen, our opponents can capture our Queen and draw 4 rounds of trump. Instead, we can protect against this by risking losing to the singleton King and not releasing our trump Ace on the first round of the suit. We can start by leading up to our Queen. Next, we cash our Ace and no matter how the suit breaks we are still on lead and free to play other suits, leaving the master trump outstanding.



Giving Up Losers Early

Whenever we delay drawing trump and work on another suit first then we risk that we lose additional tricks by allowing the opponents to ruff in. In contrast, if we draw trump too soon then we may exhaust our trump, especially in the short side, and not be able to ruff our losers in the short side. When making use of the trump we must balance the risk of ruffing in the short side without drawing trump against the loss of tricks from drawing trump too soon.

Example 5

♠ 432
♥ 86
♦ KQJ
♣ K9854

♠ AK765
♥ A73
♦ 654
♣ A7

Playing 4♠ on a ♥ lead, we should duck the first ♥ and win the second round. Then we play two rounds of ♠, leaving the master ♠ outstanding. We play the ♥A and a third ♥, ruffing it in the dummy. If we win the first round of the ♥ and then draw two rounds of trump, then we must give the opponents the lead in the ♥ suit before we can ruff our ♥ loser. In doing so, they may use their master trump to draw the final trump from the dummy, preventing us from ruffing our ♥ loser (allowing them to cash a second ♥ trick).

This is a classic example of ducking our Ace, opposite a doubleton in dummy, to allow us to ruff losers in the other hand later in the play without having to give up the lead. A crossruff line of play is often set up in a seminar fashion.



Example 6

♠ A954
♥ 73
♦ AK65
♣ J72

♠ K873
♥ A964
♦ 82
♣ A65

It appears in 4♠ that we have 1♠, 1♥, and 2♣ losers. But on a ♥ lead we can duck one round of ♥ and set up a crossruff for ourselves. Now we can draw two rounds of trump, leaving the master outstanding, and proceed to crossruff the hand. As long as the opponents do not overruff, we score 2♠, 1♥, 2♥ ruffs, 2♦, 2♦ ruffs, and 1♣ for 10 tricks. (In effect, our trump loser and one of our ♣ losers collapse into one loser.)

Safely Plays

Another important part of managing our trump properly to make plays that cater to potential bad breaks without giving up any tricks if that suit breaks poorly. These plays are called *Safety Plays*.

Example 7

 A432
7 QJ98
 KT65

If the suit splits 3-2 then we have only one loser. If the suit splits 4-1 with West having four, then we have two losers no matter how we play the suit. But if the suit splits 4-1 with East having four, then when we play the Ace and then low to South, if East plays low, playing the 10 will protect us against this break – losing only one trick no matter if the suit splits 3-2 or 4-1.



Conclusion

When it comes to playing the trump suit there are many subtle skills to maintaining control of the hand and making the best use of our trump. Refusing to ruff in the long side, loser on loser plays, keeping trump in the short side to protect the long trump suit, etc., are just some of the sophisticated tools that can be used to keep control of the trump suit. But before you can tackle most of these plays you must first develop good skills about avoiding danger and not allowing the opponents to easily capture your trump. One of the starting points for this as a developing declarer is to remember that when you draw the last trump it often costs you two trumps (yours and the dummy's) to extract the opponents' final one. If the opponents' final trump is the master trump, it is often best to leave it outstanding and force them to ruff in with their sure trick. Work on drawing the opponents' trump in a way that best makes use of your trump and protects you from potentially dangerous breaks. You'll find this skill keeps you out of some disastrous declarer play situations.