



Declarer Play at Trick One

THIS NEW series has been prompted by recent requests. Several readers have noticed that their partners have a tendency to make mistakes which could be avoided, and I have been enrolled to assist them in avoiding such errors in the future!

The first issue that I shall address revolves around the decisions that are faced by the declarer at trick one. On many deals, this is the most important trick, so it is wise to decide on a plan before playing to the first trick. However, even when this hurdle has been crossed, errors can still creep in. In this article, I shall attempt to deal with some of the more common positions that can go awry, and look at ways to make sure that the declarer enjoys more success going forward.

Why is the First Trick so Important?

The declarer often has an advantage over the defenders when playing to the first trick, since the opening leader has to make a choice based on his thirteen cards (and the auction), while the declarer can make decisions based on both his cards and dummy's. In many instances, the first trick also represents an opportunity to set goals or targets. This is especially true when playing duplicate pairs or teams, as the declarer may be able to assess that his goal is not the same as the trick target required to fulfil his contract (being defeated by a trick can be better than having your opponents bid and make a contract).

Which Card to Play from Dummy?

A typical choice faced by the declarer involves which of dummy's cards should be played, and although it can be hard to generalise, there are common mistakes which can be avoided once you are aware of what might go wrong.

The Opening Leader Leads a High (Honour) Card

Mistake No. 1: 'Cover an Honour with an Honour'

When the opening leader begins with a high card, there will clearly be no problem if dummy cannot beat that card. However, if dummy has a higher card, the declarer will have to decide whether or not it should be played. A simple mistake to fix is the idea that you should 'cover an honour with an honour'. This idea is often useful when playing as a defender and may erroneously be applied by a declarer. However, as a declarer, you can assess whether there is any advantage to covering the opening lead.

Consider Example A:

♠ K 8 2
♦ N
W S E
♠ 7 6 5

South is the declarer in 4♥, and left-hand opponent leads the queen of spades.

An assumption that can be made is that the opening leader does not hold the ace of spades. It follows that there is no advantage to covering with the king of spades. East will win with the ace of spades, and none of declarer's remaining cards will be promoted. Declarer should instead play low from the dummy. If East has the singleton ace of spades, the king of spades will be promoted. However, it is more likely that the queen of spades will win the first trick, after which West will likely continue spades. Whether he plays a low spade, or a second high spade, dummy should again play low. Again, there is no advantage in playing the king of spades, while playing low might promote the ♠K if East has no choice but to win trick two with the ♠A.

Mistake No. 2: 'Failing to Protect a High Card'

Although you should not automatically cover an honour at trick one, there are situations where it can be a mistake not to beat the opening leader's card. This can seem quite confusing, but knowing why a play should be made is often the key to making the right decision.

Consider Example B:

♠ Q 7 4
♦ N
W S E
♠ 9

Once again, South is the declarer in 4♥. West leads the jack of spades.

When it comes to winning tricks in the spade suit, declarer's play to the first trick is irrelevant, but it may be that dummy has another suit which will be vulnerable if attacked by West, but not by East. Imagine that dummy also has ♣K-5-4 and declarer has ♣9-8-6. If West wins trick one with the jack of spades and then switches



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to clubs, declarer may lose three tricks in that suit if East has the ace of clubs. However, if East is forced to win trick one, he cannot attack clubs without allowing the king of clubs to win a trick.

Mistake No. 3: 'Mishandling Entries'

Declarer will sometimes be able to win the first trick in either hand, and thus have a choice of where to win trick one. Though it will sometimes make no difference in which hand declarer wins the first trick, the failure to plan at least one trick ahead can lead to declarer wishing he had won the first trick in the opposite hand. Before playing to the first trick, he should consider which hand he wishes to lead from at trick two (often important when tackling trumps early), and also make sure that he does not prematurely waste an entry to a long suit (often necessary when a long suit needs to be established).

The Opening Leader Leads a Low (Non-Honour) Card

Mistake No. 1: 'Second Player Plays Low'

This strategy is intended for defenders. When declarer leads a low card, the second player tends to play low, saving his high cards to beat a high card. However, it is often misapplied when playing as declarer. Again, seeing his partnership's combined assets allows the declarer to decide whether it is a good idea to play high or low from the dummy (second player).

Consider Example C:



This time, South is the declarer in 3NT, and West leads the four of diamonds.

Though West would tend not to lead away from the ace of diamonds against a suit contract, he could easily have done so against your no-trump contract. Playing low from the dummy gives declarer no

theoretical chance of winning a trick with the king of diamonds, while playing the king at trick one gives declarer at least a 50% chance of winning that trick.

Mistake No. 2: 'Paying Insufficient Attention to Spot Cards'

To many less-experienced players, spot cards often appear insignificant. Attention to these cards can allow for huge progress to be made and the winning of many more tricks over an extended period.

Consider Example D:



South plays in 1NT, and West leads the three of clubs.

Declarer plays low from the dummy, and East follows with the jack of clubs. It may be tempting to think that declarer can now make three club tricks by leading towards the ten of clubs at trick two. However, assuming that the opponents lead 'fourth highest from good suits', then the declarer can now make a couple of assumptions which may allow him to win all four tricks in the suit.

First, West is expected to hold the queen of clubs from the lead, and second, he is also placed with the nine of clubs (East should have played the club nine seeing the ten in the dummy). Therefore, West can be placed with ♣Q-9-7-3 or ♣Q-9-4-3. If he has the first holding, only three tricks can be won, but if he has the second holding, declarer can avoid a loser in the suit. Can you see how?

South should win with the ace of clubs and return the eight of clubs at trick two. If West plays low, dummy plays low. Declarer's eight of clubs will win the trick, and a finesse of the ten of clubs will give four winners. If West covers the eight of clubs with the nine, dummy's club ten wins, and all will depend on which card East contributes to the trick. If it is the seven of clubs, then declarer will later be able to lead towards dummy's K-6 which represents a 'finesse position' over West's remaining ♣Q-4.

Mistake No. 3: 'Failing to Recognise the Value of Tens'

Perhaps the most undervalued card in any given suit is the ten. Possession of the ten is often the deciding factor when determining the number of stoppers declarer holds in a suit, or the number of tricks that can be won from a particular suit.

Consider Example E:



South is the declarer in 3NT, and West leads the six of hearts.

You will often see relatively experienced players play the jack of hearts from the dummy at trick one. This is a technical error that will not always be punished, but one that is worth eradicating from one's game. Why is it a mistake to play the jack of hearts? Whenever one opponent has the heart queen and the other has the heart king, playing the jack of hearts will potentially leave the declarer with just one winner (and one stopper).

Say that East covers the jack of hearts with the queen. Winning with the ace may leave West with the king of hearts over declarer's ten of hearts, meaning that the ♥10 will not be useful if East leads a second round of hearts. Playing low at trick one is no better, as East simply continues hearts and West's king beats declarer's ten.

However, if dummy plays low at trick one, declarer's ten of hearts will immediately provide a second winner (and stopper) if East does not play an honour. If East plays the queen of hearts, then declarer can win with his ace and guarantee a second stopper (and winner) in the suit. If the jack of hearts is beaten by the king, then the ten of hearts will win the third trick in the suit.

How to Avoid Mistakes

- Do not automatically apply advice given to defenders to your play as declarer – not all principles are transferable.
- Make a plan – think at least one trick ahead.
- Pay attention to detail – not all small cards are insignificant!
- Pay sufficient respect to your tens. □



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