

AVOIDANCE PLAYS by Maritha Pottenger

The key to avoidance plays is to first **recognize the possible danger in a hand**. Usually the danger involves a specific opponent gaining the lead and being able to lead “through” a tenace or “at risk” holding that you have. The most common holding that you do NOT want to let RHO “lead through” is Kxx in a suit. You might also hold KJxx with LHO having overcalled that suit, or similar vulnerable holdings. **You want to ensure that the hand with the vulnerable honor plays last, NOT second!**

In **no trump**, the usual danger is that one hand (usually LHO, the leader) might be able to gain the lead and **cash winners in a long suit** that has been set up. Your goal is to keep that opponent from gaining the lead. (If RHO has bid a suit and his/her partner leads it, RHO has the length and is the dangerous hand.)

There are three major ways in which you can avoid some of these dangers:

- 1) **Ducking a trick** or tricks (also called hold-up plays)
- 2) Taking a **finesse into the “safe” hand**
- 3) **Transferring a loser** from an “unsafe suit” (where the “wrong” opponent could get the lead) to a different suit (where the “right” opponent retains the lead and has no way to put partner on lead). This is the **Scissors Coup**, so called because the loser transfer snips communication with the dangerous hand.

It is important to **look at the whole hand** before you play these combinations. The “right” technical way to play a combination in one suit may be “wrong” for the hand as a whole. For example, normally with 9 cards between your two hands and the Ace and King, you play for the drop rather than finessing for a queen. If, however, one hand is clearly the dangerous hand, you should finesse for the queen if it would lose to the non-dangerous hand. In other words, **you finesse so that the safe hand plays last and the dangerous hand plays second.**

Consider a few examples:

In 3NT, you hold ♠Axx ♥KQx ♦AQxx ♣J10xx and dummy has ♠xx ♥AJxx ♦J109 ♣AQ9x. The lead is the ♠K. You *duck* that trick (*hold-up* technique). You duck the second spade as well and win the third spade perforce. Count your tricks: 1 spade, 4 hearts, 1 diamond and 1 club. You need to develop two more and could finesse in either minor suit for extra tricks. Clearly you will finesse in clubs NOT diamonds—***taking the finesse into the safe hand*** (*dangerous hand plays second; safe hand plays last*). If a club finesse loses and RHO has no more spades (thanks to your hold-up), you are fine. (If RHO has another spade, spades are probably breaking 4-4 and you are still fine.) If you finesse in diamonds, LHO could win the trick and cash two more spades. Down 1.

(Note: If the opponents are playing suit preference signals, the size of the LHO’s third spade should tell his/her partner—and you—where LHO’s entry or potential entry is. If LHO plays the lowest outstanding spade, it implies a club entry (lowest ranking suit). If LHO plays highest outstanding spade, it implies a heart entry (highest ranking suit, excluding trump). Middle spade implies a diamond entry.)

Ducking can also be important in suit contracts.

Suppose you hold: ♠KQJxx ♥xx ♦KJx ♣Jxx and dummy has ♠xxx ♥Ax ♦xxx ♣AKQxx and LHO has overcalled in hearts. LHO leads the ♥K and RHO plays the ♥9. Who has the queen of hearts? LHO. Who has the jack of hearts? RHO if you believe the encouraging attitude signal. What is the danger? If you take the Ace of hearts, LHO will get in with the Ace of spades, lead a heart to partner’s Jack and RHO will play a diamond through your ♦KJx and you will lose two diamonds if LHO has the expected 12 HCP overcall, as well as a spade and a heart for down one. How do you avoid that unfortunate fate? You *duck* the King of hearts, allowing LHO to retain the lead. Then you force out the Ace of spades and LHO can cash the Ace of diamonds then or wait until you discard two diamonds on the long clubs in dummy and get the Ace of diamonds at the end.

Transferring a loser from one suit to another is often vital if you are going to avoid letting the dangerous hand get the lead. (Scissors Coup)

Suppose in a 4♠ contract you hold: ♠AQJxxx ♥x ♦Kxx ♣xxx opposite ♠Kxx ♥Ax ♦xxx ♣AKxxx and LHO has overcalled in hearts. The lead is the ♥K. If you “automatically” play the Ace because you have a singleton, you go down in a cold contract. RHO will later get the lead in clubs and your ♦K is toast if LHO has the ♦A, which is very likely for his overcall. The avoidance play—to ensure your contract is to DUCK the ♥K. If LHO continues hearts, take the Ace while discarding a small club from dummy. Then, pull two rounds of trumps with the Ace and Queen, and cash the AK of clubs and ruff a club HIGH. Return to dummy with the King of spades and cash two good clubs, discarding two diamonds. You have just transferred a loser. You make 5 instead of being down one!! [This line assumes clubs are breaking 3-2—about 68% chance, and spades no worse than 3-1 which is about 90%, for an overall chance of about 61%.]

When does a 1½ stopper holding become a 2 stopper holding and when does it become only 1 stopper?

If you hold AJx opposite xx(x), that is 1½ stoppers in the suit. If LHO leads the King (promising the Queen), **duck** the first trick. LHO cannot continue that suit without giving you two tricks (and two stoppers in no trump). This is called the **Bath Coup**, named after the city of Bath in England in the days of Whist. If LHO leads low (promising an honor) in no trump and RHO plays the Queen (or the King), then you must assume that the other half of the royal pair is on your left. If you must take a finesse in another suit that could lose to LHO, take RHO’s sovereign with the Ace immediately. Your Jx becomes a second stopper if LHO leads the suit (as you play fourth hand). If instead you must take a finesse in another suit that could lose to RHO, duck the sovereign. Duck the second round of that suit and take the third round perforce. You are hoping to exhaust RHO of the suit that was led. Then, if your obligatory finesse loses, RHO will not have any of the first suit left to lead to his/her partner’s length. (Remember, your Jx is NOT a stopper if RHO leads the suit.)

Another example of a 1½ stopper combination is the KQx in a suit. If the Ace is on your right, you always have two stoppers. If the Ace is on your left, you have one stopper—or two stoppers—depending on who gets the lead next. If LHO leads that suit and RHO plays the 10 (trying to force you to play the King or Queen), assume that LHO has the Ace. If you must take a finesse in another suit that could lose to LHO, take your King immediately. Your Qx will serve as a second stopper if LHO leads that suit again (as you are playing fourth hand). If you must take a finesse in another suit that could lose to RHO, duck the 10. Play the King or Queen on the second round of the suit and pray that RHO has only two cards in the suit. If so, you will exhaust RHO of that suit and, even if the finesse in the other suit loses, RHO will not be able to lead the dangerous suit to his/her partner.

These 1½ stopper combinations are also called **positional stoppers**. (They are two stoppers or one stopper based on the position of the opponent who leads that suit next.) Another positional stopper is AQJ opposite xx. If LHO leads low in that suit (promising an honor), RHO will play some spot card and you take the Jack. If you have two cards that you must knock out from the opponents’ hands, take the finesse in another suit that could lose into LHO’s hand first. Your AQ remaining in that first suit is two stoppers if LHO leads the suit again. It becomes only one stopper if RHO leads the suit. If you let RHO get the lead first (perhaps by knocking out an Ace), RHO eliminates your last stopper. Then, when you must finesse into LHO (the truly dangerous hand at that point), a losing finesse means losing your contract.

Bonus technique: strip and end play. Sometimes you can remove (**strip**) all but one suit from a defender and then “throw in” (give the lead to) that opponent, forcing him to lead into a tenace, for example AQ or Kx. Often the opponent can be thrown in with their last card (a loser for you) in their only other remaining suit such that the strip and throw in are accomplished on the same trick. A related scenario is to pull trump and strip a defender of only one side suit before the throw in, leaving the defender with the choice of leading to a tenace in one remaining suit or conceding a ruff-and-sluff by leading the other. Be particularly alert to this possibility when you have a nine card trump fit split 5-4 and nearly mirror distribution in the side suits.