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This Week in Bridge

(390) NT Play: Hold Up Plays and The Danger Hand

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Level: 4 of 10 (1 of 6)

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General

When we are declaring a hand in notrump and we have a stopper in the opponents' suit then we can prevent the opponents from talking all of tricks in that suit. If the stopper is a master card (like the Ace) then we can choose when to take this trick. Choosing not to take the first trick is called a *Hold Up Play*. This hold up play can be an effective technique in a variety of different situations. One of the most common uses of a hold up play is when we are declaring a notrump contract and we choose to hold up to cut communication between the opponents. Let's take a look at this declarer play technique in more detail.

Hold Up Plays in NT Contracts

In a notrump contract, one of the reasons to wait to take our Ace is to cut the communication between the defenders.

Example 1

87
KQJT3 942
A65

If we take the Ace on the first or second round of the suit, when Right Hand Opponent (RHO) gains the lead they will be able to return the suit to their partner and allow them to cash the rest of their tricks – giving them 4 tricks from Left Hand Opponent's (LHO) long suit. If we hold up our Ace and do not take it until the third round of the suit, then when RHO gains the lead they cannot return their partner's long suit.

This hold up play cuts communication between the opponents and makes our RHO a *safe hand* and our LHO the *danger hand*. If we give up the lead to the opponent's we want to do so to the "safe" opponent, not the "dangerous" opponent (the one with the winners).



When Not to Hold-Up – Promote a 2nd Stopper

One time that we usually do not hold up with our Ace is when we use it to capture one of the opponents' honors and promote another trick for ourselves.

Example 2

73

AQJ

Here if LHO leads this suit and RHO plays the King, we win our Ace so that we can take 3 tricks.

Example 3

73

AJT

If LHO leads a low card this suit and RHO plays an honor, either the King or Queen, then we usually capture that honor with the Ace. This now promotes our JT into a second stopper in this suit.

Other Times Not to Hold Up – Positional Honors

When we have *positional values*, honor cards that cannot afford to be led through, or a card that can be promoted into a positional value, then we usually do not make hold up plays.

Example 4

762

5 Q

K3

This is a simple example: if we do not take our King now, it will never win a trick. We do not hold up on the Queen in this situation.

Example 5

76

5 Q

AJ3

This is another example of a time where we do not simply make a hold up play. Instead, we should consider taking RHO's honor with our Ace. If we take the Ace now, our J3 is now a positional stopper - a stopper if LHO gets the lead but not if RHO gets the lead. With this holding, we also have the option of making a hold up play to cut communication, just as we would if we did not have the Jack. If we do make a hold up play then RHO becomes the safe hand, instead of LHO, and we hope the suit splits 5-3 and when RHO gets on lead they cannot return the suit. We determine the right play based on how we plan to play the rest of the hand and which opponent is likely to gain the lead.



Example 6

762
5 Q
 AJ

Sometimes making a hold up play cuts communication, but when our holding up seems unlikely to work, we can win an Ace early to give the appearance of still maintaining a positional stopper. Here, if we win the Queen with the Ace, then LHO will know that we have the Jack (RHO's Queen denied holding the Jack). Now, if LHO gains the lead, they may not know if our Jack is protected (at least Jx) and probably will shift to another suit – trying to get their partner on lead to lead through our Jack.

Note: Another time not to hold up is when things will be worse if the opponents shift to another suit. If the opponents have not led their best suit, do not give them a chance to change their mind.

More Hold Up Plays – Double Stoppers

With a double stopper in the opponents' suit, it is natural to win the first trick, but consider the following situation:

Example 7

762
QT854 J9
 AK3

If we win the first trick and RHO gains the lead, they can return the suit and knock out our second stopper. Then if LHO gains the lead later, they will be able to run their suit. However, if we duck the first trick and win the second, this hold up play works better. Now if RHO wins the lead, they will not be able to continue the suit. LHO must gain the lead twice in order to run their suit.

More Hold Up Plays – Bath Coup

Consider another situation where a hold up play is valuable.

Example 8

76
KQT52 984
 AJ3

If the King is led and we win the Ace, when RHO gains the head we are in trouble; but if LHO gains the lead then we are safe (RHO is the danger hand, LHO is the safe hand). However, if we duck the opening lead, then if LHO continues the suit they will set up a 2nd stopper for us - this is called a *Bath Coup*.

Note: Many of these hold up plays may also apply to suit contracts, but we must consider the entire hand (especially the danger of a ruff) when considering whether to make a hold up play.



Conclusion

The hold up play is one of many declarer play techniques that we use to make it more difficult for the opponents to take their tricks. This technique can be used in a variety of different ways, but the most common use of it is to cut communication between the opponent's hand. By using a hold up play you can often create a danger hand and a safe hand (especially when the opponents have a 5-3 fit). Make sure that this is a skill you feel comfortable with and make it a regular part of your notrump declarer play considerations.