

Notrump Contract Play – When to Take Stoppers

For notrump contracts keeping the opponents from running their suits is critical. This seminar will review the best strategy for taking stoppers in the opponent's suit.


What is a Stopper?

A stopper is defined as a holding that will (or is likely to) prevent the opponents from immediately running a large number of tricks in a suit at notrump.

Does it matter when you play your stopper?

Yes, consider this deal where West is playing 3NT:

Contract: 3NT ♠ by West

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

On this deal declarer (West) has 5 winners (1S, 2H, 2C) and can develop four more in diamonds to make the contract if opponents do not run spades first. Can declarer keep this from happening? No if declarer takes their ace on trick one. Yes if West lets opponents win the first two spades winning their ace on the third spade. Now when declarer attacks diamonds South can win their ace but no longer has spades to return to partner to set the contract.

Rule of Seven

So when is it right to take your stopper if it's the ace? If the declarer subtracts from 7 (seven) the total number of cards in the suit in their own hand and the dummy, the result is the number of times declarer should hold up with his Ace:

5 cards between hands: $7 - 5 = 2$ = hold up two times, then take your Ace

6 cards between hands: $7 - 6 = 1$ = hold up one time, then take your Ace

What about other stoppers like the King or Queen? If you can safely holdup, you can follow the Rule of Seven. Otherwise you must take your stopper when you can.


Notrump Contract Play – When to Take Stoppers Worksheet

For the following hands in 3NT contracts, determine when to take your stoppers.


Hand #1 – Contract is 3NT by West. Opening lead is ♣Q (from QJ10 sequence)

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

Hand #2 – Contract is 3NT by West. Opening lead is ♥K (from KQJ sequence)

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

Hand #3 – Contract is 3NT by West. Opening lead is ♠J (from J109 sequence). South overtakes with the ♠A and returns a spade.

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

Answers:

Hand #1: 8 winners (2S, 5D, 1C). You can develop 3 more heart tricks but you must protect against the opponents getting 4 clubs and a heart first. Using the Rule of Seven hold up two times and then take your ♣A.

Hand #2: 8 winners (1H, 5D, 2C). Using the Rule of Seven hold up one time and then take your ♥A before developing spades to make your contract.

Hand #3: 4 winners (2H, 2D). In this case you can still use the Rule of Seven to hold up two times before taking your king.