

SUIT COMBINATIONS AND SAFETY PLAYS

Rather than having to work them out at the table each time they occur, it is useful to know the standard 'odds' plays with various common suit combinations. For the moment we will look at suits in isolation i.e. not taking into account any special problems that be created by the rest of the hand.

(i) AJ432 K1098

Holding nine cards, missing the queen it is correct to play for the drop.

 AJ43 K1098

With only eight cards you would cash either the ace or king then finesse.

(ii) J1098 A7654

Taking two finesses is best. Of the times when you could have succeeded, this only loses to KQ doubleton offside.

(iii) AKJ1098 32

You should take a first round finesse. To cash the ace then finesse gains when North has the bare queen but loses when he has any of the four small singletons (four times as likely) as you can no longer pick up South's Qxxx.

(iv) AQ92 543

Needing three tricks you should finesse the 9 first, then the queen. This gains over a first round finesse of the queen when South has J10x.

(v) A32 KJ54

Needing four tricks, ace then finesse the jack. Needing only three tricks, king, then ace, then low to the jack. This gains when South has queen doubleton.

(vi) A432 KJ65

Needing four tricks, ace then low to the jack.

(vii)

A932

KJ65

Similar holdings are not always identical. Needing four tricks, you should now lead low to the jack on the first round. Cashing the ace first stops you losing to South's bare queen - but now four tricks are impossible. Suppose North has the bare queen and South 10874. That is when the recommended line gains.

Now suppose you only need three tricks from this combination. Neither of the above plays is 100% secure. Cashing the ace fails when South has Q10xx, while low to the jack loses out to South's bare queen. There is, however, a perfect safety play for three tricks. Cash the king then lead low, intending to play the 9 if South follows with another small card. Either the 9 scores or the suit breaks 3-2. If South shows out or plays an honour you win the ace and lead low towards the jack.

S	KJ43	S	A962
H	AK	H	74
D	AQ62	D	KJ5
C	Q108	C	AKJ2

Your contract could affect how you play any given combination. In this example, playing 7S on a heart lead, you would win, cross to the East hand and lead low to the jack - your best chance for four tricks. In 6S, however, you can afford one loser but not two. Cash SK and lead towards the 9 as described above.

(viii)

A2

K1098765

If you can afford one loser but not two lead low from East and run it if South plays low. This guards against QJ43 with South - the only real danger.

(ix)

AQ102

K9873

Missing jack to four, cash a top honour from the hand with two honours first. Now you can finesse either way if 4-0 break comes to light.

(x)

AQ42

K9873

Again, a similar holding which is not identical. You can only overcome a 4-0 break if it is South who holds them, and only then if you start with the king.

S A4	S J9753
H KJ75	H A82
D AK5	D 632
C AK43	C 108

Against 3NT, North leads S6 to the 7, king and ace. You return a spade to the 9, which holds. Counting our winners, we see that we need just three heart tricks and from (v) we know the best way to play with that target in mind - HK, HA, low to the jack.

S AQ1095	S 8632
H Q4	H AK7
D AK	D QJ54
C KQ105	C A3

How should we play the trump suit in 7S and in 6S?

In 7S, It is best to lead low to the queen and hope South has the doubleton king or K74, when the jack will fall and we can finesse the 10 next.

In 6S, we can afford one loser but not two. What if the queen loses to the king? Do we finesse the 10 next time or cash the ace? Better is to cash the ace first then lead towards the queen. Now you have no awkward guess to worry about and will succeed unless North has KJx(x)

S AJ10642	S 5
H J6	H KQ53
D AK74	D Q632
C 6	C A853

North leads ace of hearts and switches to a low club against you 4S contract. The best way to play the trump suit for only two losers is to play the ace then a low one. If spades are 3-3 anything will work, while if they are 4-2, Kx or Qx with North is more likely than KQxx with South so finessing the 10 is more likely to create a third loser.

S	KJ98753	S	4
H	K6	H	Q72
D	A4	D	KQ8
C	A8	C	K106532

North leads HJ against 4S. You play low from dummy but South rises with the ace and returns a low heart to your king. How should you play the spades?

The correct play is to cross to dummy and lead low to the king. If Spades are 3-2, it is just a matter of guessing correctly, with any king, jack and nine being equally likely to succeed. If the worse happens and you lose to the next highest card, you get a chance to guess which remaining honour (if any) is now bare on the second round.

The difference comes when spades are 4-1. Low to the king gains when North has a singleton queen or ten, while you will probably lose three tricks when he has bare ace even if you guess correctly. Low to the jack gains only against bare ten, while low to the nine never gains - you always lose three tricks even is the nine wins or forces a bare ace or queen.

AVOIDANCE PLAY

We have seen how to play some basic suit combinations in isolation, but in real life we have to consider the whole hand rather than just one suit. Just as we saw that different contracts might lead to different plays with the same suit combinations because of the number of losers we could afford, we must also look at the rest of the deal.

Often we have a weak spot one which is vulnerable to attack by one defender but not the other. Clearly, if we must lose the lead, we would prefer it to be to the safe hand - the one which cannot hurt us - rather than the dangerous hand - the one which can hurt us. This leads us into the concept of avoidance play; keeping the dangerous opponent off lead.

S	AJ98	S	K10762
H	K4	H	A7
D	AQJ3	D	K84
C	864	C	K32

You play 4S on the lead of the queen of hearts. In isolation, the correct play in the trumps suit is to cash the ace and king, but is that right here? What is the only danger? It is that North gains the lead and leads clubs. South holding the ace. The solution is simple; win the heart lead, cash the ace of spades and finesse into the South hand. Even if it loses, South -the safe hand - can do no harm.

S	K109	S	AJ62
H	KJ6	H	73
D	KJ85	D	AQ104
C	A102	C	873

North leads H5 against 3NT and you have eight sure tricks. You can finesse either way in spades to establish the ninth trick. Which way is correct? It depends on the heart suit. Suppose South plays the queen and you win the king. Now South is the danger hand as he could lead through your remaining J6. So you simply finesse spades into the North hand.

Now suppose South won the ace of hearts at trick one and returned the suit. Firstly, you should finesse, as even if this loses you will cut their communications. North wins the HQ and leads a third round. You know either North has the remaining hearts or they are 4-4, so this time it is South which is the safe hand - so finesse spades into South.

S 75	S K94
H AJ986	H K105
D KJ4	D AQ1096
C AJ6	C 104

North leads C2 to South's king. How do you play 4H? There are at least ten winners available so the only worry is losing four tricks before we can take them. The four losers would have to be one club, one heart, and two spades, and that can only happen if North gets the lead to play a spade through. The way to ensure this does not happen is to duck the club, win the continuation and finesse hearts into the South hand.

S KJ3	S 72
H 7642	H AK5
D AQ87	D 53
C K9	C AQ10862

Against 3NT, North leads S6 to the queen. You win the king and now, of course, South is the danger hand. Don't be greedy; you only need five club tricks, so try to cater for a bad break. You can afford to lose a trick to North but not to South, so cross to HA and lead a low club to the nine, gaining when South has jack to four.

S 76	S AK85
H A109	H 654
D AK632	D 954
C K75	C AQ8

North who overcalled 1H, leads HK against 3NT. You duck the opening lead and win the continuation and have a simple problem -how to establish a ninth trick from diamonds without letting North gain the lead. If South has the diamond length there will be no problem, while if North has queen to three there is no hope. What about if South has a doubleton queen. Cross to the CQ and lead a diamond. If South plays the queen, duck, if not, win the ace and lead a club to the ace. Again you lead a diamond, planning to duck the queen and otherwise play king and another, hoping South has length. A classical avoidance play.

S	AK863	S	742
H	105	H	A64
D	K64	D	95
C	KQ3	C	AJ1097

This requires the opposite technique to the previous example. South is the danger hand because he can attack the diamond position. You duck the opening lead and win the continuation in the dummy. Now lead a spade and simply cover South's card. If that necessitated playing an honour, cross back to dummy and again lead a spade and cover South's card. If spades are 3-2, you will succeed in keeping South out of the lead unless he has QJ10.

S	KQ10854	S	AJ732
H	-	H	QJ109
D	K72	H	853
C	9754	C	Q

North leads ace and king of clubs against 4S. You could just rely on South holding the ace of diamonds, but there is a better option. Take the double ruffing finesse in hearts, pitching diamonds, and you only need South to hold one or both heart honours - a 75% chance instead of the 50% diamond play. The point, is of course, that if the first heart finesse loses, North cannot attack diamonds effectively.

WHEN TO DUCK, WHEN TO WIN

(a) There are a number of situations where we need to duck for the sake of our own communications, for example

S AK9	S 752
H A62	H 1083
D AK84	D 72
C 865	C AK732

In 3NT, you win the spade lead duck the first club and hope they are 3-2.

A more extreme example would be:

S AK4	S 85
H AJ4	H 76
D A8642	D 93
C 85	C AKJ7632

Again in 3NT, you win the spade lead and lead a club. So long as North follows you can guarantee your contract simply by ducking completely. Try giving North Q1094 to see why this is essential.

S AKJ742	S Q5
H A53	H K742
D A	D Q6532
C 976	C J3

North leads CA against 4S but switches to a low trump. Without the trump switch, you could have ruffed a club in dummy for your tenth trick. Clearly, you are not going to be allowed to do so.

The only hope is to make a third heart trick. To do so you must duck a heart to preserve communications and you must do so immediately, while there is still a trump in dummy to take care of further club leads.

(b) Most ducking plays are, however, designed to cut defensive communication. We have already seen some simple ducking plays.

S A63	S K92
H K4	H AQ107
D A106	D K93
C Q10976	C J84

North leads SQ against 3NT. You need to knock out the ace and king of clubs and if North has both of these cards plus five spades there is nothing you can do. If he has only one club honour there is no problem, simply duck the first spade. When South wins his club trick he will only have a spade left to lead if they are 4-3, in which case he cannot hurt you.

Note that winning at trick one and ducking the next round is not good enough.

S AJ3	S 65
H A83	H K64
D K5	D A732
C QJ1083	C A962

North leads SK against 3NT, If you win at trick one you go down when spades are 5-3 and the club finesse loses. Duck and North must switch or give you a cheap trick, either of which means you make your contract. This is known as The Bath Coup.

S KJ52	S 4
H AKJ	H 1064
D K7	D AQ43
C Q853	C AJ1096

When south plays the queen on the spade lead against your 3NT contract, it is correct to duck twice in case spades are 5-3. It may look a strange play, but try it when the club finesse loses and you should see why it is necessary.

Note that if West had the ace of clubs it would be right to win the first spade as that would then be the way to guarantee a second spade stopper.

S	AJ2	S	104	West	North	East	South
H	QJ5	H	K1096	-	-	-	1C
D	QJ104	D	K973	INT	PASS	3NT	PASS
C	KJ3	C	A42				

North leads S5 to South's king. It looks as though North has led from queen to five spades and that South has the rest of the high cards. What happens if you win the first spade? You have two aces to knock out. The first time, South wins and leads a spade which North ducks. The second time, South wins and leads his last spade and North cashed three tricks - one down.

Now try ducking two rounds of spades. This leaves you in complete control and you only lose the two red suit aces.

S	A95	S	64
H	A63	H	K952
D	K1052	D	A964
C	Q74	C	AK5

North leads SK against 3NT. This is really a double ducking play. First you should duck two rounds of spades to cut the defensive communications in the dangerous case when they are 5-3. On winning the third spade you lead a diamond to the nine, ducking into the safe hand. As long as this does not lose to a singleton honour, you now have three diamond tricks and nine in all.

(c) There are many possible ducking plays and it is useful to know them, but just as important is to know when and when not to use them .

S	A94	S	KQ	West	North	East	South
H	KJ5	H	A42	1C	PASS	1H	PASS
D	KJ4	D	632	INT	PASS	3NT	PASS
C	QJ53	C	K10964				

North leads a low diamond to the queen. You have to knock out the ace of clubs - do you win the diamond or duck?

There is no danger to your contract unless the diamonds are 5-2. If South has the ace of clubs, you must duck at trick one or lose four diamonds when he wins with his ace. If North has the CA, ducking at trick one is fatal as it restricts you to one diamond stopper when you otherwise would have two.

Is it a guess? Well, remember that it is only a 5-2 diamond break which can hurt you. If North had five reasonable diamonds and an outside ace he might have overcalled. As he didn't, assume South has the missing ace and duck the diamond.

S 10842	S A9
H A3	H QJ4
D KQ104	D J73
C Q98	C AK1064

North leads S5 against 3NT. If he had KQJ of spades he would have led an honour. so South is known to have at least one of the KQJ. Imagine North with KJxxx plus the ace of diamonds. Duck and South wins the queen. North doesn't waste an honour on a spade return and has three spades to cash when he takes his ace -one down.

Now try winning the ace at trick one and playing on diamonds. With the spades still blocked and North no longer having an outside entry, you have a second stopper and make your contract.

S K1064	S Q3	West	North	East	South
H KJ	H AQ	-	1S	2C	PASS
D K1097	D QJ84	3NT	PASS		
C Q97	C KJ1083				

North leads S5. It looks obvious to play low from dummy, but in fact this will probably cost you your contract. North will have all the missing aces and you need to knock out both the ace of clubs and ace of diamonds. If you play low from dummy. South's seven forces your ten. North wins the first club and plays SA, dropping the queen, and SJ, forcing out your king. You lose three spades and two aces.

Now try playing SQ at trick one. When that holds you still have two more stoppers and North can no longer hurt you.

So don't just learn a whole set of ducking plays and use them indiscriminately. Before deciding what to do, go through the play in your mind, firstly if you duck and secondly if you win. Then you can make your decision.