



Adventures in Bridge

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This Week in Bridge

(239) Hold Up Plays

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Level: 1, 2

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General

When we are dealt the Ace of a suit, we have a powerful advantage in the suit. We have the ability to win a trick when we choose and do not have to worry about the position of the opponents' honors or taking our trick when the opponents want us to. With this control of a suit comes a decision about when to take our Ace. Here we look at the different situations where we can take our Ace and when we may choose to *hold up* and take it later.

Hold Up Plays in NT Contracts

Level 1

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 holdup play cuts communication between the opponents and makes our RHO into a *Safe Hand* and our LHO into the *Danger Hand*.



When Not to Hold Up – Promote a 2nd Stopper

Level 1

One time that we usually do not hold up with our Ace is when we use it to capture one of the opponent's 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.

Note: These discussions are of suit combinations in a vacuum, but there are times when we must consider the entire hand and do something other than the "normal" action.



Other Times Not to Hold Up in NT – Positional Honors

Level 1

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 holdup plays.

Example 4

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      762
5           Q
      K3
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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

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      76
5           Q
      AJ3
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This is another example of a time where we do not simply make a holdup 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 holdup play to cut communication, just as we would if we did not have the Jack. If we do make a holdup 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

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      762
5           Q
      AJ
```

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

Note: Another time not to hold up is when things will be worse if the opponents shift to another suit. If the opponents have made a mistake by not leading their best suit, do not give them a chance to change their mind; instead win the Ace immediately.



Advanced Holdup Plays at Notrump – Double Stoppers

Level 2

With a double stopper in the opponent's 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 holdup play works better. Now if RHO wins the lead after the third round of the suit, they will not be able to continue the suit. LHO must gain the lead twice in order to run their suit.

More Advanced Holdup Plays – Bath Coup

Level 2

Consider another situation where a holdup play is valuable.

Example 8

76
KQT52 984
AJ3

If the King is led and we win the Ace, when RHO gains the lead 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 LHO cannot continue the suit and must shift to another suit to try to get their partner on lead to return their suit. This is a famous situation called a *Bath Coup*.

Note: Many of these holdup 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 holdup play.



A Classic Holdup Play in a Suit Contract

Level 1

In a suit contract one of the main reasons we hold up is to cut communication between the opponents.

Example 9

76
KQ854 JT92
A3

If we win the first round of this suit, when LHO gets on lead then they may be able to get to their partner by underleading their Queen. Making a holdup play can cut communication between the opponents and not allow RHO to gain the lead.

Example 10

Another place not to take the Ace on the first round is to keep communication open between our hand and the dummy.

76
K
A53

This is a classic situation for ducking the first round of the suit. This allows us, when we get the lead (in this suit or another suit) to come to our hand with our Ace and then ruff our 3rd round loser in the dummy (hopefully in the short side). This is a much better play than winning the Ace immediately and then playing this suit again. In this case, then we would need a way back to our hand in another suit in order to ruff our third round loser.

Conclusion

When to take your Ace as declarer can be a complicated decision. You want to give yourself as many tricks as possible without allowing the opponents to take too many tricks. Holding up on your Ace is a powerful tool for preventing the opponents from gaining control of the hand with the suit they have attacked. Spend your Ace wisely and at the proper time to create as much difficulty for the opponents as possible.