

No Trump Play: The Hold Up, Part II

Dealer South	♠107		
N/S Vul	♥632		
♠AJ42	♦KQJ763	♠Q863	
♥Q75	♣A6	♥J1094	
♦1054		♦A	
♣752	♠K95	♣J843	
	♥AK8		
	♦982	Bidding	<u>S</u> <u>N</u>
	♣KQ109		1NT 3NT
			all pass

Opening lead: ♠2

Last week we talked about the basic principal of the hold up play in a no-trump contract: don't play your only stopper in a suit until at least one of the opponents plays her last card in that suit. This week we're looking at situations where you should not hold up playing your winner in a suit.

In the above deal, you only have one spade stop, the king. You must play the king at trick one even though you know you must lose the lead to the ♦A to make your contract. If you permit East's ♠Q to take the trick, on the spade return the king will be trapped by West's ♠AJ, and you will take no spade tricks. If, however, instead of the ♠K, your stopper was the ♠A (switch West's and South's ♠A and ♠K), you probably think you should hold up. But not this time (see below).

Fortunately you can take your king with some comfort because of the opening lead! West will usually lead 4th best (when in doubt, check their card, or ask East—the correct question is, “What do you play on opening leads?” and most of the time the answer will be “standard,” meaning 4th best). When West plays the deuce, West cannot hold a 5-card suit if playing 4th best leads (there can be no 5th card lower than the deuce). So you win your ♠K, drive out the ♦A and take your good diamonds after they cash their 3 spade winners.

The important lesson to be learned here is to look at the opening lead, then try to determine the length of the opening leader's suit. Is it likely to be 5 or more, or only 4? As Eddie Kantar says, “Look under the opening lead.” In the above hand, say dummy holds the ♠32, and declarer holds ♠K54. It's easy to guess West only has 4 when the opening lead is the ♠2, but it's just as easy to figure it out if West's opening lead on this holding is ♠6—you and your partner have all of the other little spades. The ♠6 must be 4th best of a 4-card holding.

One last note: as we said above, if your stopper is the ♠A, and *you don't hold up your ace on the first trick* (because you correctly read West as having only a 4-card suit), East might think you hold the ♠K as well and try a club or heart shift instead. *Voila!* Your deception pays off, and now you have overtricks!

Here's a much trickier play, courtesy Frank Stewart's Daily Bridge Column:

<http://baronbarclay.com/062512.html>

(Thanks to Glenda Fleming for calling it to my attention.)

Dealer South	♠AJ					
N/S Vul	♥KJ10					
♠Q10853	♦742	♠K4				
♥754	♣KJ975	♥98632				
♦Q106		♦985				
♣A3	♠9762	♣862				
	♥AQ					
	♦AKJ3	Bidding	<u>S</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>E</u>
	♣Q104		1NT	pass	3NT	all pass

Opening lead: ♠5

As we said above, first you look at the opening lead and try to determine how many spades West holds. Since you can't see the 3 or 4, you should assume West holds at least 5, which would leave East with 2 (or 1). Since you need to drive out the ♣A to make your contract, your first inclination will probably be to hold up dummy's ace for one round, then hope East has the ♣A and no spade to return.

But this being a Frank Stewart problem, you have to use your head and think beyond the obvious. Before playing from dummy, visualize the West-East hands based on your own holding and the opening lead. Of the 6 remaining unseen spades, who has the king, queen, and 10? If West held all three, then West would almost certainly have led the ♠K (from ♠KQ105x), the top of a 3-card sequence (the break before the 3rd card is acceptable). So East has one of the three missing honors (including the 10 as an honor), and it will drop either on the first or second round of the suit.

So the answer, after all this thought, is *play the ace on the first round!* Then drive out the ♣A, in this case held by West. If East doesn't drop a singleton spade honor on trick one, then West cannot continue the suit without blocking the suit in East's hand. If the missing spade honor does drop 1st round, your ♠J and 9 will ultimately work as a second stop.

If you had held up one round, East's ♠K would win, and the spade return would drive out your ♣A. Now when you lose to West's ♣A, the defense cashes three more spade tricks for down one.

The lesson from this is, don't make the obvious play. See if there's enough information available to find a better strategy to make your contract.