Bridge Theory for the Practitioners

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6. Restricted Choice: Fully Explained

We continue our discussions of "finesse or drop" in a more general sense. Consider this problem at the table. There are two missing *equally important cards* and your contract depends on locating them. These two equally important cards are often touching honors like QJ, but not always. For example if the J is on the dummy and the Q and T are missing, these two missing cards are considered to be equally important cards for our discussion.

Terence Reese has coined the term *Restricted Choice* to guide declarer play when two equally important cards are missing and defense has just played one of those cards. The question is do you finesse for the other honor or play for the drop?

Let us consider some concrete examples.

Example 1. (Reference: Terence Reese, *Master Play in Contract Bridge*)

A 9 7 3

K Q 5

Here JT are the equally important cards.

You want all the tricks in this suit to make your contract.

Trick 1.	You play the K. Small from both opponents.
Trick2.	You play Q. Small from left and T from right.
Trick 3.	You play the 5. J does not show up from left. Sigh. What now? Do you finesse for the J (by playing the 9 from the dummy) or play the A and go for the drop? Which is more probable line i.e. what is the percentage play?

The way this dilemma is traditionally resolved is by invoking the *Principle of Restricted Choice*: *A defender should be assumed not to have had a choice rather than to have exercised a choice in a particular way.* If right hand opponent (RHO) had JTx then he/she had a choice of playing J or T in the second round. The fact that he played the T means that he had a *restricted choice* and hence cannot have the J. I am sure your response to this is, "huh"? Now suppose the RHO played the J and the T becomes the card to locate. Traditional restricted choice explanation will go again like this. If right hand opponent (RHO) had JTx then he/she had a choice of playing J or T in the second round. The fact that he played the J means that he had a *restricted choice* and hence cannot have the T. What is your response to this now? A double huh?

Rather than invoking this sort of explanation that leaves everyone mystified, let us do some card counting. How many ways RHO can have Jx or Tx? These are the possibilities:

J2	J4	J6	J8
T2	T4	T6	T8

So there are 8 combinations where finesse would work. Now how many ways the RHO opponent can have JTx? The possibilities are:

JT2 JT4 JT6 JT8

So there are 4 combinations where drop would work.

Looking at these two sets of combinations, sometimes it is said that finesse is twice more likely to work than the drop. **But this statement is not accurate**. Do you know why? Because by making this statement one implicitly assumes that all these combinations are equally likely. And they are not. Why? Because when 6 cards are missing as in the example 1, we know that a 4-2 break is more likely (48%) compared to a 3-3 break (36%). However, here is the bottom line. Even though the combinations are not equally weighed, the case for finesse turns out to be much stronger than the drop.

So we have given the Principle of Restricted Choice a firm mathematical footing. From now on, you can use the Principle with confidence and when someone asks you why it works that way; just say that it has a mathematical footing when you count the number of favorable versus non-favorable combinations.

Let me state the Principle of Restricted Choice in a more useful fashion (Following Eddie Kantar: *Topics in Declarer Play at Bridge*)

When the opponents hold two equally important cards, and one has appeared on a previous trick, then take the finesse for the remaining important card.

Now I present some more *uncommon* examples of Restricted Choice for your review.

Example 2. (Reference: Eddie Kantar, *Topics in Declarer Play at Bridge*)

Here QJ are the equally important cards.

K T 4 3

A 7 6 5 2

Trick 1. You play the A. RHO plays the "Quack" (i.e. either Q or J)
Trick 2. Finesse for the other one. Play small and hook the T.

Example 3. (Reference: Mike Lawrence: *How to Play Card Combinations)*

This is an uncommon example where KQ are the equally important cards.

A 4 2

J T 5

Trick 1. 2 of S to the J but RHO wins with the Q.

Later. Play the J from hand and *finesse* for the K.

Example 4. (Reference: Terence Reese, *Master Play in Contract Bridge*)

K J 9 7 4

A 6

Looking at the J on dummy, here QT are the equally important cards.

You need 4 tricks in this suit.

Trick 1. Play the A from hand. RHO drops the Q.

Trick 2. Following restricted choice, with Q and T being equally important cards, hook the 9.

This last example is amazingly counter intuitive. The Principle of Restricted Choice says that RHO holding stiff Q is more probable than him/her holding QT even though 4-2 breaks are more probable (48%) compared to 5-1 breaks (15%). And there is solid mathematical footing for this conclusion.

If you follow the Restricted Choice principle correctly, you will win "oodles of tricks" (using Kanter's language) over the years.

References:

1. **Terence Reese, *Master Play in Contract Bridge***
2. **Eddie Kantar, *Topics in Declarer Play at Bridge***
3. **Mike Lawrence: *How to Play Card Combinations***