

005: The Bath Coup

When beginning players hear the word “coup” (pronounced “koo”; the P is silent) I sometimes see them react as though it’s an indication of knowledge that they’ll never be good enough to understand. Admittedly some of the advanced ones are way, way beyond me. Perhaps it will help if you think of a coup as kind of like a bidding convention; a way of standardizing a situation that you encounter all the time, like asking for aces, in a way that means you do the same thing every time. A coup is a pattern — when you see a certain pattern of cards, you play in a certain way and get a certain result. In a way, a finesse is a coup; it’s just such a common coup, we don’t even think of it that way. Clever players in the past have realized that, when you see a certain pattern, if you play your cards in a certain way, you come out on top. And they communicate the pattern by naming it and calling it a coup.

The Bath coup is the simplest coup of all (beyond the finesse) and it’s a good way to grasp the mechanics of coups; you turn one trick into two. It requires a certain amount of restraint, because you have to steel yourself to NOT take a trick when it is first offered to you — and this is something that I find beginners have a problem with. Holding up an ace for even one round is the mark that you’ve progressed from beginner to intermediate status!

Here’s how it works. Just to recap something that is standard in bridge card play, when the opening lead is a king, it promises that the opening leader holds either the queen or the ace in that suit to go along with it. So let’s suppose that you are the declarer in a no-trump contract and the opening lead is the king of spades (SK). Your holding in spades is AJ5 and dummy’s is 543. Since you hold the ace of spades yourself, you know that the opening leader, your LHO (West), also has the queen of spades (SQ). And it’s not precisely clear where the rest of the spades are; for the moment, it doesn’t matter.

Your combined holding with dummy of AJ5 against 543 will produce precisely one guaranteed trick — SA. Suppose you take SK with SA on the first trick and then play on another suit. When your RHO (East) takes a trick in another suit, she will lead a spade through your hand, something that beats dummy’s 5, and your SJ will be gobbled up by the SQ whether you play it now or on the next round. End result, one trick in spades.

Now let’s suppose the opening lead is still the SK, but you take a deep breath and play the S5 from your hand, leaving you with a holding of the SA and SJ. LHO takes the first trick with the SK. If she now plays another spade, either the SQ or a small spade, you take two spade tricks with the A and J of spades. End result, two tricks in spades. If you’re having trouble visualizing this, take some actual cards and lay it out. West’s hand can be KQT98 of spades and East’s is 76. West leads the king and the first trick goes king, small, small, small. See what happens at trick 2.

West, of course, has also read about the Bath coup and realizes that if she continues the spade suit, you will get two spade tricks instead of the single one to which you’re entitled. So she will switch to another suit, aware that when East takes a trick, she will lead a spade back and West will again have a chance to score her queen and hold you to the single spade trick you’re definitely entitled to. But you haven’t lost anything by not playing the ace on the first round, and you’ve given yourself a chance of two tricks instead of one. You can’t lose a trick and you *might* gain one.

This is the easiest example of what's called a "hold-up" play. You hold up the SA by refusing to play it on the first round. You haven't lost it as a trick; it's hard to imagine a situation where you're the declarer in NT and don't manage to score an ace in your own hand. You're just waiting for a time when it will do you more good to play it. This is an example of "timing" — timing is a very important concept in the play of the hand. Forcing an opponent to switch suits, as West will have to do at trick 2, may pay off for you. For instance, she might lead a heart into the AQ in your hand! With the Bath coup, you take command of the timing of the hand and force West to play a new suit at a time when she doesn't know enough about where the cards are to make a sensible decision. The timing is yours, not hers.

So next time you're declaring a NT contract, and the opening lead is the king in a suit where you have AJx, take a deep breath and duck the first trick and see what happens!

By the way, if you're wondering where the name "Bath coup" comes from — it's named after the city of Bath, in England, where it was apparently invented, and predates the game of bridge. It comes, in fact, from bridge's precursor, whist, and has been around since at least the 1800s! Textbooks on bidding and bidding conventions come and go, but the play of the hand itself will never change.

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