Text for second talk on suit combinations

Revised 11/09/08

Let's start with a quick review of the last talk. If you were lucky enough to miss it, you can find it on the Unit's website (Paloaltobridge.com). Today we'll look at a few more isolated single-suit combinations and then a few card combinations in the context of the auction and considering the role of defense.

1. Objective

The objective is to provide ways to deal with unexpected combinations in real time (say less than 20-30 seconds) at the table. There will be many combinations that you wont be able to figure out at the table, but as you become more aware of combinations, and start analyzing them, your ability to think them through quickly will increase.

You will also develop a sense of some basic concepts (not rules). I don't think there are hard and fast rules, but there are some guidelines:

- Try to keep flexibility by preserving tenace positions and controls in both hands.

- Before you take a finesse, ask yourself if there's an option, especially when the finesse involves leading a minor honor, and especially when you only have 2 minor honors.

- Lead toward honors.

1. Assumptions last time were:

* Your x's are smaller than the defenders' unless otherwise specfied.

* We will look at only one suit. There are many hands in which you have to decide to try one suit before another to combine your chances. I am not going to get into that issue here.

* Assume that there is no information from the auction, opening lead, or previous play – simply look at best way to play a suit to take a specified number of tricks.

* Assume that there are always adequate side entries so that you can play the suit the best way.

We said that most of the time these assumptions will not be true, but the idea today is to concentrate on the suit combination, not on the rest of the hand and the validity of the assumptions.

2. Approach

There are usually 2 or more ways to play a combination.

       * State to yourself the opponents' total holding (e.g., K 10 8 3). You wont always bother doing that when the opponents' holding is quite simple. However I would suggest that you do it at first anyway.

       * Decide how many tricks you need from the suit. This is essential; the best play will often differ depending on the number of tricks needed.

       * For the different lines of play dismiss those configurations of the opponents' cards that yield the same result (success or failure) in all lines of play.

       * Try to identify those configurations that favor one line over another, and you will often have a situation where most configurations yield the same result with both lines of play, but there is one, or more configurations where one line of play is superior.

We defined an optional safety play, meaning that you give up a chance for an extra trick to increase the chance of getting the needed number of tricks. This may or may not be something that you want to do in a MP game.

We also defined a mandatory safety play in which you don't have to give up any chance of an extra trick while improving the chance of getting the required number of tricks.

So much for review.

Here's a case that I recently blew  Q32    J108754 by playing the Q first. Bad general technique and careless; in general lead low toward honors.

Q32

J108754    Need 4 tricks,  Opponents have AK96; The objective is to hold to 2 losers, A and K.

Lead low to J, and then you can finesse against 9 if there's a 4-0 split in either direction. As you can see the spot cards are vital.

Another case
AKQ532

64

Assume no outside entries to dummy. If you need 6 tricks, cash honors; If you need 5 tricks, duck once. But in playing MP, you may want to go for the extra tricks even at the risk of going down if there's a 4-1 break, which is about 28% probable. Here again if you can garner any information from the auction or play, you may improve your odds.

```
(14)
AQJ54

    632
```

If you need 5 tricks, finesse twice; this is only play that can work; you need 3-2 split with K on side (about 1/3 probable).

If you need 4 tricks, you can finesse or play the A first; either works with any 3-2 break. But if the cards are 10987    K, then you must play the A first. If the K doesn't drop, you lead from S to the QJ to guard against K10xx in W. This is an optional safety play. You give up the chance of 5 tricks to increase the chance of 4 tricks.

Now I want to get to cases where you give more consideration to the complete hand. For a while we'll still be looking only at the cards in one suit. In the previous examples the suit was missing one or more key honor cards. Now assume that you're playing 3NT on a minimally informative auction like 1NT – 3NT.

You have one of the following suit combinations:
```
(15)
AKQx  xxx        AQxx        Qxxx        Kxx        KQx   Axx


 xxx    AKQx      Kxx         AKx         AQxx       Axxx   KQxx
```

These are all the same in terms of raw potential, but they differ in terms of the opponents' knowledge of the suit's strength and length since they can only see the dummy. First compare the first 2 cases. In the firs case 1 the opponents knows within 1 HCP how many HCPs declarer has in this suit, and the opponent holding the J knows exactly. In the second the gap in their knowledge is 9 or 10 HCPs!

I'm not going to talk about HOW to play this "combination" but WHEN to play it. CAUTION: what I'm about to say has to be taken in the context of the entire hand, the auction, the lead, the number of tricks available, the hazards, the chance of forcing you to find a discard, etc.

Many declarers will attack this suit as soon as they can, hoping for a 3-3 split.

One of the few rules in bridge that is ALWAYS true is that if there is a 3-3 split at trick one, no defender will ever have  fourth round control in a NT contract. So keeping in mind the caution, there are many reasons to defer playing out the AKQ before trying to establish tricks in other suits.

- This suit may be important for transportation.
- 
- You don't want to show the defense where your HCPs are.

- If an opponent is pressured to make an early discard (say his partner is trying to establish a long suit), he may discard from, something like 9654. He probably wont do so in the first case, but he may very well in the second. Remember the auction was 1NT – 3NT.

- This suit poses a squeeze threat in which only one opponent can possibly guard the suit.

- If you play the AKQ early, and the suit breaks 4-2 (greatest probability), you set up a trick for the defense.

The other confirgurations are just variations on this theme. The situation is somewhat (but not totally) different if your suit is divided 5-2 instead of 4-3. Say AKQxx    xx. Now if the suit breaks 3-3, you get 5 tricks. If it's 4-2, you can give up a trick and establish the long card for your $4^{th}$ trick in the suit.

All of the previous examples were declarer problems. Now let's consider some cases in which both declarer and the defenders must think about the card combinations. I'm going to give the auction, and assume that the examples always deal with the S suit.

```
N    E    S    W
1C   P    1S   P
2S   P    P    P    or they go on to 3 or more S.
```

KQ10x


A7xx (I'm assuming that opener guarantees at least 4-card support when he raises responder's major; there are other systems.

Say that the rest of the hand dictates that you pull trump as soon as you get the lead. The opponents' have J9842. If the suit breaks 3-2 (68%), you have no problem. Therefore before you touch or call for a card, you should be thinking about whether you can handle a 4-1 split (28%). If W has 4 to the J there is no problem. You start by leading to a K in dummy. Assuming both follow low, you cash the A. If E shows out, you lead toward the Q10 and pick up the suit. But if E has four to the J, you're going to lose a trick. Therefore you play the way that you could pick up the J four long in W. You've now handled more than _ of the cases in which there's a 4-1 split. More than half because if W has a stiff J you can still succeed as your 10 is promoted.

Ok now move yourself into the W seat and you find yourself holding J9xx. You know from the auction that E has at most a singleton. Declarer, having studied this combination, plays low to the K. You know that if you play low, declarer only has one option to pick up the J, but you smoothly play the 9. Now whatever E's singleton was, declarer has 2 options of how to play. If he thinks your 9 was a singleton, he can play the Q next, planning to finesse against partner's J if you show out. You have given declarer a chance to go wrong, whereas if you had played small, he would go right.

This is called a mandatory false card. Just like the mandatory safety play it may gain a trick, but it can't lose a trick. A good declarer will know that you may have false carded, but he can't be sure. Note that if you had the 8 instead of the 9, you should play it on the first trick. If partner has the singleton 9, you have accomplished the same thing as the false play of the 9. If declarer has the 9, he had a 2-way finesse from the start, but you have not lost anything. However if you hesitate and play the 8, you may be helping declarer.

Also note that if you have both the 8 and the 9, declarer will only have one way to finesse even if you play the 9.

        KQ103

J982            4

        A765

**Consider a similar case**.  The auction is

| N  | E | S  | W |
|----|---|----|---|
| 1C | P | 1S | P |
| 2S | P | 4S | P |
| P  | P |    |   |

Dummy's S suit
AQ8x
                E's S suit
                109x


Declarer wins the opening D lead in dummy, plays a C to his hand, and leads a low S. Partner plays low, and declarer plays the Q from dummy. You are E. It looks like declarer has Jxxx of S and has just finessed against partner's Kx. If you play low, declarer's only option to pick up the suit, is to play W for Kx, and play the A. Then he will pull your last S with the J. However, if you play the 9 or 10 on the first trick, you have given declarer another option. He can play you for 109 doubleton and partner for Kxx. In that case he returns to S, and leads the J smothering your remaining S. If W covers the J, dummy's 8 takes the third trick. If W ducks the J, declarer lets it ride, and he

picks up the K with the A on the third trick. But if declarer tries the smother play in the actual holding, W will cover the J perforce, and declarer will lose a trick to your 10 (or 9) on the third trick.

**Two more similar case**

These 2 cases are from Kantar, Eddie, "Modern Bridge Defense." This and the companion volume, "Advanced Bridge Defense" are excellent books.

The auction is

```
S     W     N     E
2NT   P     3H*   P
3S    P     3NT   P
P     P
```

* transfer to S.
Dummy comes down with AJ109x of S and nothing else of any value (no side entry).
You're W with Kxx.

                AJ109x

Kxx


Declarer wins the opening lead in another suit and leads a low S. You know from the auction that S is most likely to have a doubleton S. If you play low, declarer will finesse the 10. If partner takes the trick, declarer will win 4 S tricks by finessing again. If partner ducks, declarer can be held to 2 S tricks but this is not an easy duck. But suppose you play your honor on the first S trick. Now there is no way declarer can bring the suit home.


Essentially the same situation occurs if the holding is

        AK109x

Qx                      Jxxx

        Xx

(Microsoft Word like to begin a doubleton with a capital X!

**A case from the Club**
The auction

```
S     E     N     W
1C    P     1S    P
```

```
1NT    P      3NT    p
P      P
```

You're W again.

    AJ9x

Q10x

At some stage of the play declarer cashes the SK, and leads a low S to the dummy. If W plays the 10, declarer will finesse the J, and probably play the A dropping the Q, and cash the 9. But if W plays the Q on the second S trick, this gives declarer more of a chance to go wrong. If he cashes the J, he risks setting up E's 10 if the suit was:

Qx              10xxx.

So he tried setting up another suit that didn't work very well. There's little to be lost by playing the Q.

There's a whole set of combinations that deal with the cocept of restricted choice. We don't have time to go in to them, but there's an excellent description in Bird, David, "52 Great Tips on Declarer Play." The whole book is very good, but see Tip 40 for a discussion of restricted choice.

If you want to see card combinations that in complete hands, I would strongly recommend, Lawrence, Mike, "How th Play Card Combinations," which is in the library.

- Don't be discouraged with failures; this is a never ending project, as are most things in bridge.

References

There are many books that deal with suit combinations, but I just want to give you a few:

Kantar, Eddie; "Take Your Tricks." This is in the Unit library. It is chock full of excellent tips on declarer play. The principal sections relating to suit combinations are Chapter 9 "Lower Mathematics," and Chapter 12, "Card Combinations and Safety Plays." A new edition is due out fairly soon.

Encyclopedia of Bridge. This is a good reference for looking up virtually any combination.

Coffin, George, "Bridge Play from A to Z." Chapters on Safety Plays and Percentages. This book was published in 1954 so ignore the bidding and lead conventions.

Lawrence, Mike, "Card Combinations." This book discusses many combinations in complete (all suits) hands. There has a different combination in each of the 7 chapters with several hands in each chapter.

Lawrence, Mike, "False Cards." This is an entire book of false cards for both defense and declarer play.

Bird, David, "52 Great Bridge Tips on Declarer Play."

Kantar, Eddie, "Modern Bridge Defense" and "Advanced Bridge Defense." These are excellent books on defense in general, and they include many situations involving a defenders analysis of card combinations.

The Unit 503 Web Site has a quiz on several suit combinations.

**Appendix**