

PRINCIPLES OF DECLARER PLAY

There are two forms of scoring: matchpoints and IMPs. I will concentrate on matchpoints.

For matchpoints, the goal is to do as well or better than the other pairs playing the hand. The first question is whether or not the contract is a normal one. If it is, then the goal might not be to make the contract. If the contract has low probability of making, then minimizing the number of tricks down is best, especially if the opponents can get better score playing the hand.

Contracts can be with a trump suit or in No Trump. In general, a suit contract has more options and can be more difficult to play properly. For No Trump, we tend to count winners. In suit contracts we tend to count possible losers.

Often the first reaction upon seeing the dummy is panic. Wait until the feeling passes and the brain engages. Plan ahead. Do not play a few tricks first in order to reduce the size of the planning and decrease the complexity of the hand. Time saved at the first trick often winds up causing excessive time use later in the hand, which may be too late. We should be able to construct some sort of a plan while looking at all thirteen cards.

Suit contracts present three options: set up the closed hand, set up the dummy, or play for a cross-ruff. Sometimes all three options should be considered. We must look at the probability of success, the risk of a ruff by a defender, and the entries needed to each hand. All of this must be determined before playing to the first trick.

Do not pull trumps until you know what you are going to do afterwards. Remember, a loser cannot be ruffed in dummy if there are no more trumps there. Also, a trump may be the entry to dummy in order to cash a trick that you have set up. Also remember, the defenders are allowed to lead trumps also. Sometimes we must delay pulling trumps until we have eliminated an outside loser.

Normally, a finesse in a suit is taken when the missing card can be in the longer part of the opponents holding. For example, if we have eight cards in a suit missing the Queen, the opponent holding at least three cards is more likely to have the Queen, so we finesse. However, avoiding a loser in another suit can be more important than taking the finesse when we have to choose between the two options. Do not reject taking a finesse just because you hate to load to a singleton King or a singleton or doubleton Queen. If we have six cards in the suit in our hand and two in dummy, we take a first round finesse for the Queen because four to the Queen onside is more likely than a singleton Queen offside.

With equal trump length in dummy as in our hand, we must analyze the hand with the closed hand as the master and with the dummy as the master. The latter case is called a dummy reversal and is possible even when the closed hand has more trumps than the dummy. For both cases we must pay careful attention to the entries needed for the plan.

If the opening lead is a trump, reducing the chances to ruff losers in dummy, an optional plan may be to set up dummy's long suit instead. Be sure to count dummy entries first. Sometimes trump entries to dummy are needed, so setting up dummy's suit must be started immediately.

When considering a cross-ruff, make sure enough tricks are available, communication is good and the risk of overruffs is small. Often, before starting a cross-ruff we must cash all of our winners first.

If declarer is setting up tricks in dummy, the defenders should either try to set up their tricks first, even if it means underleading a King in a risky situation, or try to remove dummy's outside entries, including making dummy ruff.

Playing a No Trump contract often becomes a race between declarer and the defenders to set up their tricks. Occasionally, misdirection can be used by declarer, including attacking a hopeless suit that the defenders have not attacked yet. Remember, declarer is allowed to false-card, since there is no partner to fool. The false-card must be plausible. If the goal is to discourage continuation of a suit, play a discouraging signal just as if you were the other defender. Similarly, play an encouraging card just above the one the other defender plays if you want the suit continued. Which high card you play depends on which defender you are trying to fool. It must be possible for the other defender to have the card you are trying to conceal.

Remember, if the contract is a normal one, Down One may be good. In general, it is better to drive out the opponents' Aces and Kings rather than cashing your own Aces and Kings and setting up their Queens and Jacks.

Check the necessary communication between the hands before playing to Trick One. There are three times to pause and think: before playing to Trick One, when something bad happens, and when something good happens. When a defender discards, the count in that suit becomes known and a card in the suit discarded becomes known. Both suit count should be adjusted, especially if the defender has ruffed in. Miscounting trumps is very embarrassing.