

On Your Mark – Get Set – STOP! Adventures at Trick One

Does this scenario sound familiar to you? The opening lead is made; dummy is tabled; declarer plays a card from dummy; defender makes a play – and declarer stops – for a loooong time. If you're this declarer, you may already be in trouble. The time to think about the play of the hand is **before you play a card from dummy**, not after. Of course, you may be lucky. The defender didn't stop to think before making his play, either.

Please note that this handout mentions many declarer play techniques, but does not discuss those techniques. If you are unfamiliar with any of these, please read *Watson's Classic Book on the Play of the Hand at Bridge*, by Louis H. Watson. For the most part, both the example hands and the play hands require only thought and careful planning, not advanced play techniques, for success.

Planning Your Play

Bridge players eventually develop a thinking process that fits their unique problem-solving methods and the unique problem at hand. That individual process never develops, however, if you don't practice planning your play at trick one. Let's break down the steps you might want to try.

- **Step One. Say, "Thank you, partner," even if you don't mean it.**
- **Step Two. Look at the opening lead.**

Your ability to reconstruct the play of the hand stems from your memory of this one card. If you don't look at it now, you will find it very difficult to answer this question at trick six. "Is my ♦8 good?"

What does the opening lead tell you about the defender's hands? Did the opponents bid? Is this card in the suit they bid? Does it indicate an honor sequence? Does it look like a short suit lead or a lead from a long suit? Using clues from the bidding and the lead, can you visualize the thirteen cards in this opening lead suit?

One of your goals in this step and the following steps is to identify and locate key cards in the opponents' hands. Take your clues from the bidding – or lack thereof – and this opening lead.

Your hand and dummy's combined contain 27 high card points (HCPs). Your left hand opponent (LHO) opened the bidding. You now know where all the missing honor cards are likely to be. Plan accordingly.

Your hand and dummy's combined contain five spades. Your RHO opened the bidding 3S. How many spades does your LHO hold? Plan accordingly.

- **Step Three. Count your *sure* tricks.**

When counting your sure tricks, pretend you're in a no trump contract. How many tricks can you take without losing the lead? Take special note when your sure tricks are in suits that block naturally. Transportation may be very important!

Anyone can take three spade tricks when the holding is ♠AQ2 opposite ♠K84. If you must take three spade tricks when your holding is ♠AQ opposite ♠K84, however, what must you consider – and when?

If you can make your contract without losing the lead – and you're in a wonderful contract that no one else in the room will have reached – make your contract. If you're in the par contract or you don't have enough sure tricks to make your contract, start looking for ways to generate those extra tricks.

- **Step Four. Identify possible ways to generate extra tricks.**

In all contracts, developing a long side suit may generate the necessary tricks. If this is the method you choose, identify any transportation problems **before** playing that first card from dummy. Any suit with four or more cards is a long suit.

Promoting honors and intermediate cards may generate the extra tricks needed.

If your plan to develop extra tricks requires a finesse, remember when you plan your play that *all finesses will lose* – unless there is no other way to make your contract. ☺ *When* the finesse loses, what will the defenders do? If the winning defender can make a play that sets your contract, do not take that finesse. That defender is the *dangerous opponent*.

In a trump contract, these techniques may generate extra tricks: 1) cross-ruffing the hand; 2) ruffing losing cards from a long suit; 3) dummy reversal.

Taking the most tricks you can in a given hand will usually require executing a plan that combines several possibilities. The order in which you attempt these possibilities must be done in a way that combines as many chances as possible. Don't put all your eggs in one basket!

- **Step Five. Count your losing tricks.**

How many tricks will you lose in developing your winning tricks? If you must lose the lead twice to develop your winning tricks, that's one trick too many to make your 6NT contract! Counting your losing tricks will help you determine the necessary order in which you execute the parts of your plan.

Promoting honors requires the loss of the lead, often to an unknown opponent. When you cannot control which opponent wins a trick, you can control the timing. It's usually right to lose this trick when you have control over any possible return; in other words, it may be right to lose these tricks early in the play of the hand.

Developing a long side suit requires transportation to that suit. If your success requires the tricks in this long suit, develop it quickly before this transportation is destroyed.

A finesse may, or may not, result in the loss of a trick. When incorporating a finesse into your plan, consider these points. 1) Will a losing finesse generate one or more tricks for your side? If not, make this play your last resort. 2) Can you take the finesse without losing the lead to the *dangerous opponent*? 3) Can you postpone a two-way finesse until you have learned the probable location of the missing honor?

Despite the fact that you may need to lose tricks to win tricks, maintain as much control as possible over those losing tricks. Lose them to your advantage! Remember that a successful end play requires losing a trick at the right time to the right opponent. It may be necessary to identify and preserve that future losing trick before playing that first card from dummy.

- **Step Six. Visualize your play of the hand.**

Don't lose track of the play you plan to make. What will you do if your first play is successful? What will you do if your first play fails? Although it would be great if your plan could cover all thirteen tricks, this is seldom possible. There will usually be at least one additional point in your play of the hand when you will stop and reevaluate based on what you have learned.

• **Step Seven. Tell dummy what card to play at trick one.**

Although this process seems like it would take a long time, thinking for a minute or two at trick one actually saves you, the declarer, a lot of time. You will no longer waste five minutes at trick ten trying to figure out where you went wrong and if there's any way to rescue the situation.

As dummy, encourage your partner to plan his play at trick one. ***Do not touch a card from dummy until partner tells you what to play!*** Doing so is a violation of law and in some circumstances might cost your side the contract. Even if this were not the case, touching a card before partner is ready puts subtle pressure on partner to hurry up. Dummy may have a singleton in the suit led, and that card will be played, but it's up to declarer to decide when he or she is ready to play it.

Defenders should also use time at trick one to think about their planned defense. What does the opening lead mean? As third hand, what will you play? Will you win this trick? If so, what will you return to partner? You don't have to wait until it's your turn to play to start your thinking process. Thinking is encouraged at all times!

On your mark – Get set – THINK!

Practice Your Planning

EXAMPLE 1.

South dealer, EW Vul.		
Dummy:	♠AQJ65	Auction: You—West—Dummy—East
	♥AQ3	Pass - Pass - 2C - Pass
	♦AK76	2D - Pass - 2S - Pass
	♣A	3H - Pass - 6H - Pass→
♠9		The opening lead is the ♠9. What do you now? (This hand is taken from the Intermediate II Bridge Class and it's one of my favorites.)
♥	♠	
♥	♥	
♣	♦	
	♠T	
	♥KJT98	
	♦J843	
	♣953	

- Take a look at that opening lead. How many spades does West hold? Where is the ♠K?
- How many sure tricks do you have? How many tricks must you generate?
- How many play possibilities do you see? Can you generate the necessary tricks with any one option, or will you need to combine two or more chances?
- Must you lose a trick? Are there any foreseeable problems if you do?
- You have your plan. What card do you call for from dummy?

EXAMPLE 2.

South dealer, EW Vul.		Auction: You—West—Dummy—East	
Dummy:	♠85	1C -	1H - 2D - 2H
	♥A2	3C -	Pass - 5C - Pass→
	♦AJ9864	The opening lead is the ♥K. What do you now?	
	♣K97		
♠		♠	
♥K		♥	
♦		♦	
♣		♣	
	♠K963		
	♥8		
	♦Q5		
	♣AQJT86		

- Take a look at that opening lead. What is West's heart holding? How many hearts does East hold?
- How many sure tricks do you have? How many tricks must you generate?
- How many play possibilities do you see? Can you generate the necessary tricks with any one option, or will you need to combine two or more chances?
- Must you lose a trick? Are there any foreseeable problems if you do? If there are problems, is there any way to avoid losing this trick?
- You have your plan. What card do you call for from dummy?

My Answers – Don't Peek!

EXAMPLE 1.

- Take a look at that opening lead. How many spades does West hold? Where is the ♠K?
 - This looks like a short suit lead – a singleton or top of a doubleton. East holds the ♠K.
- How many sure tricks do you have? How many tricks must you generate?
 - I have one spade trick, five heart tricks, two diamonds, and one club – nine sure tricks. I need to generate three more tricks.
- How many play possibilities do you see?
 - Given the probable spade break, the two small spades in dummy won't become tricks, but I do have two spade honors that will be promoted once the ♠K is played. [Generates two tricks]
 - I can ruff my two small clubs in dummy. [Generates two tricks]
 - Do I have enough tricks if I crossruff spades and clubs? [Only comes to eleven tricks]
 - I can develop one more diamond trick. Hmm, what are my odds that the ♦Q is doubleton? [Doesn't sound like a great plan]
- Can you generate the necessary tricks with any one option, or will you need to combine two or more chances?
 - I need to combine two chances. Promoting two spades and ruffing one club will provide the three needed tricks.
- Must you lose a trick? Are there any foreseeable problems if you do?
 - Yes, I need to lose the ♠K. If LHO started with only one spade, they can ruff the spade return. I need to ruff that return in hand.
- You have your plan. What card do you call for from dummy?
 - Low spade.

THE COMPLETE DEAL

Example 1: South dealer, EW Vul.		Auction: You—West—Dummy—East	
Dummy:	♠AQJ65	Pass -	Pass -
	♥AQ3	2C -	Pass
	♦AK76	2D -	Pass -
	♣A	2S -	Pass
		3H -	Pass -
		6H -	Pass→
		The opening lead is the ♠9. What do you now?	
♠9	♠K87432		
♥7654	♥2		
♦T5	♦Q92		
♣KT8762	♣QJ4		
	♠T		
	♥KJT98		
	♦J843		
	♣953		

EXAMPLE 2.

- Take a look at that opening lead. What is West's heart holding? How many hearts does East hold?
 - West holds at least five hearts headed by the ♥KQJ or ♥KQT. With six hearts and no other honor cards in hand, West might have bid 2H at his first opportunity. With six hearts and values or distribution, West might have competed to 3H. West is most likely to hold five hearts and at least one outside honor. If East holds five hearts, his hand is unlikely to contain a singleton or good values. With either of those holdings, East might have bid 3D (cue bid) or 4H at his first call..
- How many sure tricks do you have? How many tricks must you generate?
 - I have eight sure tricks: one heart, one diamond, and six clubs. I need to generate three tricks.
- How many play possibilities do you see? Can you generate the necessary tricks with any one option, or will you need to combine two or more chances?
 - If East holds the ♠A, I can lead a spade from dummy, then trump my two losing spades. I would generate three tricks with the good ♠K and the two spade ruffs.
 - I could take the diamond finesse. If it succeeds, I should be able to set up the diamond suit and pitch at least three spades. I might even be able to take twelve tricks!
 - If West holds the ♠A, I would lose two spade tricks, but if the diamond finesse works, I can still take eleven tricks: my sure tricks plus at least two diamonds and up to two spade ruffs.
 - If West holds the ♠A, and East holds the ♦K, I can't make this contract – or can I?
- Must you lose a trick? Are there any foreseeable problems if you do? If there are problems, is there any way to avoid losing this trick?
 - Working on the long diamond suit is the best chance I have to make this contract. If I take the diamond finesse and it loses, East will win the trick – and East is the danger opponent. East will switch to a spade. Is there a way to set up the diamond suit without letting East win a trick? The answer to this question provides the plan of play. What card do I play from dummy at trick one? The ♥2! Do you see the solution?

THE COMPLETE DEAL

Example 2: South dealer		Auction: You—West—Dummy—East	
Dummy:	♠85	1C -	1H - 2D - 2H
	♥A2	3C -	Pass - 5C - Pass→
	♦AJ9864		
	♣K97	The opening lead is the ♥K. What do you now?	
♠AQ2	♠JT74		
♥KQT65	♥J9743		
♦732	♦KT		
♣53	♣42		
	♠K963		
	♥8		
	♦Q5		
	♣AQJT86		

On Your Mark - Get Set - THINK!

1

♠ A9
 ♥ AQJ4
 ♦ 84
 ♣ AK842
 ♠ QJ10753
 ♥ 752
 ♦ K65
 ♣ Q
 ♠ 862
 ♥ K63
 ♦ 972
 ♣ J1097
 ♠ K4
 ♥ 1098
 ♦ AQJ103
 ♣ 653

Dealer: North
 Neither Vulnerable

West	North	East	South
	1 ♣	Pass	1 ♦
2 ♠	3 ♠	Pass	3 NT
Pass	Pass	Pass	

 Opening Lead: Q ♠

2

♠ 72
 ♥ 743
 ♦ K98
 ♣ AK952
 ♠ AQJ86
 ♥ 92
 ♦ AQ643
 ♣ 7
 ♠ K54
 ♥ KQJ108
 ♦ 752
 ♣ 63
 ♠ 1093
 ♥ A65
 ♦ J10
 ♣ QJ1084

Dealer: East
 N-S Vulnerable

West	North	East	South
		Pass	Pass
1 ♠	Pass	2 ♠	Pass
4 ♠	Pass	Pass	Pass

 Opening Lead: A ♣

3

♠ KJ4
 ♥ QJ62
 ♦ Q953
 ♣ 96
 ♠ 10652
 ♥ 9743
 ♦ J82
 ♣ J10
 ♠ Q987
 ♥ 1085
 ♦ K107
 ♣ Q85
 ♠ A3
 ♥ AK
 ♦ A64
 ♣ AK7432

Dealer: South
 E-W Vulnerable

West	North	East	South
			2 ♣
Pass	2 ♦	Pass	3 ♣
Pass	3 NT	Pass	4 NT
Pass	6 NT	Pass	Pass
Pass			

 Opening Lead: 7 ♠

4

♠ Q52
 ♥ QJ8
 ♦ 96
 ♣ J10932
 ♠ KJ7
 ♥ 7632
 ♦ AKQ85
 ♣ 5
 ♠ A10983
 ♥ K95
 ♦ J10
 ♣ A76
 ♠ 64
 ♥ A104
 ♦ 7432
 ♣ KQ84

Dealer: West
 Both Vulnerable

West	North	East	South
1 ♦	Pass	1 ♠	Pass
2 ♠	Pass	4 ♠	Pass
Pass	Pass		

 Opening Lead: K ♣