

HAND OF THE MONTH FOR NEWER PLAYERS

August, 2015

This month we begin a series focusing on the important subject of safety plays, i.e. declarer plays intended to guard against adverse distribution. When playing rubber bridge, or in a team games or in an international match point (IMPs) pairs event, overtricks are only minimally important and the generally recommended strategy to give up the possibility of overtricks if it helps to ensure the contract; the situation is trickier at matchpoint scoring where overtricks may be the difference between a top and a bottom.

Consider the following:

	NORTH	
	S AKQ62	
WEST	H 853	EAST
S 10873	D 972	S J4
H QJ1042	C 62	H 96
D KJ		D Q1084
C 95	SOUTH	C QJ1074
	S 95	
NS Vulnerable	H AK7	
Dealer South	D A653	
Opening lead HQ	C AK83	

South	West	North	East
1 diamond	pass	1 spade	pass
2 notrump (18-19 HCP)	pass	3 notrump	all pass

The bidding requires little comment. The opening bid of one diamond when holding four cards in both minors is standard, and the jump to two notrump promises a balanced hand that was too strong to open one notrump, and not strong enough to open two. Trusting that the spade suit will be a valuable source of tricks in a notrump contract, North wisely chooses that stripe. Note that four spades can only be made with an unlikely 3-3 spade break.

Following the general rule for planning the play of the hand in a notrump contract, declarer counts top tricks and finds eight, three spades, two hearts, one diamond and two clubs. Clearly the spades offer the best prospect for the crucial ninth trick, but how best to play the suit.

The general rule of distribution is that an even number of cards will tend to divide unevenly, while an odd number will tend to divide as evenly as possible. Here, the six missing spades are more likely to divide 4-2 than 3-3.

The lack of entries to dummy outside the spade suit creates the problem. If the three top spades are played and the suit breaks 4-2, conceding a spade trick will establish the fifth spade, but there is then no way to return to dummy to cash it. A safety play saves the day. Declarer simply DUCKS THE FIRST SPADE, wins any return by defenders, leads his carefully preserved spade five to the AKQ, and makes his ninth trick with the now established spade six.

This line of play gives up the overtrick possibility when spades are 3-3, but ensures the contract if they break 4-2. Since 4-2 is more likely, ducking the first spade is recommended at any form of scoring, matchpoints included.

The strategy may change if the spade suit is instead the following:

North	South
AKQ642	95

With only FIVE spades missing, the safety play -- as before -- is to duck the first trick to ensure the contract against anything other than a 5-0 break; this is clearly the correct play in rubber bridge, a team game or at IMPs scoring. At matchpoints, however, declarer cannot afford to make one trick less than the other declarers in the 67% + of the cases in which the spades break 3-2, and the play of the AKQ is recommended hoping for the drop.

MORAL: When a safety play gives up the possibility of overtricks to ensure the contract, declarer must weigh both the form of scoring and the odds of the bad break against which he/she is guarding.