

AVOIDANCE PLAYS by Maritha Pottenger

The key to avoidance plays is to first **recognize the possible danger in a hand**. Usually the danger involves a specific opponent gaining the lead and being able to lead “through” a tenace or “at risk” holding that you have. The most common holding that you do NOT want to let RHO “lead through” would be Kxx in a suit. You might also hold KJxx with LHO having overcalled that suit, or similar vulnerable holdings. **You want to ensure that the hand with the vulnerable honor plays 4th, NOT 2nd!**

In **no trump**, the usual danger is that one hand (usually LHO) might be able to gain the lead and **cash winners in a long suit** that has been set up. Your goal is to keep that opponent from gaining the lead. (If RHO has bid a suit and his/her partner leads it, RHO has the length and is the dangerous hand.)

Another situation can occur when **one player can give the other a ruff**. (Here, you employ the “**Scissors Coup**”—snipping the lines of communications between your two opponents by transferring a loser in one suit—in which the dangerous hand can get the lead—to a loser in a different suit, in which the non-dangerous opponent gets the lead.)

In **strip and end play situations**, one opponent may have a winning trick, while the other opponent is void in that suit. If you can “throw in” (give the lead to) the opponent who is void, s/he may have to give you a ruff-and-sluff, allowing you to make your contract or a precious overtrick.

There are three major ways in which you can avoid some of these dangers:

- 1) **Ducking a trick** or tricks (also called hold-up plays)
- 2) Taking a **finesse into the “safe” hand**
- 3) **Transferring a loser** from an “unsafe suit” (where the “wrong” opponent could get the lead) to a different suit (where the “right” opponent retains the lead).

It is important to **look at the whole hand** before you play these combinations. The “right” technical way to play a combination in one suit may be “wrong” for the hand as a whole. For example, normally, with 9 cards, you play for the drop rather than finessing for a queen. If, however, one hand is clearly the dangerous hand, you should finesse for the queen so that only the non-dangerous hand might be able to get the lead with the queen. In other words, **you finesse so that the safe hand plays 4th and the dangerous hand plays 2nd.**

Consider a few examples:

In 3NT, you hold: Axx KQx AQxx J10x & dummy has xx AJxx J109 AQ9x. The lead is the King of spades. You *duck* that trick (*hold-up* technique). You duck the 2nd spade as well. You take the 3rd spade. (If the opponents are playing suit preference signals, the size of the spade that LHO plays should tell his/her partner—and you—where LHO’s entry or potential entry is. If LHO plays the lowest outstanding spade, it implies a club entry. If LHO plays highest outstanding spade, it implies a heart entry. Middle spade implies a diamond entry.)

Count your tricks: 1 spade, 4 hearts, 1 diamond & 1 club. You need to develop two more and could finesse in either minor suit for extra tricks. Clearly you will finesse in clubs NOT diamonds—**taking the finesse into the safe hand** (*dangerous hand plays 2nd; safe hand plays 4th*). If a club finesse loses and RHO has no more spades (thanks to your hold-up), you are fine. (If RHO has another spade, spades are probably breaking 4-4 and you are still fine.) If you finesse in diamonds, LHO could win the trick and cash two more spades. Down 1.

Ducking can be important in suit contracts as well as no trump.

The purpose of a hold-up play is to exhaust one defender of cards in a particular suit. This is especially true at no trump. Once one opponent no longer has cards in that suit, that opponent becomes the “safe” hand and the

partner is the “danger” hand. Your challenge is to develop your tricks without allowing the dangerous hand to gain the lead. The general “rule” in NT, when you have only one stopper, and it is the Ace, is the “**Rule of 7.**” You add together the number of cards in your hand and in dummy in the suit which the opponents have led. You subtract that sum from 7. That tells you how many times to duck your Ace. So, hold up an Ace twice if you and dummy have only 5 cards in the suit; hold up once if you and dummy and 6 cards in the suit and don’t bother to hold up if you and dummy have 7 cards in the suit. (This only applies with the Ace.)

Ducking can be vital in suit contracts as well. Suppose you hold: KQJxx xx KJx Jxx and dummy has xxx Ax xxx AKQxx and LHO has overcalled in hearts. LHO leads the King of hearts and RHO plays the 9 (standard signals--“I like it.”) of hearts. Who has the queen of hearts? LHO. Who has the jack of hearts? RHO if you believe the signal. What is the danger? If you take the Ace of hearts, LHO will get in with the Ace of spades, lead a heart to partner’s Jack and RHO will play a diamond and your KJx will become toast. How do you avoid that unfortunate fate? You *duck* the King of hearts, allowing LHO to retain the lead. Then you force out the Ace of spades and LHO can cash the Ace of diamonds then or wait until you discard two diamonds on the long clubs in dummy and get the Ace of diamonds at the end.

Transferring a loser from one suit to another is often vital if you are going to avoid letting the dangerous hand get the lead.

Suppose you hold: AQJxxx x Kxx xxx opposite Kxx Ax xxx AKxxx and LHO has overcalled in hearts. The lead is the King of hearts. If you “automatically” play the Ace of hearts because you have a singleton, you go down in a cold contract. RHO later gets the lead in clubs and your King of diamonds is toast again. The avoidance play—to ensure your contract is to DUCK the King of hearts. If LHO continues hearts, take the Ace and discard a small club. Then, pull two rounds of trumps with the Ace and Queen, and cash the AK of clubs and ruff a club HIGH. Return to dummy with the King of spades and cash two good clubs, discarding 2 diamonds. You have just transferred a loser. You make 5 instead of being down one!! [This assumes clubs are breaking 3-2—about 64% chance, and spades no worse than 3-1 which is about 90%. Combined chance for both is over 50%.]

When does a 1½ stopper holding become a 2 stopper holding and when does it become only 1 stopper?

If you hold AJx opposite xx(x), that is 1 ½ stoppers in the suit. If LHO leads the King (promising Queen), **duck** the first trick. LHO cannot continue that suit without giving you two tricks (and two stoppers in no trump). This is called the **Bath Coup**. If LHO leads low (promising an honor) in no trump and RHO plays the Queen (or the King), then you must assume that the other half of the royal pair is on your left. If you must take a finesse in another suit that could lose to LHO, take RHO’s sovereign with the Ace immediately. Your Jx becomes a 2nd stopper if LHO leads the suit (as you play 4th hand). If you must take a finesse in another suit that could lose to RHO, duck the sovereign. Duck the 2nd round of that suit and take the 3rd round. You are hoping to exhaust RHO of the suit that was led. Then, if your mandatory finesse loses, RHO will not have any of the first suit left to lead to his/her partner’s length. (Remember, your Jx is NOT a stopper if RHO leads the suit.)

Another example of a 1½ stopper combination is the KQx in a suit. If the Ace is on your right, you always have two stoppers. If the Ace is on your left, you have one stopper—or two stoppers—depending on who gets the lead next. If LHO leads that suit and RHO plays the 10 (trying to force you to play the King or Queen), assume that LHO has the Ace. If you must take a finesse in another suit that could lose to LHO, take your King immediately. Your Qx will serve as a second stopper if LHO leads that suit again (as you are playing 4th hand). If you must take a finesse in another suit that could lose to RHO, duck the 10. Play the King or Queen on the 2nd round of the suit and pray that RHO has only two cards in the suit. If so, you will exhaust RHO of that suit and, even if the finesse in the other suit loses, RHO will not be able to lead the dangerous suit to his/her partner.

These 1½ stopper combinations are also called **positional stoppers**. (They are two stoppers or one stopper based on the position of the opponent who leads that suit next.) Another positional stopper is AQJ opposite xx. If LHO leads low in that suit (promising an honor), RHO will play some spot card & you take the Jack. If you have two cards that you must knock out from the opponents' hands, take the finesse in another suit that could lose into LHO's hand first. Your AQ remaining in that first suit is two stoppers if LHO leads the suit again. It becomes only one stopper if RHO leads the suit. If you let RHO get the lead first (perhaps by knocking out an Ace), RHO eliminates your last stopper. Then, when you must finesse into LHO (the truly dangerous hand at that point), a losing finesse means losing your contract.