

Marty Bergen Online Lesson

How To Sharpen Your Declarer Play

This is a free sample of my online lesson series transcripts.
My full length non-audio declarer play lessons usually have between 10 and 12 hands.
My full length bidding lessons usually have at least 40 examples.
This free sample is an abbreviated version with 4 deals to play.

The auction will only be given when it is relevant.
As usual, South is the declarer.
Therefore, West will always make the opening lead.

Hand 1. Look Beneath the Surface

Contract: 3NT
Lead: S Q

North
S A K
H 3 2
D Q 8 7 5
C Q J 10 9 2

You
S 8 6
H A K 10
D A K J 3
C 7 6 4 3

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
Pass	3NT	All Pass	1NT

Declarer's potential thought process:

Nice spades, partner, I was worried about that suit.

I've got eight easy tricks: two spades, two hearts, and four diamonds.

For my ninth trick, I'll just work on clubs.

Wait a minute. Darn it, there's a problem.

Before I can win any club tricks, they'll set up their spades.

They will win two clubs and at least three spade tricks.

3NT is hopeless.

5C seems to be ice cold.

I wonder if any pair will get there.

I can't say that I disagree with partner's 3NT response.
Maybe I shouldn't have opened 1NT with no stoppers in two suits.
No, that's silly. Don't be a wimp.

Wait, there's still hope.
If East has the queen and jack of hearts,
I can finesse the 10 for my ninth trick.
Might as well do it right now, while I'm on the board.

Here is the entire deal:

	North	
Contract: 3NT	S A K	
Lead: S Q	H 3 2	
	D Q 8 7 5	
	C Q J 10 9 2	
West		You
S Q J 10 7 5		S 9 4 3 2
H 9 7 6		H Q J 8 5 4
D 10 6 2		D 9 4
C K 8		C A 5
	South	
	S 8 6	
	H A K 10	
	D A K J 3	
	C 7 6 4 3	

In conclusion:

When declaring in notrump,
you don't always have the time to set up your best suit.
Don't give up,
and don't waste brain cells thinking about what contract you'd rather be in.
Instead, try to find another suit
that will give you a chance to make your contract.

Hand 2. Who needs the entries?

	North
Contract: 3NT	S Q 3 2
Lead: H Q	H K 5 3
	D J 5 4 2
	C K J 3

You
S J 8 5
H A 7 4
D A K Q
C Q 10 7 4

You get to 3NT, and West leads the queen of hearts.
How would you play?

Step 1 in notrump is counting your winners.

You have 4 diamonds and 2 hearts.

You need 3 more, and with your 4 club honors, that should be easy.

However, here is a warning which is relevant on many deals.

"Hands where your winners are blocked
are usually harder than they appear."

Question 1: What will you do at trick 1?

Clearly, you have three choices.

- A. You could win in your hand.
- B. You could win in dummy.
- C. You could duck in both hands.

Answer: You should not duck the opening lead!

It won't solve your dilemma as to where to win the heart,
and if West finds a spade shift, you are history.

E-W will win 3 spades, 1 heart and the club ace.
In which hand should you win the HQ lead?

Most players want to save dummy's heart king.
They think they need it to get to the D jack after unblocking the AKQ.
However, saving the heart king is not necessary.
North does have a guaranteed entry to dummy.
Because he has 2 club honors, he must win a club trick.

Although it is not obvious, you do need to save the entry to your hand.
Why is that?

Let's put that on hold for a moment.

Once we answer question #2, the logic will be much easier to understand.

Question 2: Will you lead clubs first or start with diamonds?

Answer: Diamonds. You must unblock your 3 honors.

On most hands containing a blocked suit,
you need to unblock the suit ASAP.

If you led clubs first and the defense correctly held up,
you'd be unable to cash the DJ.

We have determined that diamonds must precede clubs.

Can you now see why you must save your ace of hearts?

If you don't, how will you get to your 4th club?

Remember, the correct defense is to win the club ace on the third round.

It's very unusual that a player who opens 1NT would run out of entries.

However, you must immediately cash your diamond honors to unblock.

Once you cash your diamonds,

the heart ace will be the only outside entry to your clubs.

You must preserve it.

Question 3: Are you confident of making this hand against best defense?

Answer: Yes. Once you win the HK and unblock diamonds, E-W is helpless. You'll then lead a low club to the king.

It does not matter which opponent holds the CA.

Either the CK or the CJ *must* be an entry to dummy to cash the DJ.

And by saving the HA, E-W can't stop you from winning 3 club tricks.

It no longer matters when West wins his club ace.

Here is the entire deal:

	North	
Contract: 3NT	S Q 3 2	
Lead: H Q	H K 5 3	
	D J 5 4 2	
	C K J 3	
West		East
S A 9 7 4		S K 10 6
H Q J 10 6		H 9 8 2
D 9 7		D 10 8 6 3
C A 9 6		C 8 5 2
	You	
	S J 8 5	
	H A 7 4	
	D A K Q	
	C Q 10 7 4	

Hand 3. Make the most of your entries

Contract: 6S
Lead: H Q

North
S K 10 3
H 6 5 3
D A 9 7 5 4
C 7 2

You
S A Q J 9 8 5
H A K 8
D 6 2
C A K

You get to 6S.
Here is a reasonable auction.

South	North
2C	2D
2S	3S
4C	4D
4H	4NT
5D*	6S

5D* = 3 Keycards

North's 4NT bid was sensible. He appreciated his two keycards.
He also hoped his club doubleton and diamond length would be useful.
He also liked his trump 10.
Trump intermediates are sometimes worth their weight in gold.

Unfortunately, he had the wrong doubleton.
If North's clubs and hearts had been reversed, 6S would be cold.
In that case, declarer could easily ruff his heart loser in dummy.

Anyway, back to the actual deal.
West leads the queen of hearts.
How would you proceed?

Your diamond loser is inevitable, so your goal is to avoid losing a heart trick.
One of my favorite teaching themes is setting up 5-card suits.
I like to say: "I never met a 5-card suit I didn't like."

Obviously, some 5-card suits can't be developed and prove to be worthless.
A lot depends on the strength of the suit and your entry situation.
Occasionally, your plan will be thwarted by a bad split.
Nevertheless, whenever I see a 5-card suit, I give it a second look.

Long suits are the key to making many contracts.
That is even true when the long suit is weak.
Another of my favorite themes is not drawing trumps prematurely.
I estimate that I draw trump first only 40% of the time.
I know that my peers would answer in a similar way.

On the other hand, when I ask my students:
"How often do you draw trump ASAP?"
I usually get answers such as 75%, 90% etc.
On this hand, it is 1000% wrong to draw even one round of trumps first.
Instead, you should immediately turn your attention to dummy's long suit.

You lead a diamond at trick 2.
Regardless of which card West plays, you should play low from dummy.

Another excellent teaching theme is: "Lose your losers early."
Many players are taught that when they begin playing.
I believe that not enough of them actually carry it with them into battle.
As is often the case, on this hand it is absolutely crucial.

After West wins the diamond, let's suppose he leads a second heart.
No other lead would affect the outcome.
You win the heart and lead a diamond to dummy's ace.
You then ruff a diamond with your SQ.
You cash the spade ace and lead a spade to dummy's 10.
That proved to be a very nice card indeed.

You then lead the 4th round of diamonds and ruff with your jack.
That removes East's last diamond.
You cross to dummy's spade king which pulls West's last trump.
You triumphantly cash dummy's last diamond and discard the H8.
Making 6.

If you wondered why you could not afford to lead one trump at trick 2,
here's the answer:

If you had done so, West could lead a second trump when he won the DJ.
This would prematurely remove one of dummy's precious trump entries.
The contract could then not have been made.
Similarly, 6S can't be made after a trump lead.
Once again, West is in a position to lead a 2nd round when he wins the DJ.
Fortunately for you, West's normal heart lead gave you a chance to shine.

Here is the entire deal.

	North	
Contract: 6S	S K 10 3	
Lead: HQ	H 6 5 3	
	D A 9 7 5 4	
	C 7 2	
West		East
S 7 6 2		S 4
H Q J 10 2		H 9 7 4
D K J		D Q 10 8 3
C 9 6 5 4		C Q J 10 8 3
	You	
	S A Q J 9 8 5	
	H A K 8	
	D 6 2	
	C A K	

Hand 4. Thou shalt not get over-ruffed

Contract: 4S
Lead: D 2

North
S K 7
H 9
D A Q 5 4 3
C 10 8 7 4 3

You
S A J 10 9 8 6 5
H A 4 2
D 10
C Q 9

W N E S
4H P P 4S
All Pass

How would you play?
Please choose your line of play before reading on.

Your only fast losers are the C AK.
As long as you can trump your two small hearts,
you are willing to lose a trick to the spade queen.
The one thing you can't risk
is an opponent over-ruffing you with the S Q and leading a trump.
This applies to both hearts and diamonds.
Having done your planning, you're ready to play.

Trick 1: Win the diamond ace.
Trick 2: Lead the H 9. East follows with the H 10, so you win your ace.
Trick 3: Ruff a heart with the S K.
Trick 4: Ruff a diamond with the S A.

Trick 5: Ruff a heart with dummy's S 7.

Regardless of which opponent has the S Q, your contract is assured.

Here is the entire deal:

	North	
Contract: 4S	S K 7	
Lead: D 2	H 9	
	D A Q 5 4 3	
	C 10 8 7 4 3	
East		West
S Q 2		S 4 3
H K Q J 8 7 6 5 3		H 10
D 2		D K J 9 8 7 6
C 6 2		C A K J 5
	You	
	S A J 10 9 8 6 5	
	H A 4 2	
	D 10	
	C Q 9	