

Planning a no trump contract

The first thing to do when playing a NT contract is, when dummy's cards are faced, **stop, think and plan**. Yes, this does take a little time but less than you probably think and it definitely can pay dividends.

Do not start playing until you have figured out:

1. how many sure winners you have (i.e. that you can win without losing a trick);
2. how many more tricks you need to develop (you may have to lose a trick);
3. how many tricks you can afford to lose and still make the contract;
4. which suits you might develop to give you the extra tricks you need;
5. if you have entries to both hands; and
6. the order you need to play your suits in.

1 & 2) Counting winners and calculating the number of tricks you need to develop to make your contract

Examples

a) 3NT contract

♠ 8 6
♥ J 6 2
♦ 6 5 3
♣ A 9 7 4 2

♠ A K
♥ A 9 8 3
♦ A K 9 7
♣ K 8 5

b) 1NT contract

♠ 8 6
♥ J 6 2
♦ K 6 5 3
♣ 9 7 4 2

♠ Q J 9 5
♥ K 9 8
♦ A J 2 4
♣ K Q 10 8

26 HCPs (7 sure winners – 2 tricks to develop)

20 HCPs (2 sure winners only – 5 tricks to develop)

3) How many tricks can you lose and still make your contract? –i.e. before the opposition take their tricks to defeat your contract.

Examples

a) 3NT contract

♠ 7 3
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♥ A 6 5
♦ Q J 7
♣ A 10 9 5 2

♠ A 10
♥ K J 7 4
♦ A K 2
♣ J 8 7 4

b) 3NT contract

♠ K J 7
♥ 10 5 4
♦ A J 9 5 2
♣ Q 7

♠ A Q 3 2
♥ A 7
♦ Q 10 3
♣ K J 10 4

a) 7 sure winners, 2 to develop. The 2 of spades is led – probably 4th from longest – the opp have 9 spades, so possibly a 4/5 split. After you win the A on the first or second round, if you lose the lead, they will cash their spades and you will go down because you will likely lose 4 spades and 1 club trick. So, the answer to how many tricks can you lose is none.

b) 6 sure winners, 3 to develop. The 2 of hearts is led – 4th from longest, so probable 4/4 split in hearts. This is a tricky hand to figure out. If you lose one trick, they will take probably three hearts tricks, and you can still make your contract. BUT only if that first trick you lost was a club, not the diamond. More on this hand later.

4) Which suits might you develop to give you the extra tricks you need?

There are a couple of ways to develop tricks:

- a) finesses where there is only a 50% chance of success, or double finesses;
- b) if there are 8 or 9 cards in one suit, you might be able to lose one or two tricks and gain several winners;
- c) the fourth card in a suit might be a winner – NB, try to play this suit later in the hope that the opposition might discard one of this suit; and
- d) dropping the opposition's honour if you have 8 or more cards in a suit.

Examples

a) 3NT contract

♠ K J 7
♥ 9 5 4
♦ A J 9 5 2
♣ Q 7

♠ A Q 3 2
♥ A Q 7 3
♦ Q 10
♣ K 10 4

b) 3NT contract

♠ K J 7
♥ 10 5 4
♦ A J 9 5 2
♣ Q 7

♠ A Q 3 2
♥ A 7
♦ Q 10 3
♣ K J 10 4

a) West leads the 2H. You have six clear winners (4S, 1H, 1D), and need to develop 3 more tricks. Clubs is a weak suit with 8 cards in the opposition's hands. If they had led the club, you could lose the lead only once before they'd run clubs and make at least 3 club tricks and possibly more if the split isn't 4/4. You were lucky with the heart lead because you will win with either the Q or A making the other good even if east gets on lead and plays a heart (you will duck and hopefully west will win the trick). The best suit to play on to develop 3 more winners is diamonds. You will need your entry to dummy in spades so play diamonds first. Best to play the Q from south and if the K is in west and is played, take with the ace, then play to your winning 10, go back to North in spades and you will make at least 2 more diamond tricks – contract made.

b) This is a challenging hand to think through. West leads the 2 H. You have six winners. There are two options to make the other three tricks needed. Lose a club and the other three are winners. OR Play the diamond finesse and if you lose to the K in east, the rest of the diamonds are winners. BUT, the problem is that if you lose to the K of diamonds, your contract will go down. How do I know this? The opposition have 8 hearts, and west led 2h – ie lowest from 4. So the opposition have 4/4 in hearts. If you lose the KD finesse, they will cash their 3 hearts winner and their Ace club winner and they had already won the KD, so they make 5 tricks immediately before you can play your diamonds. The way to play this hand is to lose the club, they will take their hearts and even if they play diamonds, you win with the A and then take your lovely 3 winning clubs. Contract made.

5) Do you have the entries that you need?

Examples

a) 3NT contract

♠ 8 6
♥ J 6 2
♦ 6 5 3
♣ A 9 7 4 2

♠ A K
♥ A 9 8 3
♦ A K 9 7
♣ K 8 5

We came across this example in our last NT lesson. 5S is led. You have 7 winners, two tricks to develop. You can lose only once before they run their spades. If the clubs split 3/2 you can lose a club and then the rest are winners. BUT if you take A then K, you will lose the third club and never get to your winners. You must lose the first club trick. Then win whatever the opposition returns, play your K of clubs then A and all your other clubs are winners. Of course, if the opposition's clubs split 4/1, you won't make your contract no matter what you do. That's bridge??

6) Does it matter in which order you play your suits?

It may not always matter which way that you play your suits but sometimes it does. Often, if hoping for the fourth trick in a suit to be a winner you might try to play that suit as late as possible. For example, you are trying to make extra tricks in dummy's long suit but you have to lose the lead. Once you establish the suit (i.e. you have your winners in dummy, you may be only able to get there in another suit, and if you'd played that suit first, you wouldn't have your entries.

Another example is where you have 4/4 in a suit and you are hoping for the opposition to split 3/2 (68% probability), making your 3 of the suit a winner. The opposition split in the suit might be 4/1 (28% probability), so you might play on that suit last if safe to do so in the hope that the opposition with the four cards will discard one. How often have you discarded a small card, only to find declarer wins in that suit with an even smaller card? We have all done it.

3NT contract

♠ A Q 10 2
♥ J 5
♦ K 5 4 2
♣ K 8 3

♠ J 9 3
♥ A 6
♦ A 7 3
♣ A J 10 9 7

You are not surprised when west leads the K of hearts. You have 6 winners & need 3 more. The opposition have 9 hearts. If they win a trick in another suit, they will win at least 4 heart tricks (total 5 and you are down i.e. you can't lose a trick). There are two finesses you could take – spades and clubs. Both have a 50% chance of succeeding. And which one would you try? Another possibility is that if you play the K and A of clubs, the Q might drop and then the other three clubs are winners. If this doesn't work, you can then try the spade finesse. In this case, the order does matter, because if the clubs work, you don't have to play the finesse which 50% of the time won't work.

So, the key for these six thinking steps to become automatic in your NT play is practise. Find the NT hands on our website from the session you played each week. It doesn't matter who played the hand, you can use it to practise your six steps. They will become easier to do as you practise.