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(118) Declarer Play - Notrump: Winners, Making a Plan

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General

When we are declaring a hand there are many things that we need to focus on and many decisions that we will have to make. This can cause distraction and make it difficult for us to play at our best if we spread our thoughts too thin. The art of declaring is an enormous subject, not one that we will master today. Instead, we will begin our journey into declaring (specifically Notrump declaring) by focusing on one of the basic ideas in all declarer play – Taking Tricks! We will try to understand the types of tricks that are available to us and see how that relates to *Making a Plan* for taking our tricks.

Making a Plan

In Notrump contracts (and actually this can be useful in all play contracts) it is usually right to start by counting our winners, but this is only the beginning of our process of attempting to take tricks. We need to develop a Plan for how we are going to take our tricks. *Taking the time to make a plan is one of the most important parts of Declarer play.* In order to effectively make a plan we need to first understand the types of tricks (winners) that are available to us as Declarer.

Types of Winners

Immediate (“Top Trick”) Winners

These are tricks that we can take without giving up the lead or risking giving up the lead. They are tricks that we can count on – we do not need to do anything in order to develop these tricks. It can be tempting, but there are several reasons that we do not necessarily start our play by “cashing” these tricks.

- First, cashing these winners can leave us susceptible to the opponents cashing winners in that suit. Winners can also be important *Stoppers* – cards to stop the opponents from running their winners in a suit.

- Second, these top tricks can be used for Transportation between our hand and the Dummy – so saving them for later can be useful.
- Third, there is no rush to develop these winners. We should use our entries/tempo to focus on other aspects of the play – we should look to developing our other tricks first.

Developed Winners

Unlike “Top Tricks”, developed winners take some effort to turn into tricks. This will frequently mean giving up the lead, knocking out stoppers of the opponents’ suit, or risking setting up tricks for the opponents. When we think about developing winners there are many things to consider:

- Winners that are guaranteed to develop.
 - *Example:* KQJT. If we knock out the Ace we will have three certain winners.
- Winners that are less certain – Potential Winners.
 - Finesses, Double Finesses, etc...
 - Length Tricks (hoping a suit will split well)
 - Squeezes
- Timing / Tempo
 - Danger Hand vs. Safe Hand
 - Control -- Are we “wide-open” in a suit? Can we afford to give up the lead?
 - Deception – What do the opponents know?
- Risk / Reward – Tricks for us if things work well vs. Tricks for them if things do not work well.
- The order in which we should try to develop winners
 - Transportation – Entries, Unblocking, etc...
 - Probability – Distributions and Card Combinations
 - “Combining our chances!”
 - Visualizing the Opponents’ Hands
 - Changing Tacks – making use of new information

Note: We will focus on many of these concepts in more detail in our future discussions. This list is here primarily to introduce us to the many things that we must consider.

Back to “Making a Plan”

The process of making our plan begins by trying to understand what tricks or options for developing tricks are available to us. We then determine what factors we need to consider in order to choose a path of tricks to develop. One of the most important factors when playing a Notrump contract is the level of danger we face from the opponents. This danger level is determined by understanding concepts like *Danger Suits* and the *Danger Hand*. Timing is also an important part of our

plan. Timing for developing winners often relates to how many Stoppers we have in the Danger Suit and how much work we need to do in order to develop our tricks. It is a race and the timing of the hand has to do with our chances of winning the race. There are of course many other factors to making a good plan, but we will explore those in time.

Conclusion

Winners (tricks) are the most important part of the play of the hand. But understanding or calculating our number of winners is not a simple task. Making a plan for how to set up and take our winners and then executing that plan are the primary skills of good Declarer play. These plans are not static though, they frequently involve Plan A, B, C, etc... The key to *good Declarer Play* is the ability to make a plan, start to execute that plan, and still be able to modify that plan as new information arises. Learning how to slow down, determine new options, and change our direction will come only with practice and experience!