(119) Declarer Play – Notrump: Unblocking, Taking Winners

Date: July 2015 © AiB
Level: Novice/Intermediate

Robert S. Todd
robert@advinbridge.com

General

In order to effectively play a hand we need to develop some basic skills that we can apply and execute without much thought as part of our plan for taking tricks. These skills are useful in many aspects of card play – Notrump contracts, suit contracts, and even defense. We will begin by focusing on a core skill that helps us "Take Tricks" – Unblocking a suit. Unblocking seems like a simple skill, but it is important to many aspects of play and important for us to feel comfortable with it in order to properly handle the more complex problems of playing the hand – Transportation, Timing, and Developing/Cashing Winners.

Unblocking Basics

Unblocking is the act of playing the cards in an order so as not to block or tangle a suit. Blocking a suit is winning a trick in the middle of the play in the wrong hand and not being able to continue to play that suit or cash your winners in that suit because you are in the wrong hand. So Unblocking (or Untangling) a suit involves playing your cards in the order that allows you to take all of your tricks and to be in the correct hand when you want to be there.

Example
KQ2   AJT43
If we play the 2 to the Ace on the first round of this suit then at tricks 2-3 we will be forced to win the King and Queen (in the short side) and be stuck in the wrong hand, unable to immediately cash the Jack and Ten. We will have blocked the suit. Instead, we can cash the King and Queen on the first two rounds of the suit, being careful to the win the third trick (the one where we run out of the suit in the short side) in the hand with the long suit. This will now allow us to immediately cash the rest of our winners.

Blocking a suit is not always costly. If we have lots of entries to the hand with the winners then we will be able to easily cross to that hand and take our tricks later.

But blocking a suit can be extremely costly if we do not have other entries to the long suit or if we are forced to prematurely use our entries in order to get to our winners.

Overtaking

Sometimes in order to have proper transportation on a hand we will play two winners (often both honors) on the same trick – this is called *Overtaking.* One important aspect of unblocking a suit is to not need to overtake and thus preserve our honors. We do not want to waste our honors in a suit in order to create transportation for ourselves, if we can avoid it. Overtaking can cost tricks and set up small cards for the opponents, especially if the suit does not break well.

Sometimes we have a good enough suit that we do not need to worry about promoting tricks for the opponents:
Example
KQ   AJT98
With this suit we can safely cash the King ("Unblocking it") and then play the Queen, overtaking it with the Ace so that we are in the "long side" and can now run the suit.

Unblocking "Tight Honors" then Crossing

In other cases we will not have a good enough suit or good enough spots to be able to afford to overtake our honors.
Example
KQ   AJ32
If we cash the King and then overtake the Queen with the Ace (as we did in our previous example) we will unblock the suit, but we will promote a trick for the Defense. Our Jack will be a winner on the 3rd round of the suit, but we will lose the 4th Round – our 3 to the opponent's 10 or 9.

Instead, with this card combination we need to maintain our honors if we want 4 tricks, so we do not overtake. We will unblock both the King and Queen, cashing those two honors separately and leaving the AJ remaining in the other hand. We will then cross to the other hand in another suit in order to cash our remaining two winners. In this case we could not afford to overtake our winner and the resulting suit blockage required us to use an outside entry in order to "run the suit".

Leading Up to Honors

When we are playing a suit like
Qx   Axxxx
we need to set up the Queen by leading up towards it. This is because we do not have the Jack and/or Ten. We hope the opponent will take their King in front of the

Queen and leave us with the now singleton Q and Axxx. We then will unblock the Queen and continue trying to run the suit – by crossing back to the long side in another suit.

Unblocking on Defense

Just as we unblock suits when we are trying to run a suit as Declarer we also need to do so on Defense. Specifically, when we are defending Notrump we will frequently try to run a long suit. We will want to set that suit up by knocking out the opponent's stopper while also untangling our cards in the suit (unblock) so as to have the long side be able to cash the final tricks in the suit. Let's look at some examples of how we unblock on Defense.

Example 1
If Partner leads a suit and we hold AJ2 then we need to know what to do. Assuming that dummy does not have an honor (for us to hold onto our Ace to capture) then we win the Ace at trick 1. From there we return the Jack (top of our Doubleton – remainder count). Returning the Jack also unblocks the suit. If we return the 2 on the second trick and the Queen and King show up (say Declarer plays the Queen and Partner wins their King) we will be stuck with the high card in the short side – the singleton Jack. This will block the suit. So we return the Jack, not the 2, on the second round!

Example 2
If Partner leads a suit and we hold AJ32 then we do similarly as before. We will usually play the Ace at trick one and return our "remainder count" at trick 2. This means we return the 2. We can afford to return low because we will not block the suit. We will be left with J3 in the suit. The 3 is low enough that we will be able to play that card later to return to partner if we need to let them cash the remaining cards in the suit.

Example 3
If Partner leads a suit and we hold AJT2 then we need to go out of our way to unblock the suit. Assuming the situation in dummy is similar to above we will win the Ace at trick 1. But when we continue the suit at trick 2 we cannot continue with normal remainder count – returning the 2.   If we do, we will be left with JT and that may block the suit. Instead, we must return the Jack on the second round, starting the process of unblocking. This is an example of a time when unblocking must take precedence over giving correct return count.

Conclusion

Playing a suit "the best way possible" involves trying to take the most tricks as well as taking them in the order that is best.   The best order can involve using the suit for transportation or just trying to take winners. When we are just trying to cash our winners we want to do so in a way that allows us to run the suit. Unblocking a suit is sometimes hard to see and we have to think a few tricks ahead, but if we try to keep in mind "untangling the suit" then we will be able to avoid suit blockage and be able to more easily cash our tricks.