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(121) Declarer Play - Notrump: Length Vs. Strength

Date: July 2015 © AiB

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General

When we are playing the hand at Notrump we frequently have many options for setting up tricks. One of the major factors we will have to weigh is using length (long suits) to produce tricks vs. using strength (high cards). These will not be easy decisions to make, but in order to make these decisions we will need to consider things like the timing of the hand and tempo. Tempo will often determine how much pressure we feel and how much time we have to develop winners from other places (length or strength).

Length

Many Declarers focus on developing winners with their HCP – either by knocking out stoppers or taking finesses. But this should often be your fallback plan. Especially in Notrump, looking to win tricks with small cards in long suits is often a better starting place. We should focus on using our tempos (when we have the lead) as Declarer to test to see if a suit breaks in a friendly fashion, allowing us to win more tricks with small cards. Try to focus on these options first and see what you can come up with when making your Declarer Play plan. Remember, the finesse is not going away; it will often be available to fall back on if our suit does not break the way we were hoping for.

When we are looking to develop little cards into tricks we need to think about how best to do this. We need to consider our options and look at the pros and cons of each of the lines of play. But we also need to develop some techniques for playing some of these more common situations so that we do not have to solve the same problem over and over again. Good technique can save us a lot of mental energy! Let's look at the details of how to play one common example:

Example

AKxxx xx

When playing this suit we know that we will get two tricks (the Ace and King). But we want to develop more tricks by trying to turn the little cards into winners. In order to do this we hope that the suit splits 3-3 and that we will then be able to have 4 winners and only one loser. But we also want to maintain control of the situation and not allow the opponents to take too many tricks if the suit does not divide as we hope.

The best way to play this suit (in general) is to give up the first round of the suit – *giving up our loser early*. Then when we regain the lead we cash the Ace and King and see how the suit splits. This has two advantages compared to playing the suit from the top. First, it preserves communication between your hands – after you give up the first trick you can still reach the long suit (because you still have one small card in the other hand). Second, if the suit does not split well we will not lose multiple tricks in that suit. We are still in control (because we still have the lead after cashing the Ace and King) and thus we can turn our attention to trying to produce tricks elsewhere (while only having lost one trick, not two or more).

Note: All of this play discussion of the previous example is based on the assumption that we can afford to lose the lead. Sometimes you cannot afford to give up the lead and in that case we will not have the tempos needed to develop tricks in this suit.

Strength

Although we tend to focus on length before strength when we have lots of time (and are not under a lot of defensive pressure), in most hands we will still also develop tricks with strength. The key will be what strategy we go after first. But in the end, we will almost certainly need to develop tricks by either knocking out stoppers or taking finesses at some point in the play.

Here is an example where strength is an important asset but the key to the hand is to combine your chances.

KQxx Axx
 xx AQ

Imagine that you have a 4-3 fit in one suit (with the AKQ) and a tenace in another suit (AQ, specifically). You have 4 top tricks. But let's say you are looking for a 5th trick in order to make your contract – and you cannot afford to give up the lead because the opponents have a long suit to run against you. Given no other information about the hand, the probability that the finesse works is 50% and the probability that the suit splits 3-3 is 36%. So it seems that the finesse is the better choice. But the finesse (strength) has one major flaw – if it fails, then you lose the lead and the opponents will run their long suit on you. The key to this kind of hand is to realize this is a false choice. You do not have to choose between the two lines

of play – you can try both the length and the strength options if you do them in the proper order. First, try the length (see if the 4-3 fit splits 3-3). If it does, you have succeeded in getting your extra trick, and if it does not, you can still fall back on the finesse, combining your chances in both the suits. You can see that if you try the finesse first you will not be able to later test to see if the other suit splits 3-3. The order in which you combine your chances is important. Traditionally, we test length first and then fallback on strength (the finesse).

Mathematical Details

The probability that this combined line of play will work is 36% for 3-3 split + 50% of the remaining 64% for the working finesse. That is $36\% + 32\% = 68\%$! This is much better than either line of play separately!

Combining Chances – Length and Strength in the Same Suit

Sometimes we can combine length and strength in the same suit. There is a classic example of this that we should look at and know well.

AKTx Qxx

The Ten is a significant addition to this suit. We can now take 4 tricks if the suit splits 3-3 (length) or if either player has Jx (strength). This is 36% + about 16+% that either player has Jx. (We also can make it when the suit breaks 5-1 or 6-0 with Jack onside or stiff J. That is about 8+% more.) So that is a total of almost 61%. So given no other information about the hand we should play this suit from the top and not try a finesse! But even more importantly if we are considering two 4-3 fits, having the 10 makes a significant difference in the probability we will be able to take 4 tricks.

Conclusion

We often have a lot of choices in our lines of play, especially in Notrump contracts. We want to focus on finding the best line of play possible. When we have lots of time (we are not under pressure that the opponents will run a long suit) then we will often want to try to develop our long suits (length tricks) first and fall back on our strength tricks (finesse, high cards). Every hand we play is unique and we must tackle each hand individually by devising a unique plan for that hand. We should focus on developing our small cards first in our long suits and see if we can make our contract that way. If that does not seem like a good solution (we do not find something satisfactory) then we can move on to making use of our HCP. In a perfect world we find a synthesis of the two approaches. Keep this in mind and try to develop the best plan you can!