Reese on Play

Terence Reese

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Foreword

When one speaks of bridge writers, the name Terence Reese is synonymous with excellence. Several of his books are landmarks in the development and understanding of bridge, especially in the field of card play. That is especially true of *Reese on Play*, first published more than fifty years ago. This masterpiece explains what counts in play, and introduces the reader to the techniques and strategies that are fundamental to good play and defence.

A measure of the author's genius is that when the deals in this book were checked using the double-dummy analyser Deep Finesse, it revealed only a few minor flaws.

In this revised edition, I have also endeavoured to correct all the typographical errors and eliminated most of the 'x's, replacing them with spot cards.

Including this title in the Better Bridge Now series was an easy decision to make. It instructs and entertains, and will surely inspire you to take another step up the bridge ladder.

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Mark Horton
Editor
Better Bridge Now

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PART ONE
MAINLY ATTACK

1
What Counts in Play

Good players dif fer fr om average players mostly in this: that the good player tries to play all 52 car ds, and the average player plays only the 26 which he can see. A player may have first-class technique, but if he plays blind, in the sense that he does not try to reconstruct the unseen hands, he cannot be better than fair; while a player who does this, even if he knows little of elimination and nothing of squeeze play, is a player in a thousand.

To count the opponents' hands r equires no special talent. Fr om a defender's side, for example, the distribution of the suit led is often established at the first trick and almost always when the suit is played a second time; then a round or two of trumps by declarer and nine times out of ten it is possible to say how many tr umps he started with. So in most cases the distribution of two suits is known after thr ee or four leads; and as a rule the picture can be completed a trick or two later. There is nothing very difficult or abstruse about this kind of analysis; but it does r equire a conscious effort, and very few players consistently make the ef fort.

It is not so easy for declar er to gauge the distribution of the defending hands; he has much less to go on, especially in r espect of inferences from the bidding. In the early stages of most hands declar er hass to r ely on his knowledge of simple probabilities; as the play develops, the picture of the enemy distribution becomes more clear. There is nothing very remarkable about the hand which follows; but it will serve as a starting-point for discussion.

```
                    ♠ 10 5
                    ♥ A 8 4
                    ♦ K Q 6
                    ♣ A J 10 5 4
    ♠ A Q 8 7                       ♠ K J 9 6 4 2
    ♥ 3              ┌─────────┐    ♥ Q 10 9
    ♦ J 7 5 3 2      │    N    │    ♦ A 9 4
    ♣ Q 8 2          │ W     E │    ♣ 7
                     │    S    │
                     └─────────┘
                    ♠ 3
                    ♥ K J 7 6 5 2
                    ♦ 10 8
                    ♣ K 9 6 3
```

East-West were vulnerable and North dealt. The bidding was:

South	West	North	East
–	–	1♣	1♠
2♥	3♠	4♥	4♠
5♥	All Pass		

The ace of spades was led, followed by another spade, which declarer trumped. The problem was to place the missing queens correctly. Declarer decided that as the opponents had bid to four spades vulnerable, the trumps were more likely to be 3-1 than 2-2. So when East followed to a second trump, South successfully finessed the jack.

This hurdle over, it remained only to find the queen of clubs. As West had a singleton heart, it was likely that he had the long clubs. To complete the count of the hand, South played diamonds before tackling the clubs. After three rounds of diamonds it was established that East held six cards in the red suits; as East had made the overcall of One Spade it was likely that he had six spades, so declarer finessed clubs against West with every confidence.

Only the two aces were lost, so South landed his contract of five hearts. Most players would have done as much, but although the play was not difficult it does raise some important points. First of all, the finesse in trumps before much was known about the East/West hands: there was an inference to be drawn from the bidding that the trumps were more likely to be 3-1 than 2-2, but suppose there had been no opposition bidding: then would it have been right to finesse trumps or to play for the drop?

The answer depends mainly on the simple probabilities. Precise odds can be quoted to show the likely distribution of any number of outstanding cards. The odds are as follows:

The simple probabilities

Two cards will be divided 1-1 52 times in a hundred, 2-0 48 times. Other things being equal, therefore, it is slightly better to play for the drop than to finesse with king and one other card outstanding.

Three cards will be divided 2-1 78 times, 3-0 22 times.

Four cards will be divided 3-1 50 times, 2-2 40 times, 4-0 10 times. But although 3-1 is rather more probable than 2-2, it does not follow from this that when nine cards are held and a queen is missing, it is better to finesse than to play for the drop of the queen. The odds vary every time a card is played; when the moment arrives for declarer to make the decision on the second round of the suit, the odds slightly favour the play for the drop. So when the trump suit was played in the hand above, simple probabilities favoured the play for the drop on the second round rather than the finesse.

Five cards will be divided 3-2 68 times, 4-1 28 times, 5-0 4 times.

Six cards will be divided 4-2 48 times, 3-3 36 times, 5-1 15 times, 6-0 once.

Seven cards will be divided 4-3 62 times, 5-2 31 times, 6-1 7 times, 7-0 less than 0.5 times.

Knowledge of probabilities is of considerable importance in play. For example, a declarer should know that a finesse, which is a 50-50 chance, is a better proposition than the play for the 3-3 split of six outstanding cards, but not so good as the play for a 4-3 split of seven outstanding cards. Of course there are generally clues available which affect normal expectation. For example, one player may be known from the bidding or from the play to have unusual length in one suit. Then naturally his partner is more Likely to have length in another.

There is another factor to be considered. The further the play has advanced, the more likely are the even divisions. For example, if in the middle of the play a declarer with a combined seven cards in a suit plays two rounds, to which all follow, it is better than evens that the two outstanding cards will break 1-1; in other words, a 3-3 break has become more likely than 4-2.

A count to avoid a finesse

We have wandered some way from the original hand, but there is one more point about it which is worth noticing: that is declarer's play of three rounds of diamonds in order to complete his count of the hand. Although in general it is more difficult for declarer to count the hands than it is for a defender, declarer has this advantage, that he can plan the play so as to obtain a complete picture of the hand. He does this on the following deal.

```
                    ♠ 9 5 2
                    ♥ Q 10 7
                    ♦ A Q 8 4
                    ♣ K 9 3
  ♠ A K 8 6 4 3    ┌──────────┐    ♠ J 10
  ♥ A 5 2          │    N     │    ♥ 6 4
  ♦ 7 6            │ W     E  │    ♦ J 10 5 3
  ♣ Q 5            │    S     │    ♣ 10 8 6 4 2
                   └──────────┘
                    ♠ Q 7
                    ♥ K J 9 8 3
                    ♦ K 9 2
                    ♣ A J 7
```

South plays in Four Hearts after West has made an overcall of One Spade. West leads the king of spades and continues with three rounds of the suit to kill dummy's nine. South plays hearts and West wins the second round and exits with a heart. Declarer has now the problem of avoiding a loser in clubs. There is a chance that the diamonds will break, and also the chance of a club finesse. Before testing the diamonds it is correct technique for South to play off the last trump, discarding a club from dummy. Three rounds of diamonds follow, but East is found to have the suit guarded. Then the king of clubs is led and another club; East plays the 10, but as he is known to have a diamond for his last card the finesse is refused and the doubleton queen is brought down – not by looking at West's hand but by counting East's.

Testing the lie

A hand like the last one is a perfect test of the difference between the player who goes ahead without thinking of what the other players hold, and the good player who explores every means to discover how the cards lie. The next hand is a slightly more advanced example of the same principle.

```
                    ♠ A 10 4
                    ♥ Q 7 5 3
                    ♦ Q 9
                    ♣ A 8 6 3
  ♠ K 5            ┌──────────┐    ♠ 9 8 6 3
  ♥ A K J 6 4      │    N     │    ♥ 10 8 2
  ♦ 8 2            │ W     E  │    ♦ 6 5 3
  ♣ K 10 7 3       │    S     │    ♣ Q 9 4
                   └──────────┘
                    ♠ Q J 7 2
                    ♥ 9
                    ♦ A K J 10 7 4
                    ♣ J 5
```

South plays in Five Diamonds after West has made an overcall of One Heart. As it happens, Three No-Trumps would have been an easier contract.

West leads the king of hearts, on which East plays the two. West then switches to diamonds and declarer takes two rounds, finishing in dummy. There is a reason for this. South can see that he may lose a trick in spades as well as in clubs. He wants to get a count on the spade suit, and an important preliminary is to find out how the clubs lie, if necessary by playing four rounds. When he leads clubs South wants the trick to be won by West, for it would interfere with his plans if he had to trump a lead of hearts from East.

So to the fourth trick a small club is led from dummy and the jack is won by West's king. West returns a club, won in dummy. Declarer ruffs a club, draws the last trump, and leads a low spade, finessing the ten. Then he leads the fourth club from dummy and discovers for certain that West started with four cards in this suit. West is known to have had two diamonds and in all probability, since he bid them, five hearts. So it is clear that West's king of spades is now single; accordingly South plays a small spade to the ace and not one of his honours. Had West turned up with only three clubs declarer would have placed him with three spades and 5-3-3-2 distribution; for remember that East played the two of hearts on the first trick, from which it was reasonable to infer that East had three hearts and not a doubleton.

Inference and hypothesis

The next hand shows something rather more difficult than anything we have met so far. Declarer's process of thought is carried one stage farther. The picture of an opponent's hand has to be based on a premise which is purely hypothetical.
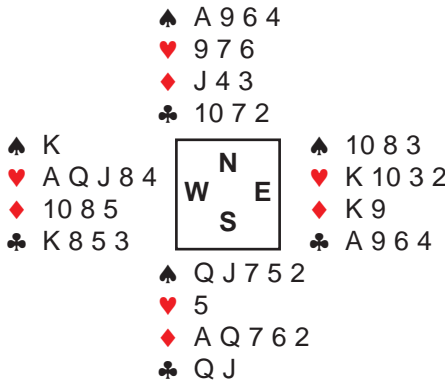

South made a third-hand opening of One Spade and West overcalled with Two Hearts. North raised to Two Spades and when East said Four Hearts

An Introduction to Good Bridge

Terence Reese's original subtitle to his 1948 classic, *Reese on Play*, really says it all. This book on card play is intended to show the average player how to become a good player, and the good player how to become a better player. More than sixty years after it first appeared, *Reese on Play* is still required reading for any bridge player wanting to improve his or her card play either as declarer or defender. It covers the gamut: counting, card reading, safety plays, deception, communications, the opening lead, defensive tactics, and finally endgames – eliminations, throw-ins, trump coups, and squeezes.
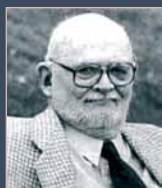
TERENCE REESE (1913-1996) was a World and European champion, and one of the best technical writers the game has yet produced. Several of his books are still in print more than half a century after their first appearance.

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