BETTER
DECLARER
PLAY

COMBINING
YOUR
CHANCES

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

Bridge is played by four players so that, unless you are a very aggressive and/or greedy bidder or consistently pick up enormous hands, you cannot expect to be declarer more than 25% of the time. That is opposed to defending twice as often and being on dummy the remainder of the time.

That borne in mind, when you are declarer, you are the star of the show and you want to be at your best. In this series of six books, I intend to show you various techniques and approaches which are applicable to a wide range of situations so that, while you may fail on the very complicated hands, typically endplays and squeezes, you will hopefully improve your results on the more straightforward examples that occur far more often.

The six books are divided according to various topics, which will hopefully help you to recognize positions requiring similar handling as you progress. Eventually, I hope you will be able to play out hands with a minimum of having to rack your brains.

Danny Roth

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Are you feeling frustrated?

In the bridge sphere, few things can be worse than week in, week out, turning up at your local duplicate or entering a tournament and having to sit there joining the applause at the end as other people collect the prizes. Well, it is time to stop being resigned to the likelihood that it is going to carry on like this until the Day of Judgment and do something about it before it is too late.

Winning at bridge (and this applies to most sports and games) is not about being brilliant; it is about avoiding errors. It is irritating to have to reflect on all those contracts you declared in that you made one trick fewer than you should have done due to one or more unnecessary mistakes. The purpose of this series of books on declarer play is to let you make those mistakes while you are reading rather than at the table — and then to eliminate them.

In this book, we are going to concentrate on different options for suit establishment, approaches that should give you the maximum number of tricks in any given situation. As we go through, we will be studying various positions that are commonly misplayed.

At the end, there will be eighteen quizzes of four problems each, which will enable you to assess how well you have absorbed and understood the lessons of the earlier chapters.

A word about scoring. I am aware that, at match-pointed pairs, overtricks can be important and therefore ultra-cautious safety plays should arguably be overlooked. In this book, the assumption is IMP or rubber-bridge scoring, and the success of your contract is the principal aim.

CHAPTER 1
DROP, FINESSE OR BOTH?

We are going to start by considering situations where there are possibilities in two or more suits and how to maximize your chances. The mentality of 'drop first, then finesse' is based on the premise that if you play for the drop of an outstanding honor, most commonly a king or queen, and are disappointed, you are still on lead and can then try a finesse in another suit. Against that, if you take a finesse first and it loses, the opponents are now on lead and may be able to cash enough winners to defeat you before you have had the chance to try the suit where a drop is possible. It may well be that the chance of a drop is a very small percentage against a 50% probability for a finesse but usually it will cost nothing to try, at worst an extra undertrick.

Let's look at some examples:

♠ K 6			
♥ 8 6 5			
♦ K 9 3 2			
♣ A K J 10			

N-S vul.

West	North	East	South
			1♦
pass	2♣	pass	2NT
pass	3NT	all pass	

♠ A 9 8 4
♥ K 3
♦ A J 10 4
♣ 9 7 5

West leads the ♥Q to his partner's ♥A. East returns the ♥9 and your ♥K wins. How do you continue?

In all declarer problems, the first step is to assess the overall situation. Count your potential winners and losers and try to place the unseen cards as far as possible. Sometimes, notably after long and protracted competitive auctions, a fairly accurate picture is available and you can play as though you can see all four hands, or, as they say in bridge jargon, 'double-dummy'. The next step is to try to predict how the play will go, anticipating losing finesses, bad breaks and other misfortunes that are likely to frustrate your plans. Most importantly, this should all be done before a single card is played to the first trick. At all levels of bridge, countless contracts are thrown away by failure to play correctly early on. Nobody will ever criticize you for long thought at Trick 1.

Hesitation later in the play, particularly when there is nothing to think about, may justly be considered unethical, but at the beginning, take your time.

Now let's do this on the above deal. The opponents did not bid but their play to the first two tricks is already enlightening. Eight hearts are missing and East returned the ♥9. Had he held four hearts, the fourth highest is the customary choice so, assuming that West has chosen his longest suit, hearts will split 5-3 or 6-2. With a six-card suit, presumably headed by QJ10, and at favorable vulnerability, West might well have made a weak jump overcall at his first turn. He did not, so the hearts are likely to be 5-3 and West is waiting with winners to cash. This means that you have to take your nine tricks immediately.

Counting those tricks, you have two winners in each non-heart suit plus the ♥K already won — seven so far. This implies that one of the minors will have to come in for four tricks. There are chances for that in both suits, so it is a question of how to combine them. The queen is missing in both, and the finesse is the percentage play but if we choose one and it fails, we will go down without having tried the other. So we sacrifice a modest percentage in one suit to have a crack at both. You have eight diamonds but only seven clubs, so the drop in diamonds is the better bet. The plan is to cash the ♦A and ♦K and if the ♦Q fails to appear, try the club finesse.

But even that is not the full story. Look at that club suit in more detail. Even within the single suit, the 'drop first, then finesse' principle can apply. With three clubs in the South hand, you can cater for the possibility that West holds four or more clubs, in which case two finesses will be needed and with the ♦A already played, entries may be problem. Also, you can cater for a singleton ♣Q offside by cashing the ♣A before trying the finesses. Do you now see the problem? Suppose you cash the two diamonds and the ♣A. You will now be in dummy, needing to cross to hand for a club finesse. That will have to be in spades. If the club finesse succeeds, there is no way to get back to take another finesse. You are thus left with two tricks in spades and diamonds, three in clubs and one in hearts, totaling only eight, unless you are lucky enough to find clubs 3-3.

Having read this, can you see the correct order of play? It is important to cash the two diamond winners ending in hand so, at Trick 3, you cash the ♣A and then the ♦K and ♦A in that order. You are now in the right place to start finessing in clubs with the spade entry still intact.

Not so simple, and yet we have hardly started! Suppose we alter the scenario and assume that West did make a weak jump overcall of 2♥. You still get to 3NT with the same defense but how do you play now? If you adopt the above line, you are likely to fail if West has ♦Qxx and East has the ♣Q.

That would leave you with two tricks each in spades and diamonds, one heart and three clubs, only eight. It is better to appreciate that the hearts are almost certainly 6-2 and that East has now run out. You can thus afford to take finesses in both minors around to East's hand, ensuring three tricks each in the minors, two spades and one heart.

With the above approach in mind, try this next example on a similar theme:

♠ Q J 2	E-W vul.			
♥ 8 4	**West**	**North**	**East**	**South**
♦ J 8 7 4		1♣	pass	1♦
♣ A K J 2	pass	2♦	pass	3NT
▭	all pass			
♠ A 10 9 4				
♥ K Q				
♦ A K 3 2				
♣ 10 6 5				

West leads the ♥J to his partner's ♥A. East returns the ♥2 and your ♥K wins. How do you continue?

Hearts are likely to be 5-4, so there are enough tricks to beat the contract if the defenders get in. Thus, it is now or never. Counting tricks, there are four winners in the minors and one each in the majors, six in all so far. If the spade finesse is right, that will be three extra tricks, enough for the contract. However, if both minor suits behave favorably, there could be three or four in each, leaving the spade finesse unnecessary. The question is which to try first. Think about this before reading on.

The approach (and this applies to most declarer problems) is to do a mental trial run. Suppose you try two top clubs first; say the queen drops. You can cash the ♣10 and try the diamonds, but if the queen fails to drop, you will be in the wrong hand to try the spades. So try two top diamonds first. If the queen fails to drop, four club tricks will not be enough, so you must go to dummy in clubs and hope for the best in spades. If the ♦Q does drop, try the two top clubs. If the queen drops, a club to the ten followed by two more diamonds and the ♣J will give you ten tricks. If the ♦Q drops on the first round, you are only guaranteed three tricks in that suit so that four clubs will be needed if the spade finesse is to be avoided. Clubs should be tested now and if that queen drops too, the ♦J will serve as entry to the fourth club trick.

This next hand displays problems regarding missing kings:

♠ J 2	E-W vul.			
♥ 8 4 3	**West**	**North**	**East**	**South**
♦ A Q J 8 7			pass	1♣
♣ 8 5 2	pass	1♦	pass	2NT
▭	pass	3NT	all pass	
♠ A Q				
♥ A Q 7				
♦ 9 3 2				
♣ K Q J 10 6				

West leads the ♠10 to the ♠J, ♠K and your ♠A. How do you continue?

You have a double stopper in spades and will clearly need to start by knocking out the ♣A. West takes the second round, both following, and continues spades. You have four club tricks, two spades and the two red aces to total eight, with finesse positions in both red suits for a possible ninth. The question is how to combine the chances, bearing in mind that at least three spade tricks are waiting for you if you lose the lead?

Once again, 'drop first, then finesse' applies. Either finesse is 50% but you can give yourself an admittedly small extra chance of one of the kings dropping as a singleton. With eight diamonds and six hearts, diamonds are clearly the better bet, so you should play the ♦A, prepared to take the heart finesse if East fails to produce a singleton king.

On this next example, the vital missing card is an ace.

♠ 8 6 4	N-S vul.			
♥ A J	**West**	**North**	**East**	**South**
♦ A K 10 9 7	pass	1♦	pass	1♠
♣ 8 3 2	pass	2♦	pass	3NT
▭	all pass			
♠ A K 9 2				
♥ K 9				
♦ J 3 2				
♣ K Q J 9				

West leads the ♥8, likely to be top of nothing. How do you play from here?

QUIZ 1

1.1   ♠ K 7 6 4
      ♥ 6 4
      ♦ A K 7 5 3
      ♣ 7 2

      ♠ A 5 2
      ♥ A Q 3
      ♦ 9 6 2
      ♣ A K 8 6

Both vul.

West	North	East	South
	pass	pass	1NT
pass	3NT	all pass	

West leads the ♥5, East playing the ♥J. Plan the play.

1.2   ♠ 8 7
      ♥ K 7 4 2
      ♦ 8 5
      ♣ A Q J 9 4

      ♠ K 5 3
      ♥ A Q 10
      ♦ K J 7 4 3
      ♣ K 2

E-W vul.

West	North	East	South
1♠	2♣	pass	3NT
all pass			

West leads out the ♠A followed by the ♠Q (East follows with the ♠6 and ♠2) and it is all too obvious that he has a quick entry with the ♦A. What's your best chance of nine tricks?

1.3
♠ 5
♥ A K 8 7 4
♦ A K 10 9 3
♣ 8 5

♠ A 7
♥ 9
♦ J 8 2
♣ A K J 10 7 4 2

E-W vul.

West	North	East	South
	1♥	2♠[1]	3♣
pass	3♦	pass	3NT
all pass			

1. Weak.

West leads the ♠2 to East's ♠Q. How do you play?

1.4
♠ A J 7
♥ Q J 7 3
♦ A 7 3
♣ Q 10 5

♠ Q 10 6
♥ A K 10 9 5
♦ K J 4
♣ J 6

Neither vul.

West	North	East	South
pass	1♣	pass	1♥
pass	2♥	pass	4♥
all pass			

West leads the ♠5. How do you play?

SOLUTIONS

1.1

There are two top tricks in each suit, to total eight so far, and chances in diamonds and spades for an extra one. The question is whether you can combine the chances. If you duck an early trick in either suit, they will clear the hearts and then you may be down if you guessed to play on a suit breaking badly. The correct approach is to leave the ♠K in dummy as entry and take the two top diamonds, retaining the lead. If both defenders follow, play a third round for the contract. If either defender shows out on the second round, you will have to rely on an even spade break. Duck an early round and hope for the best. Satisfy yourself that playing spades from the top may not work. If they break badly, the defense will take two spade tricks and clear the hearts. Then, if West holds three diamonds, his hearts will come in first.

```
                    ♠ K 7 6 4
                    ♥ 6 4
                    ♦ A K 7 5 3
                    ♣ 7 2
   ♠ J 9 3                          ♠ Q 10 8
   ♥ K 10 8 5 2         N           ♥ J 9 7
   ♦ J 10 8 4      W        E       ♦ Q
   ♣ J                  S           ♣ Q 10 9 5 4 3
                    ♠ A 5 2
                    ♥ A Q 3
                    ♦ 9 6 2
                    ♣ A K 8 6
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Score 10 if you found the line as above. Reduce to 7 if you attacked diamonds by ducking an early round. Reduce to 3 if you played on spades early.

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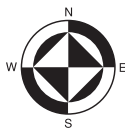
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BOOK TWO COMING IN 2023

The first book in Danny Roth's new intermediate-level series on declarer play, this book covers topics that, once mastered, will bring any intermediate player an immediate improvement in their scores. Topics include: to finesse or play for the drop (why not both?), loser-on-loser plays, entries, disposing of losers, and much more. The overall theme is, 'Don't put all your eggs in one basket — instead, choose a line of play that gives you more than one chance of success.'

As always, the author's clear exposition of his points is followed by a large collection of problems where the reader can test their understanding of this new-found knowledge.

DANNY ROTH (London, UK) is the author of more than 16 books on bridge. His most recent title for Master Point Press was *Don't Be Fooled* (2020).

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