

Planning the Hand

Planning the play in notrump

These are the steps to planning the play in a notrump contract:

- Count your winners
- Decide whether you need to develop tricks
- Don't be afraid to give up the lead
- In general, establish your extra tricks before cashing sure tricks
- Plan your entries

An example of counting your winners:

♠	K Q 9 8 2
♥	J 10 9
♦	7 6 4
♣	A 3
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♠	A 4 3
♥	A 7 4 3
♦	K Q J 10
♣	K 10

South is in 3NT. West leads the ♣Q.

Look at both hands, suit by suit. In spades, you have the ace, king and queen that could win you three separate tricks. You might make two more tricks with the nine and the eight but this is not certain so you can't count them as winners. They may have to be developed. In hearts you have one immediate winner — the ace. In diamonds you have no winners! Tricky here — you won't have any certain winners until you have lost a trick to the ace but after that the remaining high cards will be winners. In clubs you have two winners. So you have six winners and must develop three more to make 3NT.

How can you develop three more tricks? Looking at spades, the opponents have five between them. About two thirds of the time one person will have three spades and the other two. Roughly a quarter of the time they split 4-1, but a 5-0 split is pretty uncommon. It doesn't hurt to remember these numbers. If they split 3-2 this will give you five spade tricks but still only eight winners in total.

The best bet is the diamond suit. As mentioned above, once you knock out the $\heartsuit A$ you will have three winners, which is just what you need. So you plan to lead a diamond immediately when you get in and keep leading them until the ace appears. This will give you nine tricks. Then if the spades break 3-2 you will get two extra tricks as a bonus.

Planning the play in a suit contract

These are the steps in planning the play in a suit contract:

- Count your losers
- Decide whether you need to develop tricks
- Consider trumping losers in the short hand
- Draw trumps first unless you need to dispose of losers beforehand
- Don't be afraid to give up the lead
- Plan your entries

An example of counting your losers:

\spadesuit	J 10 2
\heartsuit	K 10 9 5
\diamondsuit	A 8 4 2
\clubsuit	7 3
\spadesuit	A K Q 4 3
\heartsuit	A 7 4
\diamondsuit	7 6
\clubsuit	A J 10

South is in $4\spadesuit$. West leads the $\heartsuit K$.

Find the hand with more trumps — in this case it is South. It is known as the long trump hand. Consider only losers in the long hand. In spades the ace,

king and queen will take tricks and the jack and ten in the short hand will take care of the four and three in the long hand, so no losers in spades. In hearts the ace will take a trick and the seven and four are losers, but the king will take care of one of them so you only have one loser. In diamonds the seven and six are losers but the ace will take care of one of them so you only have one loser. In clubs you have the ace plus two losers, neither of which can be covered by the short hand. So you have four losers — one in hearts, one in diamonds and two in clubs and you need to eliminate one of them to make your contract.

There are thirteen tricks in a deal. Take your four losers from thirteen and you get nine. That is, you expect to take nine tricks in 4♠. But you need ten, so you have to eliminate one of your losers.

Can you trump a loser in the short hand? Yes — since you have three clubs in the long hand, South, and only two in the short hand, North, you could trump one in the short hand. The next thing to consider is whether you can safely draw trumps first. If there is no reason to delay, you should always draw trumps first. In this case if you draw trumps there will be none left in dummy to trump a club. So you plan to lead the ♣A and then another club. When you regain the lead, you will be able to draw a round or two of trumps leaving one in dummy and then trump your losing club. This will give you ten tricks and your contract.

There are other possibilities here but trumping a loser in dummy is the best bet to eliminate a loser.

PROBLEM 1

To Answer

You are South, declarer in 1NT.

♠ A K 9
 ♥ 4 3 2
 ♦ 4 3 2
 ♣ 5 4 3 2

	N	
W		E
	S	

♠ 4 3 2
 ♥ A K 9
 ♦ A K 9
 ♣ Q J 10 6

West	North	East	South
all pass			1NT

You open 1NT (15-17 points) with your balanced hand. North, who also has a balanced hand and needs at least 8 points to invite to game, passes.

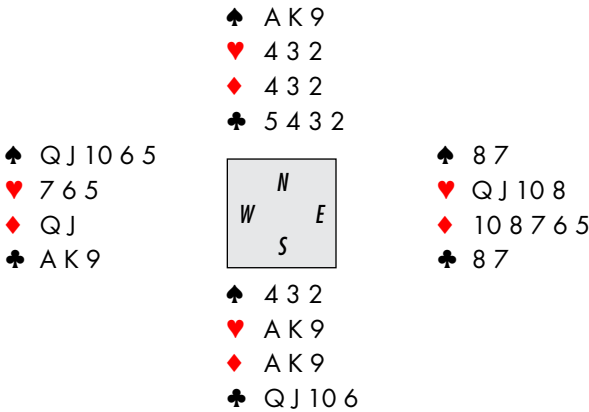
West leads the ♠Q. How will you make seven tricks?

Analysis

The first thing to do in notrump is to count your winners. You have two each in spades, hearts and diamonds. You need one more trick to make your contract.

West has probably led the ♠Q from a four-card or longer suit headed by the ♠QJ10, with the plan of taking several spade tricks after your ace and king have been knocked out. There are no extra tricks in spades available for you.

What is the best way to proceed?



No matter what you do in hearts or diamonds there is no way to make a third trick in either suit. Look at the diamond suit — if you play the ace and king, the queen and jack will drop but East will control the third round with the ten. In hearts you can lead small ones from dummy towards your ♥AK9 but East will play an honor each time so your nine will never win a trick.

The only suit that will yield a seventh trick is clubs, and all you have to do is knock out the opponents’ ace and king. You have to lose some tricks in spades, but you can still make your contract if you establish your club suit before you cash the winners in hearts and diamonds.

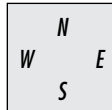
So win the opening lead with the ♠A in dummy and lead a small club to your ♣Q. West will take the ♣K and probably continue with the ♠J. Take this in dummy with the ♠K and lead another club to your ♣J. West will win this with the ♣A and cash three spade tricks: you will follow suit to the first and discard the ♥9 and ♦9 on the next two. Now your ♣10 and ♣6 will be good, giving you eight tricks.

Key Point

Develop tricks in suits where you hold more cards than the opponents.

You are South playing in 3NT.

♠ A K 10 8
 ♥ A K 10 7
 ♦ 8 3 2
 ♣ 5 4



♠ Q J 6
 ♥ Q J 3
 ♦ A J 4
 ♣ A 8 6 2

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

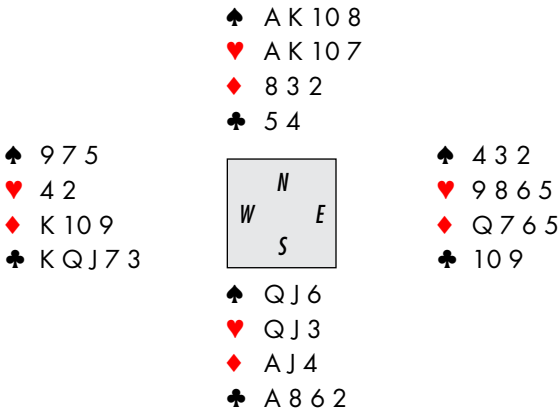
You open 1NT (15-17 points) and partner bids 2♣ (the Stayman convention) to see whether you have a four-card major. You reply 2♦, showing no four-card major. Partner, who has a good hand and doesn't want to miss out on game, bids 3NT.

West leads the ♣K. How do you plan to play the hand?

Analysis

As everyone tells you, it is important to plan the play at Trick 1. In notrump, the first thing to do is to count your winners. You have four in spades, four in hearts and the two minor aces — that's ten tricks.

So what's the problem? Why not start by cashing the nice major aces and kings in dummy?



If you cash the aces and kings of spades and hearts before thinking, you will not be able to take the fourth trick in either major. The third round in either suit will put the lead in your hand with no way to get back to dummy. The suits will be blocked. You will end up with only eight tricks.

The key to unblocking is to cash the winners from the hand with fewer cards in the suit first. So take the opening lead with the ♣A in your hand. Then cash the ♠Q and ♠J before crossing to dummy by playing the six to the ace. Then you can play the ♠K. Play the hearts in a similar fashion and collect your ten tricks.

Key Point

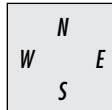
Play high honors from the short side first to unblock a suit.

PROBLEM 3

To Answer

You are South, declarer in 4♥.

♠ 5 2
 ♥ J 9 7 4
 ♦ J 5 2
 ♣ A 10 6 4



♠ A 4 3
 ♥ A K Q 8 6
 ♦ Q 10 3
 ♣ K 3

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

You have an 18 HCP hand that you open 1♥. Partner gives you a single raise and you bid game.

West leads the ♠J. How do you plan to play the hand?

Analysis

In a trump contract the first thing to do is to count your losers. You have four losers — two spades and two diamonds.

How will you proceed?

<p>♠ J 10 9 8 7 6 ♥ 5 2 ♦ A 7 6 ♣ J 2</p>	<p>♠ 5 2 ♥ J 9 7 4 ♦ J 5 2 ♣ A 10 6 4</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 100px; height: 100px; margin: 0 auto; display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: center; justify-content: center;"> <div style="margin-bottom: 5px;">N</div> <div style="margin-bottom: 5px;">W E</div> <div style="margin-bottom: 5px;">S</div> </div> <p>♠ A 4 3 ♥ A K Q 8 6 ♦ Q 10 3 ♣ K 3</p>	<p>♠ K Q ♥ 10 3 ♦ K 9 8 4 ♣ Q 9 8 7 5</p>
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Win the opening lead with the ♠A. You have to lose one spade for sure but you can trump one in dummy. You only need one trump in dummy in order to do this, so you can start drawing trumps. Both defenders follow to two rounds of trumps so now you can play a spade. When you regain the lead you can trump your third spade in dummy. You will inevitably lose two diamond tricks to the ace and king but you will make your contract.

The only danger is if the outstanding trumps are divided 4-0. This will become evident on the first round of trumps. If it happens, stop drawing trumps temporarily and ruff the spade in dummy before resuming the extraction.

The expression ‘ruff a loser’ means the same as ‘trump a loser’. The terms are interchangeable.

Key Point

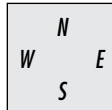
Where possible, draw trumps before ruffing losers in dummy.

PROBLEM 4

To Answer

You are South playing in 6NT. Gulp!

♠ K Q 10
 ♥ K 8 5 4
 ♦ Q 10 9 4
 ♣ K 4



♠ A 7 5
 ♥ A Q 10
 ♦ A K J
 ♣ Q J 10 8

West	North	East	South
pass	6NT	all pass	2NT

You open 2NT (20-21 HCP). Partner has a balanced hand with 13 points and knows that the partnership total is 33 or 34 points, so bids 6NT immediately. No messing around!

West leads the ♦8. How do you plan to play the hand?

Analysis

In notrump, the first thing to do is to count your winners. You have three in spades, three in hearts and four in diamonds — that's ten tricks.

So how do you go about developing two more tricks?

<p>♠ J 6 3 2 ♥ J 9 7 3 ♦ 8 3 ♣ A 7 3</p>	<p>♠ K Q 10 ♥ K 8 5 4 ♦ Q 10 9 4 ♣ K 4</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin: 10px auto; width: 60px; text-align: center;"> <p>N W E S</p> </div> <p>♠ A 7 5 ♥ A Q 10 ♦ A K J ♣ Q J 10 8</p>	<p>♠ 9 8 4 ♥ 6 2 ♦ 7 6 5 2 ♣ 9 6 5 2</p>
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If you start cashing your top tricks, you can only take ten tricks. By then it will be too late to develop a club trick because West will win the ♣A and take the last two tricks with the ♠J and the ♥J. How sad!

When developing tricks in notrump, it is common to look for long suits with top losers. Here the club suit isn't long, but once you lose a trick to the ace all your other clubs will become winners.

It is important to knock out the ♣A immediately while you still control the other suits. So win the diamond lead in your hand with the ace and lead the ♣8 to the king in dummy. If the ace is not played to this trick, continue with clubs until the ace appears. The only trick you will lose is to the ♣A, so twelve tricks are yours.

Key Point

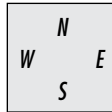
Develop tricks early while you still have stoppers in the other suits.

PROBLEM 5

To Answer

You are East. South is declarer in 2♥. Partner leads the ♠A.

♠ 9 6 3
 ♥ A 6 3 2
 ♦ 7 5 2
 ♣ A J 5



♠ Q 7 2
 ♥ 9 5
 ♦ J 10 8 3
 ♣ 9 8 7 6

West	North	East	South
dbl	2♥	all pass	1♥

West makes a takeout double of South’s 1♥ opening. This shows an opening hand, shortness in the opponent’s suit and promises support for any unbid suits. You are obliged to respond to the double even with no points unless your right-hand opponent bids, in which case you can pass if you are weak. North has four hearts and makes a single raise to 2♥, which lets you off the hook. Phew!

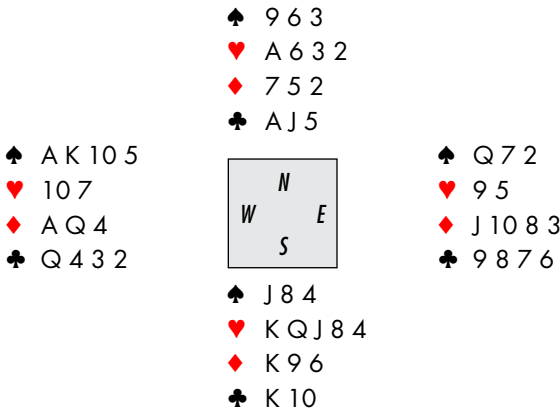
West leads the ♠A, which is normally from ♠AK. You play the ♠7 on the ♠A. West continues with the ♠K on which you play the ♣2. This combination of playing a high card followed by a low card on partner’s leads is a signal, encouraging partner to continue the suit. Partner continues with the ♠5 to your ♠Q, which wins the trick.

What will you do now?

Analysis

You have no spades left so you have to decide which suit to switch to. There is no point in switching to hearts so the choice is between diamonds and clubs.

Which card will you play?



When choosing a suit to lead in defense it is a good principle to lead through the strong opponent's hand towards the weak opponent's hand. Dummy has the ♣AJ5, which is strong, but only three small diamonds. If partner has some honors in diamonds they will be sitting over declarer's diamonds, so you can perhaps promote partner's diamonds by leading them.

So the suit to lead is diamonds, but which card should you lead? The answer is the ♦J, because it is the top of a sequence. Looking at all four hands you can see that declarer's ♦K will be trapped between your ♦J10 and partner's ♦AQ. If declarer ducks the ♦J, partner will play low, you will continue with the ♦10. Your side will win three diamond tricks to go with the three spade tricks you already have and the contract will be defeated.

If you return a club instead of a diamond, you will trap partner's ♣Q. Declarer will draw trumps and eventually discard a diamond loser on a winning club from dummy.

Key Point

On defense, when choosing a suit, lead through the strong opponent towards the weak opponent.