

TIPS FOR THE IMPROVING PLAYER

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THE FIRST RULE OF DECLARER PLAY

You are Declarer (West) and you & your partner find yourselves in 3NT after the following auction :

West	North	East	South
1NT	P	2♣	P
2♦*	P	3NT	P
P	P		

2♦*: You are playing Simple Stayman so 2♦ = no 4-card major

North leads the ♦Q and these are EW's combined hands. Plan your play before you read on.

West	East
♠ AQJ	♠ 963
♥ 732	♥ Q954
♦ K65	♦ A7
♣ KQJ8	♣ A763

You have 7 top tricks (1 spade, 2 diamonds, and 4 clubs). There are no more tricks available in diamonds or clubs. You have no idea how to approach the heart suit. However there is a spade finesse available and if South does have the ♠K, then you can make 3 spade tricks – but you will need to take the finesse twice. So your total will be 9 without ever touching hearts. But you will have to take your tricks in the correct order. Despite the 8-card club fit, your only club entry on the table is the Ace. And the only other entry in dummy is the ♦A. You're going to need both entries to take the spade finesse twice. And you'll need to take the first finesse at trick 2.

Here you go. Win the diamond lead in dummy with the ♦A. Then play a small

spade towards the ♠J. If South plays low, insert the J. The ♠J holds. Looking good! Back over to dummy's ♣A and you repeat the spade finesse – the Q holds. Mission accomplished! You now have 9 tricks.

What could have gone wrong? If you hadn't made a plan before you played to Trick One. If you had nonchalantly won the ♣A, cashed your 4 high clubs ending in dummy, and only *then* made a plan! You'd be one trick short! You'd only be able to take the spade finesse once.

Another problem. Same contract. Different auction. Different problem? Not totally.

This time you're South and West opens a Weak 2 in spades – promising a 6 card suit and 6-9 points. Somehow you & partner find yourselves in 3NT with you as declarer.

Not surprisingly, West leads a spade – the ♠8 (leading 4th highest, you are told by East after you enquire). These are NS's combined hands:

North
♠ 3
♥ A5
♦ A10985
♣ A10985
South
♠ K1064
♥ KQ8
♦ QJ4
♣ QJ7

The first question you ask yourself is "What high cards does West have in his 6-card spade suit?" You can find the answer by applying the Rule of 11. But to

apply the Rule of Eleven after West's lead, you need to see what card East plays, so you decide to call for dummy's ♠3. East produces the ♠Q. So what high cards does West have in spades? Eight from eleven is three. This means there are three cards higher than the ♠8 outside of West's hand. East has the ♠Q and you have the ♠K10. All three accounted for. It looks like West has something like ♠AJ98xx.

So how does this help you to know whether or not to win your ♠K at trick one? Let's think about West's hand. Five points is light for a weak-2 opening so you think it likely West has one of the missing minor suit kings. If he has both then you have 14 tricks if you win the ♠K immediately!!

But do you need either or both minor suit finesses to work? No. Not if you take the practical view and place East with just 2 spades – the Q and another. West should have 6 spades for his bid, you have 4, dummy 1 – so East has 2. You duck the ♠Q and the 2nd spade continued by East. As long as East does not have 3 spades, your contract is safe. It now doesn't matter what West does. Because if East wins either or both minor suit Kings, you have 9 tricks. West can't continue with a spade. You simply lose the first 2 spade tricks and 1 or 2 minor Kings. Very clever of you. *(For those of you still unsure, deal the spade suit as above on the table and try different actions by declarer.)*

So how does this connect with our first declarer play problem?

The first rule of declarer play: Do not win a trick until you are sure what you will do next and you have a PLAN.

Can you make this little slam?

South as dealer was dealt this hand:

♠ AKJT96 ♥ 4 ♦ AKJT ♣ AJ

She opened 2C with 21 HCP and 8 playing tricks.

West bid 3H, but North's hand was

♠ Q83 ♥ A7652 ♦ 64 ♣ 876

Since the North/South partnership was using controls over a 2C opening and DOPI over interference, North correctly passed showing one Ace or two Kings.

South became interested in a little slam and the bidding proceeded as follows:

South	West	North	East
2C	3H	P (DOPI)	P
3S	P	4S	P
4NT	P	5C (14/30)	P
5D	P	5S	P
6S	P	P	P

Every response that South received from North was positive, telling South that North had at least three Spades including the SQ and the HA. Not being a wimp, she went for the little slam in Spades.

West led the HK as expected. Plan your play, before you see the East/West hands.

Did you duck the first trick? If you did, you have given yourself a chance to make the contract. You can see six Hearts in your two hands, and West bid 3H so he probably has seven and that should tell you that East is void in Hearts. Save that HA, as you will need it later to get rid of the CJ. Here are the hands in full.

	North	
	♠ Q83	
	♥ A7652	
	♦ 64	
	♣ 876	
West		East
♠ 2		♠ 754
♥ KQJT983		♥ void
♦ 987		♦ Q532
♣ Q2		♣ KT9542
	South	
	♠ AKJT96	
	♥ 4	
	♦ AKJT	
	♣ AJ	

When you ducked the first Heart lead East discarded the D2. West continued with the HQ and again you duck in dummy with East discarding the D3. But you ruff in hand and it must be with the S9 or higher. Play the SA and everybody follows. Now lead the carefully preserved S6 to the S8 and West shows out, leaving the defence with one little trump.

Now comes the moment of truth for you. Lead the D4 towards the DT. Fortunately East follows with the D5 and the finesse holds. Play ST to SQ to remove East's last trump and now pitch the CJ on the HA. Repeat the finesse of the Diamonds, but East has to drop the DQ, which you cover. The remaining tricks are all in your hand.