

10. Declarer play at notrump

Four-step plan, at no trump contracts

1. How many winners are needed? The contract will tell you this.
2. How many winners do I have? Count only tricks “off the top”.
3. How can I develop more winners, if I don’t have enough?
4. What is my overall plan?

In counting “off the top winners” at notrump, it is often helpful to assume the most likely distribution of the opponents’ cards. The table at right shows the two most likely suit breaks for different numbers of cards held by the defenders. An odd number of cards is likely to break as evenly as possible, but an even number of cards tends to break unevenly, except when there are just 2 cards missing. As an example, declarer has AQxxx and dummy has Kxx of spades. Since the defenders’ 5 cards are likely to break 3-2, it is reasonable to assume that you have five spade winners off the top.

Cards Missing	Suit Breaks	
	Most Likely	Next likely
2	1-1 52%	2-0 48%
3	2-1 78%	3-0 22%
4	3-1 50%	2-2 41%
5	3-2 68%	4-1 28%
6	4-2 48%	3-3 36%
7	4-3 62%	5-2 31%
8	5-3 47%	4-4 33%

To develop more winners than those off the top, there are two methods. You can **promote** a high card by allowing defenders to take a trick with a higher card (e.g., holding the KQ(x) of a suit, one of your honors will be promoted when the other one loses to the opponents’ ace). You can **establish** cards in long suits by playing on that suit until defenders can’t follow suit any more.

Your overall plan should take all the above into account, and more. Is there a danger suit that defenders can run when they get the lead? Is there one defender who must be kept off the lead at all costs? Should you employ a holdup play to cut defenders’ communication? Let’s look at some examples.

1. The contract is 1NT and West leads the ♣4. You win the third round of clubs, throwing a heart from dummy. Plan the play to ensure the contract despite West’s apparent holding of a five card club suit. How many tricks do you need? (). How many top winners do you have? (). How many more winners must be developed? ()

♠	A J 8									
♥	10 7 3 2									
♦	Q 10 8 4									
♣	9 6									
<table border="1" style="margin: auto;"> <tr> <td></td> <td>N</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>W</td> <td></td> <td>E</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>S</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>			N		W		E		S	
	N									
W		E								
	S									
♠	K 7 6 2									
♥	Q J 4									
♦	A K 3									
♣	A 7 2									

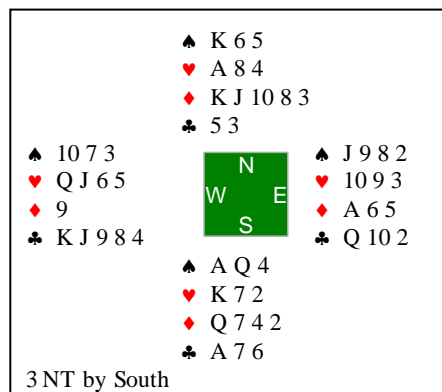
2. The contract is 3NT and West leads the ♠5 to East’s king. Outside of diamonds you see four sure top tricks. You can afford to lose one diamond trick. Plan the play to give the best chance of making the contract – don’t worry about overtricks. (Hint: who is the dangerous defender?)

♠	6									
♥	K 7 3 2									
♦	A Q 10 7 6 5									
♣	A 4									
<table border="1" style="margin: auto;"> <tr> <td></td> <td>N</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>W</td> <td></td> <td>E</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>S</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>			N		W		E		S	
	N									
W		E								
	S									
♠	A J 7									
♥	A 8 4									
♦	K 9									
♣	Q J 5 3 2									

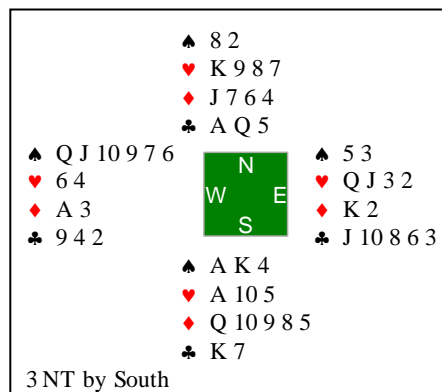
3. The **hold-up** play often comes into play when you are declaring a notrump contract. The aim is to take your winner on the same trick that one of the defenders plays his last card in the suit. Let’s say that West has bid spades, showing at least five cards. You and dummy have six between you, including the ace. Therefore East probably has a doubleton. West leads the ♠K. Win the second round of spades; now, if East gets the lead, he can’t lead a spade to his partner. Holding up for three rounds won’t normally help you, but it might give the defenders an undeserved trick.

	♠	9 7 3	
		N	
♠	K Q J 4 2	W	E
		S	
	♠	8 5	
	♠	A 10 6	

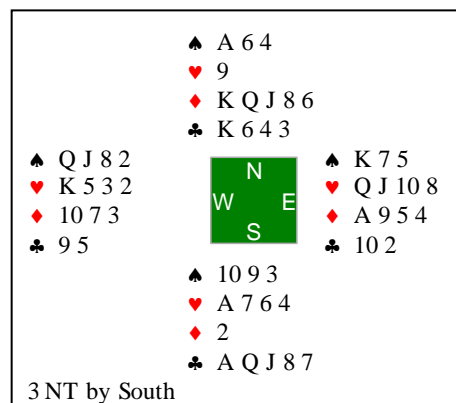
Here's a hold-up play showing all the cards. West leads the ♣8 against your contract of 3NT. It looks like 4th highest of a five card suit, so East will have three clubs (if the clubs are 4-4, it doesn't matter, but you must try to allow for a 5-3 split). How many tricks do you have off the top? Obviously, you will need to get some tricks in the diamond suit. Hold off taking your club ace until the third round is played. Now start the diamonds. You don't know where the ace is – if West has it you are in trouble, but since East turns up with the ace you are in control and end up making 10 tricks. The hold-up would also be needed if the ace and king of diamonds were switched around. Again, when East gets in, this time with the king, he has no more clubs to lead.



Is it necessary to hold up when you have two stoppers in the enemy suit? It depends! Look at this deal. West opens with a bid of two spades and leads the queen against your 3NT contract. You have two spade stoppers. Do you need to hold up? If so, does it matter whether you hold up on the first spade lead or the second spade lead? Make a plan for bringing your contract home, and then see if the hold-up matters.



Should you always hold up when you have only one stopper? West leads the ♠2 against 3NT. It is clearly 4th highest of a four card suit. You have 7 winners off the top (5 clubs and two major suit aces). You clearly need two tricks from diamonds. What can go wrong if you do hold up? If you don't hold up?



Summary

- Make a plan of how to make your contract, even if it involves making certain assumptions
- As part of your plan, consider whether there is a dangerous opponent who needs to be kept off the lead
- The hold-up is used to cut communication between defenders, by exhausting all the cards held by one of them in a danger suit
- Holding the ace of the danger suit, you normally hold up until the trick on which one defender plays her last card of that suit
- If the defenders' suit is split 4-4, there is no point in holding up – you aren't going to cut their communication, and in any case the suit is not that threatening
- With two stoppers in the danger suit, a hold-up may be called for if declarer has to lose the lead twice while developing needed winners in other suits
- Do not hold up if a switch to another suit by defenders will make things worse