

12. Declarer play at suit contracts

Four questions to ask yourself, and answer, in planning play at a trump contract...

1. How many losers can I afford to give up?

The contract will tell you the answer. If the contract is 4 spades, you can afford to give up 3 losers (3 tricks)

2. How many losers do I have?

Count the losers in the hand with long trumps, usually declarer's hand. Do this suit by suit, and add them up. **A loser is counted as any card that is not a winner, either off the top or once the defenders' winners are gone.** Winners in dummy take care of losers in your hand; however, ignore ruffing values at this stage. Assume normal splits of opponents' cards but at this stage assume finesses will lose.

3. If I have more losers than I can afford, how can I get rid of the extra ones?

A loser can be eliminated by ruffing it in the opposite hand (the hand with short trumps, usually dummy), discarding it on a winner from dummy, or by successful finesse.

4. What is my overall plan?

Where will I get the tricks I need for the contract? Do I need to discard some losers?/trump some losers?/establish some winners in a side suit?/draw all the trumps first?/draw some trumps first?/start with a side suit? Is there a dangerous opponent? Is there a threat of an early ruff by defenders?

Fast losers and slow losers

It is useful to distinguish two kinds of losers, fast ones and slow ones. Fast losers are tricks that can be lost as soon as defenders get on the lead; slow losers are ones that are protected by one or more winners, but can be lost once those winners are removed. Here's an example. In spades, there is one slow loser (3); in hearts there are no losers; in diamonds there are two slow losers (Q, 3), in clubs there is one fast loser (K) and one slow loser (8). There are five losers in all; if hearts are trumps there is a chance of reducing the number to three – how?

Drawing trumps

You should draw trumps first unless there is a good reason not to. Draw trumps first if

1. You have enough tricks for your contract, off the top
2. Even though you need to make some ruffs, you will have enough trumps left over, after drawing them, for the ruffs that you need
3. You need to get some of their trumps out of the way before starting on side suits
4. You don't need any quick discards

Conversely, you should delay drawing trumps if

1. You need some ruffs, but drawing trumps will prevent you from getting some or all of them
2. You need to discard some losers first or to establish a discard for a slow loser
3. You need to establish a suit in dummy while keeping some trumps as entries to dummy

♠	9 8 7 4									
♥	K Q J									
♦	7 6 5 2									
♣	6 4									
<table border="1"><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 3									
♥	A 10 9 4 3									
♦	A Q 3									
♣	K Q 8									

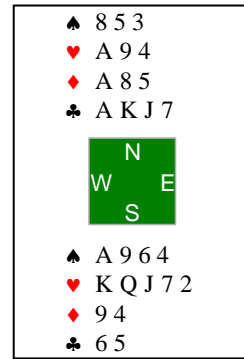
Here's a simple example of this approach. You are South in a contract of 4 hearts, and West leads the $\spadesuit 3$.

How many losers can you afford?

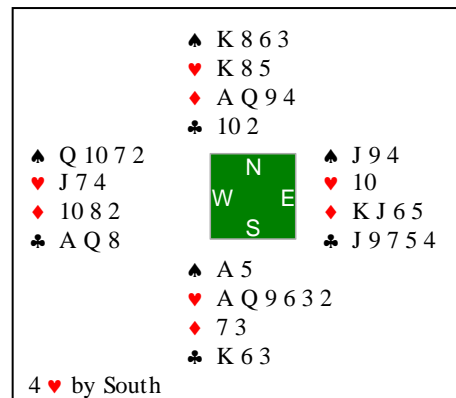
How many losers do you have?

How can you get rid of a loser/losers?

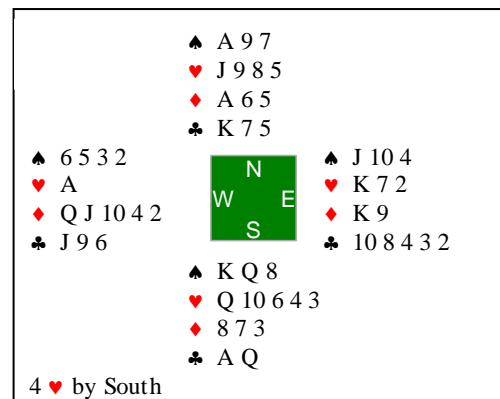
What is your next move after winning the diamond lead with the ace?



Another example. The contract is 4 hearts and the lead is the $\spadesuit 2$. You can afford to lose 3 tricks. In your hand you have no spade losers (the K takes care of the 5); no heart losers assuming a split no worse than 3-1; 1 diamond loser; 3 club losers. That makes 4 losers altogether, 1 too many. (Looking at winners, you come to the same conclusion – you have 9 tricks off the top.) There are 3 chances of eliminating losers – what are they? Do you draw trumps first? And when you try to eliminate losers, which one do you start with?



Discarding a fast loser. The contract is 4 hearts, and the lead is the $\diamondsuit Q$. You win the first trick with $\diamondsuit A$. Counting losers, you see 2 in hearts and 2 in diamonds. Until the opening lead, your 2 diamond losers were slow, but with the ace gone they are now fast. Four fast losers is too many – you can only afford 3. Do something quick, before drawing trumps!



Establishing a discard for a slow loser. West leads the $\spadesuit J$ against your 4 heart contract. You have 1 spade loser (slow); 1 heart loser; 1 diamond loser; and 2 club losers. That makes 5 altogether. You can ruff a club, but you still have 4 losers. How do you get rid of that 4th loser? You **establish** a discard. (Note: this technique only works for slow losers, not fast ones!)

