

The Play of the Cards – Tips for the improver

This month's article is the second of two devoted to **safety plays**. One of the factors to consider in thinking about safety plays is whether you can afford to cash a top honour before taking a finesse. Take these two hands:

(1) AKJ2
10964

(2) AKJ1032
75

With an eight card fit in each case, South intends to finesse against the missing queen. In (1), subject to the entry position, he can afford to cash the ace first (dropping a singleton queen in East's hand) because he can finesse just as easily on the second round of the suit. In (2), however, it is better to finesse the jack on the first round because then he can pick up Qxxx in West's hand by a subsequent finesse of the Ten.

The most frequent opportunities for safety plays occur when declarer can afford to lose one trick in the suit but not more. In teams, where making the contract is much more important than overtricks, this can be crucial. The term 'safety play' can be particularly appropriate where it involves the abandonment of the possibility of making all of the tricks in order to guarantee making the number required for the contract as in these two hands:

(1) AQ852
7643

(2) AKJ4
763

As often, the safety play consists in refusing a normal finesse. In (1) the play that gives the best chance of four tricks is to cash the Ace first followed by a lead towards the queen, gaining when East has a singleton king. In (2) the play is similar: cash AK and then lead towards J4. This saves a potentially vital trick when East has Qx. The following are two related hands which are related and which crop up quite frequently:

(1) A94
KJ752

(2) KJ4
A9653

In (1) the play is to cash the king first and then lead towards A9 intending to finesse the nine if West plays low. This will guarantee four tricks against any 4-1 distribution. With (2) the play is king first then back to hand for a lead up to J4. Again this guarantees four tricks against any 4-1 distribution. As with most 'maxims' in bridge there are of course occasions when the safety play involves a finesse instead of playing off high cards.

(1) K52
A1094

(2) A3
KQ986

(3) K1042
A9864

In (1) you play off the king and then finesse the ten if East plays low because he may have QJxx. In (2) the play is to cash the ace and then finesse the eight if East plays low on the second round. This gains when East has J10xxx. In that case it would not help East to split his honours because the 98 would then be equal to the remaining honour in his hand. In (3) you can make certain of losing only one trick by leading low from either hand and inserting the ten (or nine) if no honour appears. If an honour does appear from one defensive hand, the odds favour then finessing against the remaining honour in the other defensive hand rather than playing for the drop.