

The Play of the Cards – Tips for the improver

This month's article is the last in our series devoted to **the finesse**. The following suits illustrate a very common position where you have a two-way finesse. On the face of it you have an opportunity to play either opponent for a particular high card but one way of finessing may be better than the other:

(1) AJ10	(2) A643
K952	KJ102

Tackling the first combination with the sole object of winning three tricks without loss, South has a genuine two-way finesse for the queen. But, if the object is to win as many tricks as possible, he should play East for the queen, cashing ace first and continuing with the jack from North. This takes care of a singleton queen with West and also of Qxxx with East. If he decides to play West for the queen, his best play is to finesse the ten on the first round. This gives up the chance of dropping a singleton queen, but can pick up West's Qxxx. With the second combination, the best chance for four tricks, other things being equal, is to cash the ace and finesse through East. South can pick up Q9xx without loss but if those cards lie in the West hand, South cannot win four tricks however he plays.

When the jack is the only missing honour, it is usually right to play for the drop when seven cards are in sight. With six cards, the finesse is slightly superior.

(1) AQ102	(2) AQ102
K93	K9

South can finesse either way for the jack but this is not the best way to win four tricks in (1). Unless there is some special clue to the distribution, South should start with ace and king, continuing with the queen if no one shows out. This wins four tricks just over 60% of the time (all 3-3 distributions and those 4-2 distributions where the jack is doubleton). In (2) the jack is less likely to drop because the opponents hold seven cards instead of six. The best chance for four tricks is to lead the king and then finesse the ten. With eight cards between the hands, declarer knows the jack will fall unless an opponent shows out on the second round. Therefore, the art is to leave oneself in a good position should that happen

(1) AK32	(2) AQ102
Q1064	K953

In (1) by playing AK first South discovers a finesse if East holds Jxxx. If West holds those cards the jack cannot be captured. In (2) South can play either opponent for Jxxx so he will be guided by what he knows about the distribution before deciding in which order to play his top honours.

When there is reason to suppose that a simple finesse for the queen will fail, declarer will sometimes be able to attempt what is called a backward finesse.

(1) K52	(2) A98
AJ9	KJ4

These two layouts present different faces of the same idea. If South places West with the queen, he can lead the jack and, if covered, take the finesse against the ten on the way back. Since it depends on two cards being placed in a particular way, a backward finesse offers only a 25% chance of success. Accordingly, the play is much more the property of the defending side who may see that ordinary play cannot gain. For example:

(1) K54	(2) K1085
1082	J64
Q73	A92
AJ96	Q73

In (1) East is on lead and wishes to tackle this suit. Seeing the ten in dummy, he realises that leading the jack may gain if South holds the queen and is unlikely to lose in any other circumstances. On the lead of the jack the defence can win all of the tricks whereas a low card lead establishes the queen as a stopper when declarer allows the lead to run to the ten. In (2) the lead of the ten from West restricts declarer to one trick. A low card lead gives declarer two tricks.

Next month we will look at some **safety plays**.

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