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## **BBW Lesson #4: Play of the Hand as Declarer in a NT Contract**

**Bruce Thompson**

"The Play of the Hand as Declarer" is a topic of considerable substance, and importance. Books have even been devoted to this topic, such as Louis Watson's, Watson's Classic Book on the Play of the Hand at Bridge, an indeed classic book on "play of the hand" that has been published and re-published in various forms since 1958.

As might be expected, the "play of the hand" is different in (1) playing **NT** contracts as Declarer, versus (2) playing suit contracts, as Declarer. And, of course, (3) nevertheless there are some aspects of "play of the hand" that are common to both **NT** and suit contracts.

### **Why the "Play of the Hand" as Declarer Is So Very, Very Important in Duplicate Bridge**

#### **Duplicate Pair Scoring**

In social bridge, the day's results for a foursome of bridge players are usually computed by adding up the Bridge Scores of both Pairs across all hands played. In this scoring system, taking or not taking a single 1 Trick on 1 hand across a large series of hands will simply not make much difference!

But duplicate pair-competition bridge is not scored the same way as social bridge! And the different scoring system in duplicate bridge means that taking or not taking a single trick can indeed make a **big** difference on a given Board, or even in the day's results!

In duplicate bridge, Board results are scored by converting Board Bridge Scores (e.g., 620 for making 4 as Declarer in a 4-Spade contract, Vulnerable) into **MatchPoint** scores. Then, at the

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end of the session, a Total MatchPoint Score is computed by adding together all of a given Pair's Board MatchPoint Scores across all Boards played. And a Pair's Total Percentage is computed by dividing the Pair's Total MatchPoint Score by the total number of MatchPoints that the Pair would have earned if the Pair had scored a "top" Board on every single Board played. The "top" Pair in a given competition will have both the *highest* Total MatchPoint Score, and the *highest* Total Percentage. And, conversely, the "bottom" Pair will have the *lowest* Total MatchPoint Score, and the *lowest* Total Percentage, in the session.

On a given *Board*, the Pair with the highest Bridge Score on the Board, assuming no ties in Bridge Scores, will receive MatchPoints on the Board equal to the number of Pairs sitting in the same direction on the Board, minus 1. For example, if Tom and Sue sitting North/South had the top N/S Bridge Score on the Board, and no other N/S Pair tied their Bridge Score on the Board, if there were 5 Pairs sitting N/S, then Tom and Sue's MatchPoint Score on the Board would be  $5 - 1 = 4.0$ .

The Pair sitting in the same direction on the Board with the lowest Bridge Score is awarded a MatchPoint score of **0.0**, or a "bottom" Board. For example, if 5 N/S Pairs all bid 4 Hearts, and 4 Pairs made 5, but Ed and Waldo made 4, Ed and Waldo would earn **0.0** MatchPoints on that Board.

All Pairs sitting in the same direction and making the same Bridge Score on the Board will receive *equal* MatchPoint Scores. And all Pairs sitting in the same direction who make different MatchPoint Scores will receive *different* MatchPoint Scores.

The total number of MatchPoints awarded on a given Board equals [(the number of Pairs sitting in a given direction) X (the number of Pairs sitting in a given direction - 1)] / 2. For example, if 5 Pairs are sitting N/S on a Board, the total number of the N/S MatchPoints awarded on the Board will equal:

$$\begin{aligned} & [5 \times (5 - 1)] / 2 \\ & [5 \times 4] / 2 \\ & 20 / 2 = \mathbf{10.0} \end{aligned}$$

For example, consider the following Bridge Scores on a given Board for 5 Pairs sitting N/S, Not Vulnerable, all playing a 4 Heart contract:

Pair	Result <sup>1</sup>	Bridge	
		Score	MatchPoints
Tom & Sue	7	510	4.0
Ed & Waldo	6	480	3.0
Frances & Diane	5	450	2.0
Holland & Tom	4	420	1.0
Bruce & Kelly	3	-50	0.0
Sum			<b>10.0</b>

As another example, consider the following Bridge Scores on a given Board for 5 Pairs sitting N/S, Vulnerable:

Pair	Contract	Result	Bridge	
			Score	MatchPoints
Frances & Diane	<b>3C</b>	3	110	3.0
Holland & Tom	<b>2D</b>	3	110	3.0
Bruce & Kelly	<b>2H</b>	2	110	3.0
Ed & Waldo	<b>2H</b>	-1	-100	1.0
Tom & Sue	<b>1NT</b>	-2	-200	0.0
Sum				<b>10.0</b>

Notice that the top 3 Pairs scored the exact same MatchPoint Scores, even though all 3 Pairs played different contracts, and some Pairs took different numbers of Tricks.

Finally, consider one additional example on a given Board for 5 Pairs all sitting N/S, and all playing a **3NT** contract, Vulnerable:

Pair	Result	Bridge	
		Score	MatchPoints
Bruce & Kelly	4	630	4.0
Tom & Sue	3	600	1.5
Ed & Waldo	3	600	1.5
Frances & Diane	3	600	1.5
Holland & Tom	3	600	1.5
Sum			<b>10.0</b>

This Board illustrates that Declarer's "play of the hand" may well make all the difference in sorting out how the N/S pairs

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<sup>1</sup> The "Result" is the number of Tricks taken by the Declarer playing the Contract, and equals the number of Tricks taken over "Book", with "Book" being 6 Tricks. So, a Result of 7 Tricks means the Declarer took 7+6 = all 13 Tricks! This first set of Results is very unlikely, but illustrates that if every Pair obtained a different Bridge Score, every Pair would earn a different number of MatchPoints.

rank, based on how many MatchPoints the Partnership earns on the Board. Taking 1 more trick than the other N/S pairs, or an average number of tricks, or 1 less trick, while making very little difference in the Bridge Score (150 for +2, or 120 for +1, or 90 for taking +0 or 7 tricks on a 1NT contract), may nevertheless result in very *large difference* in the MatchPoints awarded. Although the range of the Bridge Scores on a given Board may be quite *small*, as in the previous example, the range of the resulting MatchPoints may be *massive*.

About 40% of the Pairs in an ACBL competition are awarded ACBL **MasterPoints** (MPs) based on Pair rankings from MatchPoints/Total Percentages. If your Pair's Total Percentage in a competition is 70% or higher, you will probably place first. If your Total Percentage is 60% to 70%, you are likely to place first, or very high. If your Total Percentage is between 50% and 60%, you will probably earn MasterPoints.

A "bottom" or 0 Board may lower your Total Percentage by 2% or 3%, depending on the number of Boards played in the competition, and the number of Pairs competing. The scoring in duplicate Pairs competitions has implications for how you approach play.

### **Implications for Play**

1. **Try, within reason, and while considering risks, to take every possible Trick you can while playing as Declarer. "Extra" Tricks matter (a lot!).**
2. **As Declarer, once you see a "line of play" that is certain to make your contract, you usually *immediately* want to take that "line of play." And, on defense, once you are able to set the Opponents' contract, do so *immediately*, even if it means leading an Ace that does not "kill a King!"**

### **What if...?**

If you play 24 Boards in duplicate competitions twice each week, statistically you will hold a hand consisting of a single suit on average once every 60,000 years. But "on average" means this could be tomorrow, or in 120,000 years, or twice next week!

If you are sitting North as Dealer, holding 13 Hearts, your correct opening bid is, of course, 7H. Notice that you will make this Grand Slam contract holding a mere **10 HCPs**! But also notice that if there are 10 N/S Pairs playing this Board, and each Pair bids and makes (very likely!) 7, every N/S Pair will receive 4.5 MatchPoints out of a possible max of 9.0! And this Board then

will have **zero** impact on the final rankings of the N/S Pairs in this competition!

Of course, *your duplicate results are also impacted by the bidding and play of your competing Pairs sitting in the opposite direction*! And over this you have no control! If at some Tables E/W Doubles the 7**H** bid, and North quite correctly Re-Doubles, these N/S Pairs will earn more MatchPoints, and be differentiated from the N/S Pairs sitting at Tables where the 7**H** bid is not Doubled!

### **Formulate Your Tentative "Line of Play" Plan**

Once your LHO leads, and the Board comes down, formulate your tentative "line of play" as Declarer. Of course, your tentative plan almost certainly will have to be adjusted as you play, and you obtain new information (e.g., there is a 4-0 trump split with your RHO holding all 4 trump cards, so that you need to constantly go to the Dummy, and lead low from Dummy, and then overtake your RHO's card with the lowest possible card in your hand as Declarer). It is important to remember the very wise bridge admonition of world champion duplicate bridge player, and world champion boxer, Mike Tyson, who once said about Declarer's initial plan for a bridge "line of play", "*Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.*"

However, as you formulate your "line of play," and adjust it along the way, when a Line of Play is unlikely to be successful, even if it is a very unlikely Line of Play, if that is the *only* Line of Play that can result in your making your contract, then that is the Line of Play that you **must** use. For example, if you are missing K,x,x,x of trump, and you can only make your contract by trying to drop the King by leading the Ace, then that is what you must do, no matter how unlikely this Line of Play is to be successful.

### **"Play of the Hand" in NT Contracts**

#### **#1 Count Your Winners**

When playing as Declarer in a **NT** contract, *the focus in playing is on **WINNERS***. Once the lead has been made, and the Dummy comes down, first count your **\*\*sure\*\* WINNERS** (e.g., top honors, honors sequences). Determine if your contract is certain to

make, no matter what is your "line of play," or how the Opponents play. Determine whether the contract is, or is not, at grave risk of Opponents running a particular suit, if you lose or give up the lead.

## #2 Count the Number of Cards You Hold in Each Suit: "Promote"!

The second thing you should do as Declarer, once the Dummy comes down, is count the number of cards your Partnership holds in each suit across both the Dummy and Declarer's hands. In an ideal bridge **NT** heaven, when the Dummy comes down, you will see that you hold something like Q,x,x in Declarer's hand, and A,K,J,x,x,x in Dummy. If so, you now know that you can take 6 Tricks in this 1 suit once you get the lead! Although in this case it won't matter, in usual fashion, lead from the top honor in the hand holding the fewest cards. Either lead the Dummy's Queen, or to the Dummy's Queen, and then back to Dummy's A,K.

However, what if the 2 hands hold numerous cards in 1 suit, but not all the top honors? As Marti Ronemus emphasizes, in her excellent bridge modules and bundles on the "**bridgebee.app**" and "**vubridge.com**" websites, especially in **NT**, never, ever, never ignore a long suit as a potential source for "promoting" even very lowly cards into winners!!! You can *also* "promote" a card into a "winner" in a **NT** contract if your Partnership holds **7** cards in a suit, even 4-3 or 3-4, and the Opponents' "split" is **3-3**, and so your 13<sup>th</sup> card in a Suit becomes a "winner"! <sup>2</sup>

You "promote" cards into winners by forcing Opponents to overtake your losing cards in a long suit, thus moving your remaining cards toward the top of the suit heap. For example, if Dummy holds, T,9,7 of Diamonds, and you hold in your Declarer's hand Q,J,6,5,4,2, try to put Dummy in the lead, and lead the 10 or the 9 from Dummy, and play low from your hand. If Opponents "duck," lead the 9 in Dummy. Otherwise, next time either Declarer or Dummy recovers the lead, attack Diamonds again, until all your remaining Diamonds are "promoted" into winners.

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<sup>2</sup> Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see: "Lesson #105: Two Ways to Promote Low Cards Into Winners When You are Playing as Declarer in a NT Contract":

<https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/promotion.pdf>

Be careful to maintain transportation back to the hand holding suit length. Also, be careful not to "block" your access back to the hand holding suit length. For example, if Declarer holds, Q,J,3 in the long suit, and Dummy holds K,8,6,5,4,2, and on the first Trick Declarer leads the Queen, let's say Opponents both follow suit and overtake with the Ace. Once Declarer gets back in the lead, do not lead Declarer's 3 to Dummy's King if you are now "blocked" from getting back to Dummy's hand.

There is an important very *helpful advantage* to running long suits in **NT** contracts: Opponents are forced to "throw off" cards in other suits. And Opponents may "throw off" otherwise winning cards in other suits, because the Opponents simply do not know what honors Declarer holds in those other suits!

### "Rule of 11"

If neither Opponent bid during the auction, your LHO on lead against you will inevitably lead Opponent's longest suit. If your LHO holds 3+ cards with at least 3 "touching honors" (e.g., Q,J,x,x, or J,T,x,x,x), your LHO will lead the top honor holding, and you may then know that this suit is your "danger" suit, and your LHO is your "danger" Opponent whom you want to try to not put in the lead.

If your LHO leads a relatively low card, you must then invoke one of the *most important* Rules of bridge: the "**Rule of 11.**"<sup>3</sup> The "Rule of 11" says, "If you subtract the face value of the card led by your LHO from 11, if that card is exactly the 4<sup>th</sup> card from the top of the LHO's holding in the suit, then exactly 11-x cards in that suit are higher in the hands of (1) Dummy, (2) your RHO, and (3) your Declarer's hand, combined." So, for example, if your LHO led the 7 of Diamonds, this means that exactly  $11 - 7 = 4$  Diamond cards are higher than the 7 in the remaining 3 hands. It's magic!

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<sup>3</sup> In sports, such as football and baseball, "rules" specify expected proper conduct, and the penalties for violating the rules. For example, in football, there is a "rule" that you must have exactly 11 players on the field when the ball is hiked, and the football "rules" specify that upon this rule violation you may be penalized by the ball being moved 5 yards further away from the goal line you are trying to cross. However, in duplicate bridge, the equivalent to sports "rules" are the ACBL "Laws of Bridge." What are instead called "Rules" in bridge are **guidelines for bidding or play in certain situations**. There are *dozens* of these bridge "Rules," which vary widely in their utility.

And if the Dummy, once it comes down, has 2 Diamonds higher than the 7, and you hold 2 Diamonds higher than the 7, then you know that your RHO holds exactly 0 Diamonds higher than the 7. This information can be *very useful* in your deciding how to play Diamonds.

Of course, your RHO also gleans exactly the same kind of information about Diamond holdings, also using the "Rule of 11." This is exactly why Opponents on lead against a NT contract are admonished, if not holding "touching honors," to lead "4<sup>th</sup> from the top of your longest and strongest suit."

### **"Rule of 7"**

Declarers defending against a **NT** contract often have an uncanny ability to suss out their longest suit hold, and your potentially greatest **NT** vulnerability. This may be because (1) the Opponent-on-Lead's Partner has bid a suit, (2) the Players setting the **NT** contract have bid all but 1 suit, or (3) the Opponent on lead holds 5 or 6 cards in an unbid suit.

Assuming the Declarer's Partnership has bid a **NT** contract correctly, the Declarer should hold a stopper or a "protected" stopper (e.g., K,x,x, or K,x, or Q,x,x,x, or Q,x,x) in every suit. But there may well be a suit in which Declarer or Dummy hold only 1 or 2 stoppers. The question then becomes, "when should Declarer take the Trick with a precious stopper?" Once the lead is made, and the Board comes down, you as Declarer should immediately determine as part of developing your "line of play" whether, if the Opponents are left in control in the next few Tricks, they will immediately set your **NT** contract. If so, and only if so, and you can immediately make your **NT** contract by immediately taking all your winners "off the top," then that is exactly what you ought to do.

In all other cases, you should instead resist the temptation to use your scarce stopper(s). Instead, you should be guided by the "**Rule of 7.**" The "**Rule of 7**" says, "As Declarer, add up the total number of cards you hold in the led suit across both your hand and Dummy. Then, subtract that number from 7, and the result tells you the number of Tricks on which you should "duck." For example, if your LHO leads a Club, and Dummy holds 3 Clubs, and you hold A,x,x of Clubs, you should duck  $7 - 6 = 1$  round of Clubs play, and only take your Club winner on the 2<sup>nd</sup>

Club Trick (assuming you didn't need to immediately take all your winners "off the top" in order to make your contract). The "**Rule of 7**" was formulated to minimize the total number of tricks that your Opponents will take when they are defending against your **NT** contract!

### **Caveat**

Bridge is a game of **CARDINAL BRIDGE PRINCIPLES**, and of general "rules", but also a game of *exceptions* to the general "rules". Let's say that you are playing a **3NT** contract, and between Dummy and your Hand you hold Spade A,x in Dummy, and x,x in your Declarer's Hand. The "**Rule of 7**" says that you should "duck" against a Spade lead  $7 - 4 = 3$  times.

But if you see that you can make your **3NT** contract "off the top" by "cashing" your Spade Ace, do so *immediately*, as a general rule, and *immediately* make your contract. As they say in bridge circles, "*A bird in the hand is worth 2 in the bush!*"

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**Esther says, "You may also be interested in 'Esther Bridge Lesson #113: 3 Strategies for 'Promoting' 'Winners' When Playing NT Contracts as Declarer'":**

<https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/promote.pdf>