

Bridge Today University

Play of the Hand 103
with Roselyn Teukolsky

SAMPLE
First 9 pages of 15 pages

Lesson 1: The Finesse.

Few things are more distressing to a bridge player than the unhappy look on partner's face as he watches you bungle the play of a hand. Now I don't guarantee that taking these lessons will make your partner more attractive. What I do promise is that if you start to recognize the same situations occurring again and again, eventually you'll handle them correctly, or at least try to handle them! Did I say that this would lead to bridge happiness? Never! However, you will start making your mistakes at a higher level and will achieve a modicum of self-respect.

Here's a situation that comes up on just about every hand: the finesse. The Oxford dictionary defines a finesse as an "attempt to take a trick with an inferior card" when a higher card, not in sequence, is held. More specifically, here is the basic finesse position.

| | | |
|------|-------|------|
| | North | |
| | A Q | |
| West | | East |
| K 6 | | 5 2 |
| | South | |
| | 7 4 | |

In this example and all examples that follow, assume that all cards shown are in the same suit, and that the rest of the suit is irrelevant. South, about to play from his hand, can score two tricks by playing a low card towards dummy and inserting the queen after West plays low. The queen, which is the "inferior" card of the definition, wins the trick since West has the king. This is a 50 - 50 shot because half the time the king will be with West and half the time it will be in the East hand. Notice that if East had the king, the finesse loses and South scores just one trick in the suit. Note too that in order to take the finesse, South must play the first card of the trick from his hand.

Here's another finesse position:

| | | |
|------|-------|------|
| | North | |
| | A 4 | |
| West | | East |
| K 8 | | 5 2 |
| | South | |
| | Q J | |

Again, with the lead in his hand, South leads the Q. If West covers with the K, South can win the A and now scores the J as a second trick in this suit. If West "ducks" (i.e., plays low), South plays the 4 from dummy and scores two tricks this way. Again, if East has the K, South can score just one trick in the suit. Please distinguish this situation from the one below:

| | | |
|------|-------|------|
| | North | |
| | A 4 | |
| West | | East |
| K 8 | | J 2 |
| | South | |
| | Q 6 | |

If South leads the Q from his hand and West covers with the K, North's A can win, but East will win the second lead of the suit with the J.

Here's a similar setup, but with more cards in the suit. How can South take two tricks in this suit?

| | | |
|-------|-------|-------|
| | North | |
| | A 4 3 | |
| West | | East |
| J 9 8 | | K 7 2 |
| | South | |
| | Q 6 5 | |

With the lead in the North hand, suppose declarer plays the 3. If East wins his K, then South plays low and eventually enjoys both the A and the Q of the suit. If East "ducks" and South inserts the Q, the Q will win the trick and the A can take another trick. Notice that if West has the K, and declarer plays a low card from the North hand to the Q, West will win and South can now win only the A in this suit.

| | | |
|-------|-------|-------|
| | North | |
| | A 4 3 | |
| West | | East |
| K 9 8 | | J 7 2 |
| | South | |
| | Q 6 5 | |

In short, half the time declarer will score two tricks with these cards, and half the time only one; it all depends on where the king is!

The king of a suit is not the only card that can be finessed. Here's an example of a suit where the queen is missing:

| | | |
|-------|-------------|------|
| | North | |
| | A K J 8 4 2 | |
| West | | East |
| Q T 3 | | 9 7 |
| | South | |
| | 6 5 | |

South, with the lead in his hand, needs to take all six tricks. Should he cash the ace-king, hoping that the queen will fall? Or should he lead the 5 to the jack, finessing against the queen? Here's a little saying from the olden days: "Eight ever, nine never." This means with eight cards between your hand and dummy's, the finesse is more likely to be the winning play, hence "eight ever," that is, always finesse. Therefore, you should finesse in the situation shown. With nine cards, play for the "drop" (i.e., hope that the queen "drops" – from either hand – under the ace-king).

| | | |
|--|-------------|--|
| | North | |
| | A K J 8 4 2 | |
| | South | |
| | 6 5 3 | |

This time you don't finesse; instead, cash the A and K. With nine cards in the suit the probabilities slightly favor the Q to come tumbling down.

EXERCISE

In which of these suits (next page) can you take a finesse? If a finesse is possible, in which hand should you begin play (North or South)?

(1)

North
A 4 2South
Q J

(6)

North
Q 8 7South
A 6 2

(2)

North
A Q 3South
7 6

(7)

North
A K 5South
J T 6

(3)

North
A 6 3South
Q 5 4

(8)

North
7 6South
A K J T 3 2

(4)

North
A 8 3South
K 7 6

(9)

North
7 6 5South
A K J T 3 2

(5)

North
A K JSouth
7 6 2

(10)

North
A K J 3 2South
9 8 7 6

SOLUTIONS

In which of these suits can you take a finesse? If a finesse is possible, in which hand should you begin play (North or South)?

(1)

North

A 4 2

South

Q J

You can finesse against the king. Begin with the queen from the South hand.

(2)

North

A Q 3

South

7 6

You can finesse against the king. Begin with the six (or seven) from the South hand and play North's queen.

(3)

North

A 6 3

South

Q 5 4

You will finesse against the king. Begin with a low card from the North hand, toward South's queen. You hope the king is with East.

(4)

North

A 8 3

South

K 7 6

There is no finesse here; your ace and king are high, and there is no "inferior" honor which can take a trick.

(5)

North

A K J

South

7 6 2

You can finesse against the queen (hoping it is in the West hand). Begin with any card from the South hand.

(6)

North

Q 8 7

South

A 6 2

You can finesse against the king (hoping it is in the West hand). Begin with a low card from the South hand, playing toward North's queen.

(7)

North

A K 5

South

J T 6

You can finesse against the queen, hoping it's with West. Begin from the South hand with the jack (or ten).

(8)

North

7 6

South

A K J T 3 2

"Eight ever" - play either card from the North hand, and put in the jack (or ten), hoping the queen is with East.

(9)

North

7 6 5

South

A K J T 3 2

"Nine never" - no finesse here; play for the drop. You can begin by playing the ace-king from the South hand, or by playing a card from the North hand to the ace-king.

(10)

North

A K J 3 2

South

9 8 7 6

"Nine never" again. (If South had only three cards in this suit instead of four, you would play "eight ever" and, beginning from the South hand, you would play low to the jack.)

Looking at these situations in a vacuum is like playing scales when what you really want is Beethoven, so here are some actual hands, all of which involve finessing situations. You have to decide how you would play the hand. Be warned: In Bridge, as in Life, there are always complicating

factors that can derail you, and these hands are tricky.

Hand 1: Contract: FOUR SPADES. Opening lead: the DQ.

North (dummy)

A K 6 3

8 6 2

7 5 4

7 5 3

South (you)

Q J T 7

A Q J

A K 3

A 4 2

This hand introduces another feature of the finesse: You can finesse in the same suit MORE THAN ONCE. Notice the heart suit in isolation. If the king is with East, you can make 3 tricks in this suit because you can play a heart to your jack, and then go back to dummy and play a heart to your queen. If the king is with West, the best you can do is to score two tricks.

On this hand, the success of the contract depends on the heart finesse. If it wins, you have ten tricks: four spades, three hearts, two diamonds and one club. If it fails, you'll end up a trick short (but there's nothing you can do about it).

When taking a finesse or finesses, you need to plan ahead. You must play hearts from the North hand toward your AQJ TWO times. Fortunately, you have two honors in the North hand that enable you to take the two heart finesses. The ace-king of spades allow you to enter dummy for your heart plays, and hence these honors are called "entries."

OK, enough hints. How do you play the hand?

Did you merrily draw trumps ending with the SQ in your hand? If so, you went down, losing two clubs, a diamond and a heart, EVEN THOUGH THE KING OF HEARTS WAS "ON-SIDE" - i.e., in the East hand. Here were all four hands:

| | |
|---------------|---------|
| North (dummy) | |
| A K 6 3 | |
| 8 6 2 | |
| 7 5 4 | |
| 7 5 3 | |
| West | East |
| 9 5 4 | 8 2 |
| T 5 3 | K 9 7 4 |
| Q J T 8 | 9 6 2 |
| T 9 8 | K Q J 6 |
| South (you) | |
| Q J T 7 | |
| A Q J | |
| A K 3 | |
| A 4 2 | |

Remember, to successfully take a finesse, you must start in the right hand. In this case, the lead must start in the North hand, and it has to happen twice.

You therefore mustn't squander your only two entries, the ace and king of spades. Although it's generally a good idea to "pull trump" (i.e., play trump so the opposition won't have any left and can't ruff your winners) early in the play, sometimes you must first take care of other business. Juggling the different things you want to do (in this case, you want to take out the opposition's trump, but you also want to take your heart finesses) is called "timing."

You should win the opening diamond lead, cash the SQ, then play a spade to the SA (you're starting to pull trump). Now, however, you make use of your spade entry to play a heart and finesse the HJ. Return to the North hand with the SK and repeat the finesse.

Bridge is a complicated game, you not only have to count your tricks, you also have to make sure that you can take them! This requires that you make a plan even before you begin to play the hand. "Managing entries" and "timing" must be part of your plan.

Your troubles aren't over. There's always something new to worry about.