

§1. The play of the cards in No-trumps.

By the end of this chapter you should understand the following terms:

Winners:	The highest cards in a suit that can be turned into tricks immediately.
To cash:	To take a trick immediately by leading a winner.
Top tricks:	Those tricks that could be cashed at once (usually at the beginning of a hand).
To knock out:	To force out the opponents' high card(s) by leading the suit, often by leading or playing a high card.
To set up:	To develop low cards into winners by knocking out the opponents' high cards.
Stopper:	A high card in a suit which prevents the opponents from running off their long suit.
Equals:	Cards from the same suit that are neighbours in rank.

General Approach: Almost all deals played at Bridge contain *top tricks* and suits that must be developed into tricks. Whenever dummy comes into view declarer should pause to consider the hand as a whole and *count his tricks*. Only if the contract is available in *top tricks* should declarer *cash* all his winners immediately. Usually declarer has to *set up* his tricks by developing a suit. Remember:

Count – Plan – Execute.

Here is an example deal, with only declarer and dummy shown. South is in 3NT, West leads the ♥2.

Hand 1

South plays in 3NT.
West leads the ♥2.

♠ K 4 2
♥ 9 7 5
♦ K Q J 10
♣ 9 6 4

Dummy	
W	E
Declarer	

♠ A 9 3
♥ A K Q
♦ 9 8 3 2
♣ A 10 3

Count

Declarer has six *top tricks* (which are: the ♠A and ♠K, the ♥A, ♥K, and ♥Q and the ♣A). Declarer could *cash* these immediately but to do so would be poor play. In fact, little could be more wrong-headed since that would set up *winners* in the opponents' hands. Top cards, in general, should be kept in order to regain the lead. It is the object of the defenders to dislodge your high cards – don't help them along! Declarer needs, therefore, three tricks from somewhere to make the total up to nine.

Plan

Declarer aims to *set up* three tricks in Diamonds by *knocking out* the ♦A. In order to regain the lead immediately after the opponents win the ♦A declarer must aim to keep *stoppers* in all suits so that he can keep control of the hand. Little is worse in No-trumps than allowing the opponents to have the lead when you have a wide open suit.

Execute

Declarer should win the opening Heart lead (he has little choice in the matter but might select any of the ♥A, ♥K or the ♥Q, which are all *equals*) and should immediately switch his attention to his suit, Diamonds. Leading a Diamond will drive out the opponents' ♦A and make the remaining three Diamonds all *winners*. Declarer can then win whatever the next lead is and be in a position to *cash* three diamond tricks when it suits him.

So, with the lead in his own hand (South) after the first trick has been completed, declarer can lead any of his Diamonds at trick two and play any Diamond from the dummy since they are all *equals*. Assuming the defenders take the ♦A immediately declarer now has set up three Diamond tricks and has nine *cashable winners*. Whatever the defenders lead back after taking the ♦A is irrelevant – declarer has the top card(s) in that suit so can win the trick and can revert to Diamonds.

The principle is the same if we modify the deal a little so that the Diamond honours are split between the North-South hands. (See next page):

Hand 2

South plays in 3NT.
West leads the ♥2.

♠ K 4 2
♥ 9 7 5
♦ K J 8 3
♣ 9 6 4

Dummy	
W	E
Declarer	

♠ A 9 3
♥ A K Q
♦ Q 10 9 2
♣ A 10 3

Again, by **counting**, declarer can see six top tricks (three Hearts, two Spades and a Club) and needs to set up three more. These three tricks are available in Diamonds once the ♦A has been forced out.

So... declarer (South) should win the Heart lead and switch his attention to Diamonds. This time he could lead any of the ♦Q, ♦10 or ♦9 as they are all equals, since the ♦K, ♦J and ♦8 are in the dummy. Alternatively he could lead the ♦2 and play any of dummy's ♦K, ♦J or ♦8 on it. This way either that card will win the trick or the ♦A will be forced out. The only losing line is to lead the ♦2 and play dummy's ♦3, inviting the opponents to win the trick with a low Diamond. You have to play a "high" Diamond to force out the ♦A.

Notice the importance of keeping high cards in the other three suits in order to regain the lead. Note also that the defender with the ♦A might refuse to play it early. That makes no difference – declarer can continue to play "high" Diamonds, which will force out the Ace eventually. Declarer is assured of three tricks in Diamonds in one way or another.

Often declarer has to knock out more than one high card. A small adjustment to Hands 1 and 2 gives:

Hand 3

South plays in 3NT.
West leads the ♥2.

♠ K 4 2
♥ 9 7 5
♦ J 8 6 3
♣ K 6 4

Dummy	
W	E
Declarer	

♠ A 9 3
♥ A K Q
♦ Q 10 9 2
♣ A 10 3

Firstly let's **count**. Here, on this layout, there are seven top tricks (two Spades, three Hearts and two Clubs). That means two further tricks are required from somewhere.

Let's **plan**. Those two extra tricks can be forced from Diamonds if declarer can knock out both the ♦A and the ♦K. The principle of developing tricks remains the same as in Hand 1; South intends to win the Heart lead in hand and play a Diamond immediately. Note again the idea of *equals*; it matters not whether South wins the first Heart lead with the ♥A, ♥K or ♥Q as they are all equals. When leading Diamonds declarer could lead the ♦2 to dummy's ♦8 (or ♦J) or, should he so wish, he could lead the ♦9, ♦10 or ♦Q and call for dummy's ♦3. This is because all of the ♦Q, ♦J, ♦10, ♦9, ♦8 are equals.

Let's **execute**. Declarer wins the opening lead in the closed hand and leads a Diamond. East or West might win that with a top Diamond honour (the ♦A or the ♦K) and will lead something back (probably another Heart). South can win that and patiently switch his attention back to Diamonds to set up two tricks in the suit. 3NT is made from the seven top tricks and the two "slow tricks" in Diamonds.

In the deal on the following page (Hand 4) South has to get his Spades going to make his Game. This time you can see all four hands.

Hand 4

South plays in 3NT.
West leads the ♣5.

	♠ Q J 10 9	
	♥ K 5	
	♦ A 9 8 2	
	♣ 7 6 4	
♠ K 6	Dummy	♠ 8 7 5 2
♥ Q 10	W	♥ J 8 6 4 2
♦ K J 4 3	E	♦ Q 6
♣ J 9 8 5 3	Declarer	♣ 10 2
	♠ A 4 3	
	♥ A 9 7 3	
	♦ 10 7 5	
	♣ A K Q	

Against South's 3NT West leads the ♣5 (you will see why in the next chapter) and declarer stops to **count** his tricks. There are three Clubs, two Hearts one Diamond and a Spade. That makes seven top tricks in all, so two more are needed.

The **plan** is to make two extra tricks in Spades. The opponents have the ♠K (and are welcome to it) but once that is out of the way the other Spades will be winners. So there will, in fact, be three Spades, two Hearts, one Diamond and three Clubs to take. Declarer knows he can win the Club lead with whichever card he pleases, after that the focus must be on Spades. South can lead off the ♠A and play another Spade, forcing the ♠K. Then, with the Clubs set up, there are sufficient tricks for Game.

Execute... Declarer wins the opening lead with the ♣Q, plays off the ♠A (every blue moon the ♠K will appear on that. Not today, however) and concedes a Spade trick to the King. Whatever the defenders do next South is in control – he has stoppers in all the other suits so can regain the lead and cash his nine winners.

You may have noticed that on most occasions declarer's plan is to make tricks in his long suit. As a general rule that's true but it isn't always the case. Consider Hand 5, played in the usual 3NT. West leads the ♥J.

Hand 5

South plays in 3NT.
West leads the ♥J.

	♠ K Q J	
	♥ 6 4 3	
	♦ J 7 6	
	♣ A K Q J	
♠ 10 7 4 2	Dummy	♠ A 9 6 3
♥ J 10 9 8 7	W	♥ 5 2
♦ K 10 9	E	♦ A 5 3
♣ 8	Declarer	♣ 10 6 4 3
	♠ 8 5	
	♥ A K Q	
	♦ Q 8 4 2	
	♣ 9 7 5 2	

South can see (via his initial count) that he has seven top tricks. There are two easy tricks available in Spades after the ♠A has gone, so that suit is the source of the extra tricks on this deal. Accordingly, declarer's plan should be to win the Heart lead and to knock out the ♠A immediately. After taking the ♥Q at trick one, declarer should switch to Spades by leading one to dummy's ♠J. East will probably take his ♠A and play another Heart (nothing is any better) and declarer has his nine tricks. Note that East-West could cash a couple of tricks in Diamonds when on lead with the ♠A. Well, good luck to them if they do – all they are doing is delaying the inevitable; in fact, they are making things easier for declarer as they are only setting up the ♦Q and ♦J for North-South.

By leading Spades early on this deal and retaining as many of his high cards as possible declarer is keeping control of as much of the hand as he can.

This last point is important and needs reinforcement: **High cards are there to regain the lead after setting up a suit. Cashing winners early is a real no-no at this game!**