Larry Teaches

Declarer Play at Notrump

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Cover by Dawn Ligon. The cover photo is of an original 1920's Trump Indicator or Bridge Marker which is from Dawn's private collection. It was made in Germany and is painted metal with paper tabs to help remind the players of trump. The cover photo has been enhanced as you can see from the original photo below. Notice the Notrump (American) vs. No Trumps (European). Whist and Bridge Markers were frequently used until the 1950's and are highly collectible.

In 2008 Joan Schepps donated her private collection of Bridge Markers (600+ pieces) for their permanent display at the ACBL headquarters at Horn Lake, MS. These markers and the other bridge paraphernalia showcased at the ACBL museum are well worth a visit.

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Introduction

Declarer play at notrump is completely different from declarer play at trump contracts. When there is a trump suit, declarer is concerned with his losers and what to do with them. He has to decide if/when he should draw trump. He needn't worry about stoppers and an opponent running a long suit.

At notrump, the idea is to count *winners*. The planning of the play always starts there. After counting the sure winners, the next step is to see where/how more tricks can be developed. Maybe declarer has to knock out an ace or take a finesse. Establishing additional tricks often means that declarer will lose the lead—the opponents will get in. If they have a suit they can run, this will be bad news. That is why a big element of notrump planning/play revolves around the "stopper situation." Is the opponents' suit stopped—and how many stoppers are there? A stopper is something like an ace or protected king. Queen-jack-low and jack-ten-nine-low are also stoppers. If declarer has no stopper, the opponents can take tricks at will in that suit. I think of notrump as a race against time. In 3NT, can I get my nine before they take their five?

In this book, the thought process for notrump contracts is clearly spelled out. It gives declarer a clear set of guidelines and thinking points for trick one along with general concepts for the rest of the play. The thinking you will see throughout this book is:

1) How many sure tricks do I have?
2) How can I get more tricks?
3) What is my stopper situation (what will happen if I lose the lead)?
4) What is my plan?

From that start, declarer will have a good idea of where he is going. If you don't make a plan, don't expect ever to become a good declarer. Very few notrump deals require you immediately to grab all your tricks. Almost every deal involves give and take. You give them one of theirs in order to set up some of yours. In 3NT, good players tend to lose four early tricks and take the remaining nine. Inexperienced players grab the first seven or eight and then run out of steam and lose the rest.

The first four chapters in this book mirror the four steps shown above.

Chapter 1
How Many Sure Tricks do I Have?

Any book (at least mine) and all teaching (definitely mine) on declarer play insists on making a plan. My students are forbidden to play a card from dummy until they have assessed their assets and decided how they will play the hand. It doesn't matter if dummy has a singleton (obvious to play) or if declarer knows right away what he will do on the first trick. The entire situation needs to be surveyed—and that has to happen while all 26 cards are in view.

While declarer play at suit contracts has its own issues (I have written a separate "Larry Teaches Declarer Play at Suit Contracts" book on it), declarer play at notrump requires a completely different approach. The main four steps were laid out in the introduction. In this chapter we focus only on the first one: How Many Sure Tricks Do I Have?

Good news: It is easy to make this calculation. Even relatively inexperienced players should have no trouble with this first step. Also good is that it can be done very quickly. It should take fewer than ten seconds to calculate.

What are sure winners? Thankfully, since there is no trump suit, we know that aces are 100% certain to win a trick. An ace-king in the same suit is two tricks. Ace-king-queen is three and ace-king-queen-jack is four (and so on).

At this point in the planning, we are not concerning ourselves with "maybes" or "probablys." Sure, if you have AKQ3 and dummy has 10765, you would hope for four tricks, but you have only three for sure.

Let's look at some layouts and calculate how many sure tricks we have:

♠AQ3	Three tricks	♥AK3	Four tricks	♣A3	Five tricks
♠KJ6		♥QJ76		♣KQJ106	
♦KQ3	Zero tricks (though we can set up two)	♠AQ3	One trick (a winning finesse would mean two)	♥J103	One trick (a winning finesse would mean three)
♦J62		♠876		♥AQ6	

Notice that we are counting only the sure (top) tricks. Parenthetically, in the second row, I mentioned the possibility for more. Similarly, look at these examples:

♦AQ3 ♦K654	Three tricks (a three-three break would mean four tricks)	♣AK3 ♣QJ765	Four tricks (five if no five-zero split)	♥A873 ♥K654	Two tricks (but three if the suit is three-two)

In the next chapter we'll discuss ways to get more tricks (as hinted at in the parentheses above). For now, though, the idea is to start by counting only the sure tricks.

You are entitled to count a sure trick if the opening lead has presented it to you. For example:

♣32 ♣K65	A club lead means a sure trick with the king	♣76 ♣AKJ2	A club lead means three sure tricks	♣A73 ♣Q42	A club lead means two sure tricks (by playing low from dummy)

Let's now try counting the sure tricks with all four suits in view:

♠KQJ ♥QJ3 ♦542 ♣K764	**9 sure tricks** (four spades, four hearts and with the lead, one diamond)	♠765 ♥743 ♦KQJ876 ♣2	**8 sure tricks** (two spades given the lead and six diamonds)	♠A3 ♥QJ ♦AQJ108 ♣AK32	**6 sure tricks** (one spade, two hearts, one diamond and two clubs).
♦7 lead		♠2 lead		♠J lead		
♠A1065 ♥AK108 ♦K6 ♣J32		♠AQ ♥KQJ10 ♦A32 ♣KQJ10		♠Q2 ♥AK ♦9764 ♣J8765		

Yes, on each layout there are many chances to get additional tricks, but that is the subject of the next chapter (where we will revisit each of these three layouts).

Counting the sure tricks takes mere seconds and is only the starting point. It is very rare that a count of the sure tricks will produce a number equal to that needed for your contract. For example, when you are in 3NT and count top tricks, it is very rare you will see nine. When you are in 1NT and count top tricks, it is very rare that you will see seven.

That is why the next chapter is much longer. It will describe the search for those extra tricks needed to make the contract.

QUIZ

In each suit below, how many top (sure) tricks does declarer have in notrump?

(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	(E)	(F)	(G)
♠ QJ3 ♠ K765	♥10876 ♥KQ52	♦AQ3 ♦6	♣AKQJ ♣107654	♠AK ♠QJ32	♥K7653 ♥J84	♦AKQ76 ♦98543

In each layout below, assume LHO has led the suit. How many top (sure) tricks does declarer have in each suit shown?

(H)	(I)	(J)	(K)	(L)	(M)	(N)
♠ J3 ♠ K10	♥10876 ♥K2	♦QJ3 ♦A2	♣J6 ♣A102	♠Q4 ♠A10	♥32 ♥AKQ10	♦A4 ♦KJ2

(O)		(P)		(Q)	
♠ Q876 ♥ J107 ♦ 43 ♣ AKJ7		♠ K76 ♥ Q65 ♦ AKJ872 ♣ 2		♠ QJ2 ♥ KQ9 ♦ KJ954 ♣ 32	
♦Q lead	**?? sure tricks**	♠J lead	**?? sure tricks**	♣5 lead	**?? sure tricks**
♠ J54 ♥ AK2 ♦ K3 ♣ Q8653		♠ Q98 ♥ KJ2 ♦ Q65 ♣ QJ103		♠ AK3 ♥ AJ5 ♦ AQ10 ♣ AQ64	

ANSWERS:

A) 0 (Yes, after the ace is dislodged there will be two or three tricks)

B) 0 (Yes, there is potential for at least one, probably more tricks)

C) 1 (Yes, a successful finesse would produce an additional trick)

D) 5 (Assuming there is an entry to the hand with 107654 after the AKQJ are played)

E) 4 (Assuming there is an entry to the QJ32 after the AK are played)

F) 0 (Yes, there is hope to set up some tricks, but no sure thing)

G) 5 (Even if they split three-zero)

H) 1 (Because the lead is coming into the king)

I) 1 (same as H)

J) 2 (Play dummy's queen and two tricks are assured)

K) 1 (but, if you play low from dummy, you are sure eventually to be able to build a second trick in the suit—more on this next chapter)

L) 1 (if you guess well, you might get two tricks, but on a bad day, just the one)

M) 4 (the lead into your tenace guarantees four tricks)

N) 3 (the lead into your king-jack provides three tricks, entries permitting)

O) 8 (one in diamonds from the lead, five in clubs and two in hearts)

P) 7 (six in diamonds and at least one from the opening lead)

Q) 13 (two clubs from the lead into your ace-queen, plus three in spades and hearts along with five in diamonds—you can claim all thirteen tricks without playing a card)