

CHAPTER 13

RUFFING LOSERS – DELAYING TRUMPS

Recollecting our earliest days of bridge, we can hear someone's voice saying "Draw trumps. You must draw trumps." This is sound advice and on most hands it is good technique to draw trumps early. It is a shattering blow to have one of your winners ruffed when you could have saved this trick by drawing trumps first.

Nevertheless, there are occasions when drawing trumps must be delayed. If you have more losers than you can afford, you may be able to eliminate some losers by ruffing them in dummy or by discarding them on dummy's excess winners. When discarding losers is the correct approach, it is often a race between declarer and the defenders. Will declarer have the discard in time? Will the defenders cash their tricks first? In these cases, it is sound to draw trumps if you can do so without losing the lead, but if you have to give up the lead in trumps, it may be wiser to go after the discards first.

Take these hands for example :

NORTH

♠ 10 5
♥ 8 6 4
♦ A K 7 2
♣ 9 8 4 3

South is playing in 2♠ after 1♠ : 1NT, 2♠. West leads the queen of hearts. How should South plan the play?

If South wins the ace and leads trumps, the defence can win and cash two hearts and three clubs for one down. Correct is to win ♥A, lead ♦Q to the king and discard a loser on the ♦A first.

SOUTH

♠ K Q J 7 3 2
♥ A 5 2
♦ Q
♣ J 10 7

NORTH

♠ 10 5 4 2
♥ A K Q
♦ 8 7 2
♣ 6 4 2

South is playing in 4♠ after 1♠ : 2♠, 3♠ : 4♠. West leads the king of clubs. How should South plan the play?

If South leads a trump at once, the defence can win and cash two clubs and the ♦A. Correct is to win the ♣A and play three rounds of hearts first to discard a club loser. Then start trumps.

SOUTH

♠ K Q J 7 6 3
♥ 4 2
♦ K Q
♣ A 10 7

Where the winners are sitting in dummy ready and waiting, things are easy. Sometimes the winners have to be established swiftly :

NORTH

♠ Q 10 7 4
♥ A 6 4 3
♦ 5 2
♣ K J 4

SOUTH

♠ K J 9 8 5
♥ K 8 2
♦ K Q J
♣ Q 7

South is in 4♠ (North passed and raised South's 1♠ to 3♠). West leads the queen of hearts. How should South plan the play?

If declarer wins and leads a trump, the defence can win and lead another heart. As declarer has to lose three aces, declarer cannot afford to lose a heart as well.

Dummy has no extra winners yet, but declarer can set up an extra winner in clubs. The correct order is win the ♥K (keeping the ♥A as an entry to dummy), lead the ♣Q to knock out the ace (and a second club if they duck the queen), win the next heart and discard a heart from hand on the third round of clubs. Then and only then should trumps be started.

NORTH

♠ 3
♥ Q J 8 6 4 3
♦ A 6 4
♣ J 7 2

South is in 4♥ after North raised South's 1♥ opening to game. West leads the queen of diamonds. Plan South's play.

SOUTH

♠ Q J 5
♥ K 10 9 5 2
♦ K 5 2
♣ A Q

South has to lose one spade and one heart. The danger is that there will also be a club loser and a diamond loser. Winning the ♦A and finessing clubs gives you a 50% chance. Anything better?

The club finesse is an illusion. If the club finesse works you have two club tricks. If the club finesse fails you have two club tricks. If you reject the club finesse and play ace of clubs and queen of clubs, you have two club tricks. Thus, the club finesse does not gain a trick and may cost the contract. Suppose you take the club finesse and it loses. Back comes a diamond, taken by the king. You can cash the ♣A but there is no easy access to the ♣J. They will win the race and reach their diamond trick before you come to your discard.

The solution is simple once you see it, but it is easy to have a blind spot. Win the ♦K, cash the ♣A and lead the ♣Q. After they take the king, the ♣J is available for a diamond discard and the ♦A is still in dummy as an entry. (Of course, if they duck the ♣Q, you have no club loser.)

When you have too many losers, you may be able to eliminate some by ruffing losers in the shorter trump hand, usually in dummy.

A 6 3 If this is your trump suit, you
K Q J 10 9 have five winners. If you can ruff one loser in dummy, this produces a sixth trick. Note that if you ruff once in hand, you still have only five trump winners.

If you can manage to ruff two losers in dummy, you score seven trump tricks: the five winners in hand and the two ruffs in dummy. Note that if you ruff twice in hand, you still have only five trump tricks, the same number with which you started.

It rarely gains an extra trick to ruff in the long trump hand.

Where dummy has few trumps, you may have to start ruffing before drawing any rounds of trumps. Sometimes you can afford one round or two rounds. Check on how many ruffs you need in dummy and that is the number of trumps dummy must retain. Sometimes it is convenient to take a ruff in dummy, return to hand via the trump suit (thus drawing one round of trumps) and ruff another loser in dummy.

Short-suiting dummy

Dummy may not be void in a suit and you may have to play one or two rounds of a suit first to create the void. You may need to do this before starting on trumps.

'Don't send a boy on a man's errand.'

If you can afford to ruff high in dummy, do so. It is painful to be overruffed when it was perfectly safe to ruff high.

How many winners can you cash without risking an opposition ruff?

If you have fewer cards in a suit than the opposition, three rounds of the suit will usually survive. If you hold six cards, they have seven and the chance for a 4-3 split is a bit over 60%. With only five cards in a suit, three rounds are very likely to escape a ruff. When you have seven cards in a suit, you can probably cash two rounds without a ruff but the third round is risky. The chance of a 3-3 break is only 36%. With eight cards in a suit, you may be able to cash two rounds but someone is bound to be out of the suit on the third round. In addition, even the second round is risky. The chance of a 4-1 split is about 1-in-4, around 28%.

These figures may be helpful when you need to decide how many rounds of a suit you can play in order to take a quick discard or two.

The cross ruff

A cross ruff enables you make your trumps and dummy's trumps separately. You ruff in dummy, ruff in hand, ruff in dummy, ruff in hand, back and forth, hopefully without an overruff on the way. In most cases, it is best not to draw any trumps before starting the cross ruff. The signs that a cross ruff will work better than drawing trumps are when dummy is short in your long side suit and you are short in dummy's suit(s). If your side suit is a 'running suit' (no losers expected, such as AKQxxx or AKQJx) or solid bar one loser (such as KQJ10x), normal technique is to draw trumps and use your strong side suit later. However, if your long suit is broken and not easy to establish, prefer to cross ruff.

You may have to short suit dummy or your own hand before starting the cross ruff. In addition, it is usually best to cash all your side suit winners before commencing the cross ruff. Once the opponents start discarding, they may be able to ruff those winners later.

Defending against declarer's ruffs in dummy

If dummy has no useful long suit but has ruffing values, the defence should lead trumps at every opportunity. If dummy has a long suit but your strength in that suit means that declarer will not be able to use it for discarding, again you should lead trumps in defence if dummy has some ruffing value.

The best defence against a cross ruff is repeated trump leads. The more trumps you draw, the fewer trumps declarer has for ruffing. Each time you lead a trump and take out one trump from declarer and one trump from dummy, you reduce the value of the cross ruff by one trick.

The bidding and the appearance of dummy may indicate the likelihood of a cross ruff. If the opponents are playing in their third suit (for example, after an auction like 1♠ : 2♦, 2♥ : 3♥, 4♥), a cross ruff is likely. Declarer figures to be shortish in diamonds, dummy will be shortish in spades and so all the ingredients of a cross ruff are apparent in the auction. A trump lead is sensible in such cases, particularly if you are strong in one of their other suits.

If declarer has drawn trumps and left you with the top trump, it is usually your best move to cash that top trump when you gain the lead. By drawing a trump from declarer and from dummy, you are reducing their potential for tricks by ruffing.

We play 51, 52, 54, 55

Hand 51 : Dealer South : E-W vulnerable

NORTH		SOUTH	
♠	K Q 5	♠	J 10
♥	8 6 5 2	♥	Q 10 7 3
♦	J 9 8 7	♦	10 6 3
♣	J 10	♣	K Q 9 7

WEST	EAST
♠ A 7 6 2	♠ 9 8 4 3
♥ 9	♥ A K J 4
♦ A K Q 4	♦ 5 2
♣ A 5 4 3	♣ 8 6 2

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♦	Pass	1♥	Pass
1♣	Pass	2♣	Pass
4♣	Pass	Pass	Pass

Lead : ♣J. The unbid suit is normal.

Play : Win ♣A and continue with ♦A, ♦K, ♦Q, discarding a club. Play the fourth diamond and discard the other club loser. Duck one round of trumps, then cash the ace of spades, ruff a club, cash the top hearts and discard a club, ruff a heart and ruff a club in dummy. Losing two spades and one diamond.

Notes : (1) East's 2♣ is 6-9 points, at most a poor 10.
(2) West is in danger of losing two spades and two clubs. One club can be discarded and two need to be ruffed. Do not start trumps.
(3) If West ruffs the fourth diamond, South overruffs and declarer goes down. Note this loser-on-loser technique to transfer the ruff.

Hand 52 : Dealer West : Both vulnerable

NORTH		SOUTH	
♠	7 6 2	♠	10 5 3
♥	7 2	♥	J 9 5 3
♦	A 9 7 6 3	♦	Q J 10
♣	A 10 9	♣	Q J 4

WEST	EAST
♠ 8 4	♠ A K Q J 9
♥ Q 4	♥ A K 10 8 6
♦ K 8 4 2	♦ 5
♣ K 8 7 5 2	♣ 6 3

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
Pass	Pass	1♠	Pass
1NT	Pass	4♥	Pass
4♣	Pass	Pass	Pass

Lead : ♦Q. Top of sequence. A trump lead is also attractive, as dummy has shown preference for spades and South has a fair holding in declarer's second suit.

Play : Duck the first diamond and ruff the second diamond. Cash ♥Q, ♥A and ruff a heart with the 8 of spades. Draw trumps and try the club finesse. 10 tricks.

Notes : (1) With four losers and strong suits, East can rebid in game.
(2) With equal length in support, prefer partner's first bid suit.
(3) Declarer ruff a heart to cater for the common 4-2 split. The ruff costs nothing if hearts are 3-3. If the ♥J drops, draw trumps.
(4) On a trump lead, win ♠9, cash ♥Q, ♥A, ruff a heart and exit from dummy with ♦K, the best chance to avoid a heart ruff.

Hand 53 : Dealer North : N-S vulnerable

NORTH		SOUTH	
♠	10 3	♠	Q 6
♥	A K 9 4 3	♥	Q 8 5 2
♦	K Q 6 2	♦	A 7 5
♣	Q 3	♣	J 10 9 8

WEST	EAST
♠ A K 9 8 5 4 2	♠ J 7
♥ - - -	♥ J 10 7 6
♦ J 8	♦ 10 9 4 3
♣ A K 6 5	♣ 7 4 2

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
4♣	1♥	Pass	2♥
	Pass	Pass	Pass

Lead : ♥K (or ace). A trump lead and a second trump when in with clubs would defeat the contract, but that is hard to tell in the auction. It is not recommended to lead a trump if dummy has not shown any support.

Play : West ruffs and continues with ♣A, ♣K and a third club. On regaining the lead, West leads the fourth club and ruffs it in dummy. A heart ruff back to hand is followed by the top spades. With trumps 2-2, West loses only two diamonds and one club.

Notes : (1) West's 4♣ is sound. It may make or be a good sacrifice.
(2) As clubs are unlikely to be 3-3, West must delay trumps and plan to ruff a club in dummy. Even one trump first could be fatal. South could play a second trump when in with the third club. If clubs are 3-3, West has lost nothing by playing clubs first.

Hand 54 : Dealer East : E-W vulnerable

NORTH		EAST	
♠	K Q J 8 3	♠	---
♥	J	♥	10 5 3 2
♦	J 6 5 4 2	♦	A Q 9 8
♣	7 3	♣	K 10 6 5 2

WEST	EAST
♠ 6 5 4	♠ ---
♥ K Q 7	♥ 10 5 3 2
♦ K 10 7	♦ A Q 9 8
♣ Q J 9 8	♣ K 10 6 5 2

SOUTH	
♠	A 10 9 7 2
♥	A 9 8 6 4
♦	3
♣	A 4

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
Pass	4♠	Pass	1♠

Lead : ♣ Q. Top of near sequence preferred to a K-Q-x suit. With strength in all outside suits, a trump lead is also sound.

Play : Win the lead and play a diamond to short suit yourself. On regaining the lead, embark on a cross ruff: ace of hearts, ruff a heart low, ruff a diamond low, ruff a heart, ruff a diamond, and so on. 11 tricks, losing one diamond and one club.

Notes : (1) North's 4♠ shows strong support (4-5 trumps), an unbalanced hand and no more than 10 HCP. The bid is normally based on 7 losers.

(2) The signs for a cross ruff are all there. Declarer short in dummy's long suit, dummy short in declarer's long suit.

(3) It would be an error to draw trumps. Three rounds of trumps cuts down your ruffing potential by two tricks.

Hand 55 : Dealer South : Both vulnerable

NORTH		EAST	
♠	A Q 10 4	♠	K 7 6
♥	10 4	♥	K Q J 9 6 3 2
♦	Q 10 8 6	♦	---
♣	10 7 3	♣	9 6 5

WEST	EAST
♠ 9 5	♠ K 7 6
♥ A 7	♥ K Q J 9 6 3 2
♦ K J 9 7 4 3	♦ ---
♣ A 4 2	♣ 9 6 5

SOUTH	
♠	J 8 3 2
♥	8 5
♦	A 5 2
♣	K Q J 8

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♦	Pass	1♥	Pass
2♦	Pass	4♥	All pass

Lead : ♣ K. The top of sequence lead is normal. A trump lead would in fact defeat the contract but that is almost impossible to judge. It is usually not attractive to lead a trump if dummy has not indicated any support for declarer's suit.

Play : Win the ♣ A and lead a spade at once, playing the king when North plays low. After the king wins, exit with a low spade. The defence can cash two clubs, but declarer wins the next trick and ruffs a spade in dummy. 10 tricks, losing one spade and two clubs.

Notes : (1) With a 7-card suit and 3 honours, East can jump to 4♥.

(2) East must not draw trumps first. That could lead to two down. There are seven hearts tricks. The other three must come from the spade finesse, a spade ruff and the ♣ A.

Hand 56 : Dealer West : Nil vulnerable

NORTH		EAST	
♠	Q 8 7 6 3	♠	J 10 4 2
♥	3	♥	J 10 6 5 2
♦	A Q J 9 5 2	♦	---
♣	A	♣	K Q J 7

WEST	EAST
♠ 9 5	♠ J 10 4 2
♥ Q 9 7	♥ J 10 6 5 2
♦ 10 8 7 6	♦ ---
♣ 9 8 6 2	♣ K Q J 7

SOUTH	
♠	A K
♥	A K 8 4
♦	K 4 3
♣	10 5 4 3

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
Pass	1♦	Pass	1♥
Pass	1♠	Pass	2♣
Pass	2♠	Pass	4♦
Pass	5♣	Pass	5NT
Pass	6♥	Pass	7♦
Pass	Pass	Pass	

Lead : ♣ K. A solid sequence is the safest lead against a slam.

Play : Win ♣ A, cash ♦ A, then ♠ A, ♠ K, ruff a club, ruff a low spade with the ♦ K, finesse ♦ 9, draw trumps and claim 13 tricks.

Notes : (1) 2♣ was fourth-suit forcing, 2♠ showed five spades and therefore six diamonds, 4♦ set trumps, 5♣ was a cue bid, 5NT asked for trump honours and 6♥ showed two top trumps.

(2) As spades figure not to be 3-3, you must plan to ruff a spade. Test trumps first in case they are 2-2. You must keep the ♦ K to ruff a spade high to prevent an overruff. The ♦ 9 finesse is marked.