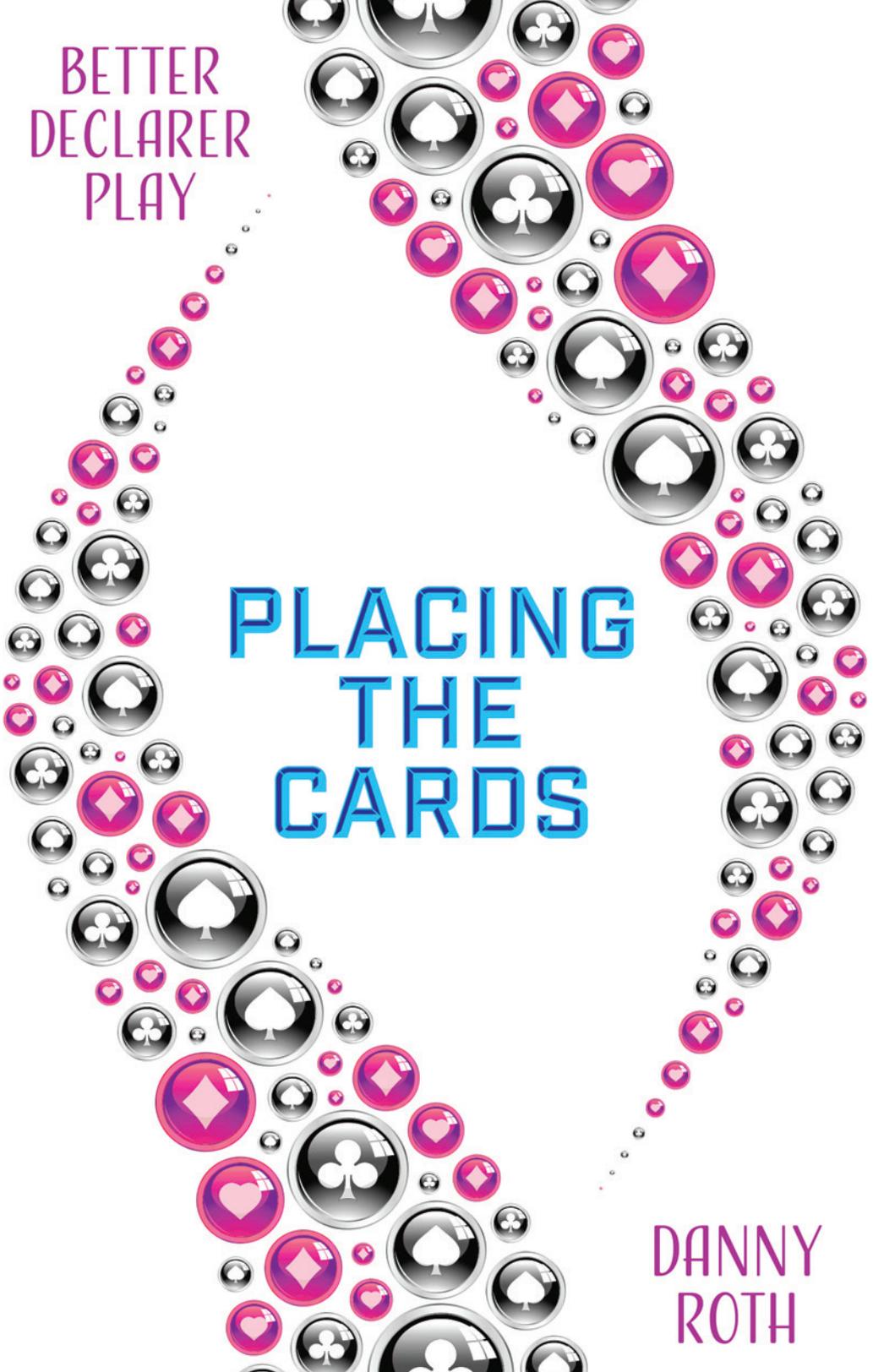


BETTER  
DECLARER  
PLAY

# PLACING THE CARDS

DANNY  
ROTH





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# SERIES INTRODUCTION

Bridge is played by four players so that, unless you are a very aggressive and/or greedy bidder or consistently pick up enormous hands, you cannot expect to be declarer more than 25% of the time. That is opposed to defending twice as often and being on dummy the remainder of the time.

That borne in mind, when you are declarer, you are the star of the show and you want to be at your best. In this series of six books, I intend to show you various techniques and approaches which are applicable to a wide range of situations so that, while you may fail on the very complicated hands, typically endplays and squeezes, you will hopefully improve your results on the more straightforward examples that occur far more often.

The six books are divided according to various topics, which will hopefully help you to recognize positions requiring similar handling as you progress. Eventually, I hope you will be able to play out hands with a minimum of having to rack your brains.

Danny Roth



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# INTRODUCTION

‘Ignorance is bliss!’ This is a well-known proverb. Sadly, it is totally out of place at the bridge table. How many times have you heard postmortems which have included such comments as:

‘I did not know who had the queen.’

‘I did not know the suit was breaking badly.’

‘I did not know that I was going to get that particular lead (or line of defense).’

— or any other similar excuses coming from declarers who have failed in contracts they should have made.

All too often, they *should and could* have known, with a little mental effort and use of common sense and logic. This book is designed to help you to get a more accurate picture of the unseen hands and thus avoid ‘wild guessing’; or, at least, improve your chances of avoiding unnecessary mistakes in that area.

As in other books in this series, I must explain that I am concentrating on making the contracts bid at IMPs or rubber-bridge scoring. I am aware that, at match-pointed pairs, overtricks and/or avoiding unnecessary undertricks can be important and therefore that ultra-cautious safety plays and ‘miracle’ lines should arguably be overlooked. In this book, I emphasize that making the contract is the principal aim.

As before, at the end, there will be a test of seventy-two quizzes, divided into eighteen chapters of four problems, each with solutions which will enable you to assess how well you have absorbed and understood the lessons of the earlier chapters.



# CHAPTER 1

## MISSING AN HONOR

There are countless combinations of suit layouts and most of them are displayed in the Official Bridge Encyclopedia and similar works. However, the instructions on how to play them and the probabilities of success are all *a priori* and take no account of the bidding, lead and subsequent play on both sides which could, and usually does, materially alter things. I am going to list the most common situations and advise on what needs to be taken into account before blindly following rules.

We shall start with a missing ace. Suppose you are looking at:

♦ K 5 3



♦ 6 4 2

You can, at best, hope for one trick, implying that the ♦A will need to be favorably placed with West. So you will normally lead from the South hand and hope for the best. But now suppose that the bidding and/or opening lead and subsequent defense make it obvious that the ♦A is offside with East and the 'standard' play has no chance. There is still hope that the ♦A could be singleton or doubleton with East, thereby dropping 'on air' on an early round. Now you can play low from both hands on both the first and second rounds and hope that, admittedly against the odds, the ace will appear, making the king master. Note also, that in this case, you can tackle the suit from either hand: it is not necessary to lead from weakness (South) to strength (North). That can be important in hands where entries are at a premium. The chance of success is modest but it is not zero.

Here is an example:

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

E-W vul.

<b>West</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>East</b>	<b>South</b>
1 ♥	pass	pass	2 ♠
pass	3 ♠	pass	4 ♠
all pass			

South's jump overcall was intermediate in the balancing position. West leads the ♥Q, East's ace winning. He returns the ♣10. How do you play?

You will have five trump tricks, a heart, a heart ruff and two top clubs, for nine so far. The tenth can only come from diamonds but East's pass, with the ♥A already shown, rules out his having the ace. You will have to assume that West holds it and that it will drop in two rounds. He could be 1=6=2=4. After drawing trumps, play a low diamond from each hand twice and hope.

Now consider the king being missing.

♦ A Q 10 5 3  
  
 ♦ J 8 6

The best chance is obviously to assume that the king is with West. That will be 50%, as it almost always is (unless you have eleven cards between the two hands, in which case it is 52% in favor of the drop). You will start with a low card from South (in case the king is singleton with West) and then if the finesse works, return to hand in another suit to take another finesse through West. This time you will play the jack, notably if the ♦7 or ♦9 drops from East on the first round. You will then be set up to take a third finesse if necessary; that is, when West holds four cards in the suit.

This is all very well; but supposing it becomes obvious that East holds the outstanding king. Now the finesse is a non-starter and it has to be the ace on the first round. It needs a 4-1 split with the king offside, slightly less than 3% but better than absolutely nothing. Here is an example:

♠ J 10 2  
 ♥ J 10 4  
 ♦ K 6  
 ♣ A Q 9 7 4  
  
 ♠ A Q 9 8 7 6  
 ♥ A 6  
 ♦ 10 2  
 ♣ K 10 6

E-W vul.

<b>West</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>East</b>	<b>South</b>
pass	pass	pass	1 ♠
pass	3 ♣	pass	4 ♠
all pass			

North has shown a near opening bid with spade support and club values. West leads the ♦5, covered in dummy and won by East's ♦A. He cashes the ♦Q and shifts to the ♥K. How do you play?

On the assumption that East has the ♥Q, he has shown 11 points as a passed hand and therefore cannot hold the ♠K as well. The only hope is to find it singleton with West. On rare occasions, you have to play 'hopelessly against the odds' if the number of tricks required so dictates:

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

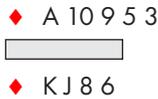
NS vul.

<b>West</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>East</b>	<b>South</b>
2 ♠	3 ♣	3 ♠	3NT
all pass			

West promised a few points with five spades and four of at least one minor suit. West leads the ♠Q, East encouraging. You win and play two rounds of clubs, East following with the ♣J and then discarding a low heart on the second round. How do you continue?

With the spades threatening, it has to be nine tricks now or never. You have the spade, three hearts and two clubs, so three tricks in diamonds are needed. The most likely favorable scenario is a doubleton king with East but that implies West holding four diamonds. With five spades and four clubs already advertised, that would leave him with a heart void. To test the water, cash one round of hearts. If West follows, the diamond play is off and the only hope now is that West has a singleton ♦K. So, low to the ♦A it is.

We now turn to missing queens. Very often, there will be a choice of the drop or a finesse in either direction:



The choice depends on a number of factors:

- a) The number of cards you have between the two hands. Most players know the guide: ‘eight ever, nine never’, implying that, with eight cards or fewer, the 50% finesse is the best chance; while with nine or more, the drop, nearer 60% at worst, is the better bet.
- b) However, if you take the finesse on the above layout, you can choose which defender will win if you guess wrong. Very often, one defender will be less dangerous than the other.

Typically, if West is waiting with established winners in a suit in which East is now void, you will finesse through West, prepared to lose to East. Conversely, if West has a tenace position sitting over you and needs his partner to be on lead, you will take a finesse through East, prepared to lose to West.

- c) If you play a finesse and lose, the opponents are now on lead. Meanwhile, if you play for the drop and the queen fails to appear, you will remain on lead and may be able to turn your attention profitably elsewhere before the opponents can cause trouble.

In positions where you can only finesse in one direction, such as this:



it may be advisable to play for the drop if you are desperate to keep West off play and do not mind losing a trick to East. If West holds ♦Qxx, there is nothing you can do.

Let’s look at some illustrative examples.

♠ 6 5 2  
 ♥ J 4  
 ♦ K J 10 6  
 ♣ A J 5 4

\_\_\_\_\_

♠ A 7  
 ♥ A 10 7  
 ♦ A 9 8 4  
 ♣ K Q 7 6

E-W vul.

West	North	East	South
2♠	pass	pass	2NT
pass	3NT	all pass	

West leads the ♠K and you win the second round. How do you continue?

With the spades presumably 6-2, East has now run out of the suit. You have two major-suit aces and four club tricks, so three diamond tricks are needed. It is important to keep West off play as he has four spade tricks waiting. But it is alright to lose a trick to East, so you cash the ♦A and take a finesse through West, still making the contract even if East has the queen. But now let's alter the hand slightly on the same auction:

♠ 6  
 ♥ J 4 2  
 ♦ K J 10 6 2  
 ♣ A Q 10 4

\_\_\_\_\_

♠ K Q 7  
 ♥ A 10 7  
 ♦ A 9 8  
 ♣ K J 7 3

E-W vul.

West	North	East	South
2♠	pass	pass	2NT
pass	3NT	all pass	

This time, West leads the ♠J and you win the first round; otherwise, they would duck a second round, leaving a position in which, if either defender gets on lead, the spades would run. How do you continue?

Here, if West gets in, he cannot profitably continue spades; East is the danger hand and must be kept off lead. It is best to cross to dummy in clubs and take a first-round finesse against East in diamonds, prepared to lose to a singleton queen with West but able to pick up the whole suit if East holds ♦Qxxx. As only three tricks are needed in the suit, it is good enough to start with the ♦K.

Now, we move into the slam zone for our third example:

♠ 8 6 2  
 ♥ KJ 4  
 ♦ QJ 10 2  
 ♣ A Q 10  
  
 ♠ A 7  
 ♥ A 10 9 7 3  
 ♦ A K 5  
 ♣ KJ 7

E-W vul.

West	North	East	South
		pass	1 ♥
pass	2 ♦	pass	3 ♣
pass	3 ♥	pass	3 ♠
pass	4 ♣	pass	4 ♦
pass	5 ♥	pass	6 ♥
all pass			

West leads the ♠Q, East encouraging. How do you play? Assuming the queen of trumps is not singleton, if you take the trump finesse, your chances are a little more than 50%. If you play the two top trumps, you have about a 30% chance of dropping the queen but, if that fails to appear, there is an additional chance that the defender holding the queen has three or more diamonds. In that case, you can discard your losing spade on the fourth round, caring little whether it is ruffed. The overall odds now improve to something like 70%.

For our next example, we are going to introduce a principle: where there are two suits to be considered and there is a choice of plays in one but no choice of plays in the other, the 'no-choice' suit should be tackled first, before a decision is taken on the 'choice' suit. Declarer may now have more useful information:

♠ Q 8 6 2  
 ♥ A 10 9 7  
 ♦ 8 2  
 ♣ A Q 7  
  
 ♠ K  
 ♥ KJ 8 6 3  
 ♦ A 9 5  
 ♣ 8 5 3 2

E-W vul.

West	North	East	South
		pass	pass
pass	1 ♣	pass	1 ♥
pass	2 ♥	pass	3 ♦
pass	4 ♥	all pass	

West leads the ♦Q. How do you play? Even if the club finesse is right, you are booked for one loser in the suit to go with one each in diamonds and spades, so the heart queen has to be found. You have no choice as to how to play the clubs, so win with the ♦A and take the club finesse. Assume it succeeds; that marks the ♣K with West. Now play a spade towards hand. If the king loses to West's ace, he is marked with 10 points. As he passed, he is most unlikely to have the trump queen as well and you should play East for it.

Now consider a position where you are missing the jack:

♦ Q 10 9 3  
  
 ♦ A K 8 4

A 3-2 split presents no problem but if diamonds are 4-1, you can pick up the jack on either side but not both. You should start with the ace, catering for a singleton jack (and indicating the position of the jack if there is a 5-0 split) while keeping both options open; but if both defenders follow low, you will need to make a decision. The count in the other suits will often be a guide.

Here is an illustration:

♠ K 6 2	E-W vul.			
♥ K J 4	<b>West</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>East</b>	<b>South</b>
♦ Q J 2			pass	2NT
♣ A Q 10 6	pass	5NT	pass	7NT
<span style="border: 1px solid black; display: inline-block; width: 100px; height: 15px; vertical-align: middle;"></span>	all pass			
♠ A Q 7				
♥ A Q 3				
♦ A K 5				
♣ K 9 8 7				

West leads the ♠J. How do you play?

If the clubs break evenly or the jack falls in one round, or even on a 5-0 split, there is no problem. To give yourself the best chance on a 4-1 split, cash your winners in the other suits first to try to get a count. Say, on three rounds of spades, both sides follow. At the moment, you are none the wiser; the outstanding spade could be in either hand; probably West is a slight favorite but there is no guarantee. Now try cashing three rounds of hearts. Again, if both follow, you have little more information. So, try the diamonds. Suppose West shows out on the third round. That marks East with five; with six major-suit cards already shown, he cannot have more than two clubs. After cashing the ♣A, play a low club to the king, ready to finesse against West if necessary. Only in the case where both defenders follow to three rounds of all side suits will you have to make a decision. As explained above, West has led a spade which is slightly more likely to come from a long suit than a short holding. So, East is marginally more likely to hold the club length.

# CHAPTER 2

## MISSING TWO HONORS

The following ten possibilities need to be considered: ace-king, ace-queen, ace-jack, ace-ten, king-queen, king-jack, king-ten, queen-jack, queen-ten and jack-ten. Sometimes, even the nine and/or lower cards are involved — but we shall concentrate on the higher honors for the moment.

With the ace and king missing, much depends on whether your queen and jack are together in the same hand or facing each other. When they are together, it will be obviously advisable to play from the weak hand towards the honors. When they are split, then ideally you would be advised not to touch the suit at all. However, if you have no choice, you will need to find the ace and king in the same hand and it will normally be right to lead towards the honor where you are shorter.

♦ Q 6  
  
 ♦ J 7 4 2

Here, leading towards the queen is preferable. If it loses, you still have a chance that East has both honors. Leading towards the jack will involve an unnecessary loser if West has both honors.

In this example, you have a choice:

♠ A J 10 8

♥ J 4

♦ K 4 2

♣ J 5 4 2

♠ K Q 9 6 3

♥ Q 8 6

♦ A 7 3

♣ Q 8

E-W vul.

West	North	East	South
------	-------	------	-------

pass	3 ♠	pass	1 ♠
------	-----	------	-----

pass	3 ♠	all pass	
------	-----	----------	--

West leads the ♠7. How do you play?

You can see that you are booked to lose the ace and king in both hearts and clubs and have been lucky to have escaped a diamond lead, after which

you would have had a potential fifth loser. You have a choice as to whether to play on hearts or clubs and there are two reasons to prefer clubs. Firstly, West is unlikely to have both the ace and king in either suit, as he did not lead one. Secondly, you are longer in clubs than hearts and if a club to the queen loses, you have the option to duck the second round, still succeeding if East holds the remaining honor in a doubleton. You would even have a chance if he was dealt three clubs: you can ruff out the honor on the third round.

You should thus win the first trump in dummy and play a low club immediately; trumps are needed as entries.

Where the ace and queen are missing, you need to consider three basic positions. Suppose your holding looks like this:

♦ K J 6  
  
 ♦ 8 4 2

The ace and queen could both be in the same hand or they could be split.

If two tricks are needed, you will have to assume that West holds both honors and lead up to the jack, subsequently returning to hand to lead up to the king. If only one trick is needed, it is even money which honor to lead up to. If West holds both, you cannot go wrong. If East holds both, you have no chance unless they drop as a doubleton. When they are split, a critical consideration may be that, if you lead towards the king and are right, you have retained the lead, whereas if you lead towards the jack and are right, you have lost the lead.

A couple of examples will illustrate:

♠ 5 4 2	E-W vul.			
♥ 6 4	<b>West</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>East</b>	<b>South</b>
♦ Q J 10 9 2			pass	1NT
♣ K J 10	pass	2NT	pass	3NT
<span style="border: 1px solid black; display: inline-block; width: 100px; height: 15px; vertical-align: middle;"></span>	all pass			
♠ A K Q 7				
♥ K 5				
♦ A 8 6 3				
♣ 8 7 3				

West leads the ♠J, denying a higher honor. How do you play?

You are lucky to have escaped a heart lead but need to get to dummy to take the diamond finesse, clubs offering the only hope. When you play a club

from hand and West plays low, if you play the jack and find East with the ace but not the queen (meaning that you were right with regard to the club suit considered in isolation), you have still not necessarily made the contract because a heart will now come through and, if the ace is with West, you may be several down. You need West to hold the ♣A and should rise with the ♣K.

In this next case, attention to the bidding is crucial.

♠ 8 4 2 ♥ Q J 10 8 6 ♦ K Q 10 ♣ K J <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 100px; height: 15px; margin: 5px 0;"></div> ♠ A 7 ♥ A K 7 4 2 ♦ J 8 5 ♣ 8 7 4	E-W vul.				
	<b>West</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>East</b>	<b>South</b>	
	pass	4♥	pass	1♥	
			all pass		

Again, West leads the ♠J, denying a higher honor, and East plays a low spade. Firstly, do you win or duck? And then when you draw trumps, assume that West discards a low spade on the second round. How do you play?

If you duck on Trick 1, West will hold the lead and can shift to a low club, putting you to a guess before you are ready. You should therefore win with the ♠A and draw trumps. Then, attack diamonds to find out who has the ace. If it is East, he will have shown 9 points with the two missing spade honors in a passed hand; therefore, he cannot have the ♣A. A club to the king will then be correct. If West has the ♦A, the defenders' points will be approximately evenly split, so you will have to guess. You might play for 'split aces', assuming that East has the ♣A, but this offers only a modest percentage advantage.

Still on the subject of attention to bidding, it will pay to look around in the other suits before making a critical decision:

♠ 10 9 8 5 3 2 ♥ K 7 4 ♦ A ♣ 7 5 4 <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 100px; height: 15px; margin: 5px 0;"></div> ♠ A K J 7 4 ♥ J 10 ♦ K 8 5 ♣ Q 9 3	E-W vul.				
	<b>West</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>East</b>	<b>South</b>	
	pass	4♠	pass	1♠	
			all pass		

West leads the  $\heartsuit Q$ , won in dummy. When you play a trump, East shows up with the singleton queen. How do you continue?

You have been lucky to have been spared an embarrassing club attack and can now discard one loser on the  $\heartsuit K$ . Nevertheless, you will still lose two tricks in clubs and must therefore avoid a similar fate in hearts. Before playing on hearts, however, ruff the third diamond in dummy and play a club up. You can be confident from the lead that West does not hold both top honors but things become interesting if East has them. He will have to rise with one of them and continue the suit to get off play without opening up the hearts for you. Now you know that East has 9 points in spades and clubs and his initial pass therefore debars him from holding the  $\heartsuit A$ . Play up to dummy's king; the position of the queen is of little interest.

If the  $\clubsuit Q$  loses to West, then there is an inference, particularly if he produces the  $\clubsuit A$ . He is now marked with 7 points in the minors. If he has the  $\heartsuit A$  as well, that would make 11 and he is already known to have a singleton spade — that hand could well have been worth a takeout double over the spade opener. It is now probably better to play East for the  $\heartsuit A$  and run the  $\heartsuit J$  through West's presumed  $\heartsuit Q$ .

When the ace and jack are missing, much depends on how many cards you have between you and dummy and whether your king and queen are in the same hand or facing each other. Where you have eight or more cards, it will typically be a matter of leading towards an honor. If that loses, you may have the choice of finessing or playing for the drop of the jack on the second round.



On the left, you need to decide which defender has the ace and lead through him. If the honor holds, duck on the second round, hoping for a doubleton ace. If the first round loses, you are booked for two losers.

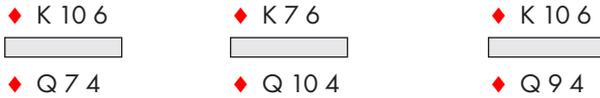
On the second from the left, you have the option to take a finesse against West but not against East. Unless you have reason to place a doubleton ace with West, it will normally be right to play the first round from dummy towards the queen and finessing against West on the second round, irrespective of whether or not you win the first.

On the third diagram, you have the option to take a finesse against East but not against West. Unless you have reason to place a doubleton ace with East, it will normally be right to play the first round from hand towards the

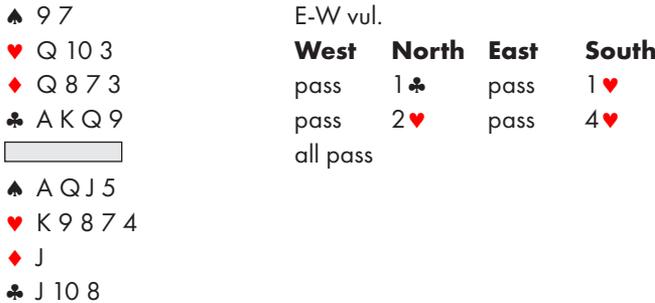
king and finessing against East on the second round, irrespective of whether or not you win the first.

On the final diagram, you have the option to take a finesse against either defender. It will often be advisable to take a decision on who is more likely to hold the ace and play the first round through him, intending to take a finesse through his partner on the second round. Only if you believe that the ace and jack are in the same hand should you play towards the honor sitting under the ace and finesse on the second round.

Where you have relatively few cards between you, the ace dropping becomes less probable and a finesse against the jack offers a better chance.



In all three cases, similar considerations apply to those above but it may be convenient, typically because of entry considerations, to take a finesse against the jack on an early round. These are illustrative examples:



West leads the ♦A, East signaling an even number with the ♦6. West shifts to a club. How do you play?

If the spade finesse fails, you need to keep your trump losers to one, implying the need to find the ♥J or a defender with a doubleton ♥A. Your first duty is to place the ♠K. If East has it, you may need a ruff in dummy and be prepared to lose two trump tricks. If it fails, West will be marked with 10 points in high cards, so his initial pass will debar him from possessing the ♥A. You will thus have to credit East with the ♥A and play a low heart from the dummy, ducking on the second round if the ♥K holds. So, start by winning the club in dummy and taking the spade finesse.

## INTERMEDIATE

The second book in Danny Roth's intermediate-level series on declarer play, this book covers topics that, once mastered, will bring any intermediate player an immediate improvement in their scores. Topics include: placing the cards missing one honor, missing two honors, missing three honors, inferences from the defense and second-degree assumption. This book is designed to help you to get a more accurate picture of the unseen hands and thus avoid 'wild guessing'; or, at least, improve your chances of avoiding unnecessary mistakes.

As always, the author's clear exposition of his points is followed by a collection of quiz problems where the reader can test their understanding of this new-found knowledge.



**DANNY ROTH** (London, UK) is the author of more than 16 books on bridge. His most recent title for Master Point Press was *Better Declarer Play: Combining Your Chances* (2022).



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