

NO TRUMPS PARTNER?

Chapter 11: Declare or Defend?

Let me now ask you a question:

If you had two hands opposite each other, with a balanced 12 HCP in one and say 8 HCP in the other, and had a choice of whether you were declarer in 1NT, or defending 1NT, which would you choose?

I will be asking the panel this same question and I can guarantee the answer will be: I would much prefer to be DECLARER of course! You of course may prefer to defend if you are one of those people who absolutely hate playing No Trump contracts, but leaving that aside, you will no doubt agree with the panel. The wonderful thing about being declarer is that you can see both your hand and your partner's, and you can make all the mistakes without involving partner.

Let me now take it a step further. Here are a couple of hands from recent play. See how YOU would get on playing them as declarer.

DEALER North NIL VUL

North

♠ 7 6 5

♥ 7 4 2

♦ 7 4 3

♣ A K 10 7

South

♠ A Q 10 2

♥ K J 6

♦ J 9

♣ Q 9 5 3

After two passes you open 1NT and all pass. West leads a low heart, to East's nine and your jack. How would you play the hand from then on? You might thank your lucky stars that opponents have as yet not found their diamond suit, and continue by leading a club to the ace and then a spade from dummy, finessing the queen if East plays low. That, if it works, will probably allow you to make seven tricks and thereby your contract. If you want to try for more tricks and think the risk worth it, you might finesse the TEN of spades. Even if West wins this, West may be reluctant to try a diamond and continue hearts instead. The lower the grade, the more the chance of this, so it may well be worth finessing the ten of spades. At least you won't get a heart through from East. And, if the ten of spades holds, you are in for a great score. And if it loses to the king, you still have hopes that the defence may go wrong and let you make a lot of tricks. Since you are in 1NT and can see that the diamonds are wide open you will probably settle for finessing the queen of spades and making your contract. All that is a reasonable assessment of the situation, wouldn't you say?

OK, now let's have a look at another 1NT hand. See how you would handle this one.

DEALER South EW VUL

North

♠ K J 4

♥ 10 9 3

♦ K 10 8 5 2

♣ J 2

South

♠ 9 8 3

♥ A Q 8 5

♦ A Q 6

♣ 8 6 4

Put yourself in the South seat again. Say you are dealer and have opened 1NT and everyone has passed. West leads the seven of diamonds, you play the eight, East the nine, and you win the ace. How will you proceed from there?

West has made a very helpful lead and it seems that either West has the jack or has led the D7 as a top of nothing card. It seems sensible to run the diamonds and then try a heart finesse. If it works, you will make 1NT, and might even make another trick later. All quite reasonable.

While doing these two exercises, has anything odd occurred to you? Probably not. But when I put the two problems together, the penny may drop, but let's have a look at another couple of hands first.

DEALER South EW VUL

North

♠ K 8 7 2

♥ 9

♦ K J 8 5 4

♣ K 9 2

South

♠ A Q 10

♥ J 7 6 4

♦ A 9 2

♣ 8 7 4

This time you are South and you are playing a system where you open 1NT with 11-14 HCP at the given vulnerability. West leads the nine of spades. How will you play this one?

The diamond suit is the obvious one to try for the most possible tricks. When East produces the jack of spades, you can run four spade tricks without needing an outside entry. Then you can turn your attention to your great diamond suit. How will you play THAT?

If you are a good analyst and know your odds, you will reason that West, having led the 'top of nothing' in spades probably does not want to open any other suit and therefore has the queen of diamonds. In any case, the odds favour finessing rather than trying to drop the queen in two rounds anyway, therefore you play your ace and then finesse the jack. If that finesse works, you make two overtricks. If it loses... In any case, you are hardly the type to cash your tricks and settle for one down, and you are quite confident that your analysis has told you the diamond finesse will work. Reasonable enough isn't it? Now for another one.

DEALER South EW VUL

North

♠ J 9 3

♥ Q 5 3 2

♦ 10 7 6

♣ Q 10 5

South

♠ 6 5 4

♥ A K 10 8

♦ Q 3

♣ A J 6 3

As South, you open a standard weak 1NT. West leads the four of hearts. How will you play this one?

There really is nothing to it. Hands like this play themselves. The heart lead has given you four sure heart tricks, so you play off all your hearts in such an order that you finish in dummy. That is so you can lead the queen or ten of clubs for a club finesse. Better the queen, since East will cover with the king ('cover an honour with an honour'!) and you will feel much happier if the king appears immediately. After all, you are wide open in the other suits. If East has the king, you make either three or four heart tricks and thereby your 1NT contract, probably with an overtrick. Another easy hand!

While looking at these examples, has anything struck you in particular? Probably, the fact that the opponents seem to have made extremely bad leads. Declarer seems to have been wide open in suits that the defenders have NOT led. That wouldn't happen if YOU were defending, would it? Or would it? I have made the leads particularly helpful because that will illustrate a particular point I will try to make, but such helpful leads do happen, as you will see when we see all the hands in the next chapter. You will also see why quite often it can be an advantage to be defending rather than declaring with a hand that has much the same distribution and point count as opponents.

The next chapter will take a look at all four hands in each case, and introduce you to the concept of "4D" play. 4D because it is four dimensional, but also because it stands for "Double Dummy Defence and Declarer" play. Wouldn't it be nice if you could see all four hands when defending? Think about it before you read the next chapter.