

Learning Points – Take the Right Finesse

By Steve Moese. Edited by Mike Purcell

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Declarer Play Level: Basic / Intermediate

Tuesday Night Duplicate, Mr. Rob Wiedenfeld, Director. Cincinnati Bridge Association Bridge Center, 2860 Cooper Road, Cincinnati, OH 45241 (513) 631-8070. Mike Purcell is my partner. We play a 2/1 version of Precision.

North Deals NS Vul MPs	♠ A85	Mike												
	♥ 1094													
	♦ A84													
	♣ AQJ7													
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♦	S	♦												
♣		♣												
	♠ KQJ	Steve												
	♥ AQ765													
	♦ 732													
	♣ 62													

When confronted with finesse choices, play them in the order that maximizes your chances on the entire hand (not just the a single suit) – often this means choosing a finesse that fails is right, if by failing, you keep additional chances alive or create new ones. Sequencing the chances you take on any hand is often called timing. Declarer is in a race with the defenders. Ensure the contract before defenders can create the tricks to defeat you. Plan to stay alive (keep chances in reserve) when sequencing your plays.

North	East	South	West
1♦ ^{1!}	Pass	1♥	Pass
1N	Pass	2♣ ²	Pass
3♥ ³	Pass	4♥	All Pass

1 = 2+♦s and 11-15+ HCP. An underbid
 2 = New Minor Forcing (Inv/GF/Not Slam)
 3 = Maximum with 3♥s

West leads ♠4

The Bidding

Partner evaluated his round 15 as less than a 14+ to 17 1NT opening. With an invitational hand South bid ♥s then New Minor Forcing. North responded with enthusiastic ♥ support. South “stretched” to game as partner has 14+ HCP.

The Play

The ♠ lead is passive (gives declarer nothing). Declarer sees 6

winners and 4-5 losers. Some finesses have to work. Winning the ♠ in Dummy with the ♠A lets declarer finesse trumps. Declarer led the ♥10 and let it ride to West’s ♥J. The ♦Q came back and now the success of the contract depended on the ♣K onside. Winning the ♦A, declarer finessed the ♥K and drew trumps then finessed the ♣K.

When East won the ♣K, declarer was down 1. Can you see why?

Postmortem

Declarer took the wrong ♥ finesse! Declarer should plan the hand with the following logic:

- 1) We gained an advantage because West did NOT lead a ♦.
- 2) We have 2 losers in ♦s that cash if we lose 2 finesses in a row.
- 3) Declarer needs to get back to hand to take the ♣ finesse and if it loses s/he still has time to get rid of a ♦ loser on the ♣J (the ♦A has not yet been played).
- 4) The best way back to hand is by the trump suit. ♠s carry a small risk - did West lead a singleton?
- 5) Having decided to play trumps, **avoid losing the 1st finesse to West.** The best line is small to the ♥Q. Leading to the ♥10 can lose to either the ♥J or the ♥K. The ♥Q loses only to the ♥K.

This analysis identifies the **dominant threat** (losing 2 tricks in ♦s) and gives **immediate priority to mitigate that risk** (finesse in ♣s, because if it loses we get to discard a ♦ on the 3rd round of ♣s). Which trump to finesse depends on **minimizing the risk that declarer loses the 2nd trick** (avoiding the imminent ♦ switch before getting ♣s started). **Finessing the ♥Q allows declarer to improve their chance to win the 2nd trick and start ♣s before the ♦A is driven out.**

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	♠ KQJ	NS 3N; 3♥; 2♣; 2♠; 1♦												
	♥ AQ765													
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Contract	Scores		Matchpoints	
	N-S	E-W	N-S	E-W
4 ♥ N	620		6.00	0.00
4 ♥ N		100	2.50	3.50
4 ♥ S		100	2.50	3.50
4 ♥ N		100	2.50	3.50
4 ♥ N		100	2.50	3.50
4 ♥ N		100	2.50	3.50
3 NT N		100	2.50	3.50
3 NT N	630		4.50	0.50
3 NT N	630		4.50	0.50
4 ♥ S	620		3.00	2.00
3 NT N	600		2.00	3.00
2 NT N	180		1.00	4.00
3 ♥ S	140		0.00	5.00

Finessing the ♥J is a “Practice Finesse”. A practice finesse is any finesse does not improve the chance the contract will be made. Avoid practice finesses at all costs. To identify them, you need to identify the threat and plan your countermeasures to deal with the imminent threat.

Note that partner undervalued his hand. The apparent 8 losers is really 7. For every 2 Aces more than the number of Queens you hold, add a winner to your count. Unfortunately this choice misdirected the bidding. Were partner to have opened 1N, a Jacoby transfer to ♥s followed by 3N would allow North to pass (given values outside hearts and the dreaded 3=3=3=4 pattern). We would have gotten to our best game. North’s pass of 3N would be almost automatic because North cannot create extra tricks by ruffing a short suit.

4♥ fails on a ♦ lead. It’s better to lead from Qxx or QJx against suits than small from a topless 5-cards suit. When defenders hold great length, declarer will be short. You might resolve 1 of declarer’s

finesse problems, surrendering both a trick and timing.

Learning Points

1. Identify the dominant threat to your contract and play to mitigate it.
2. Be sure to look for a line of play that requires NO FINESSE at all. This will often be superior, even if by only a small margin. *Corollary:* Take the fewest finesses necessary to make your contract.
3. Missing KJ in a suit, consider the danger. If you need to NOT lose control, finesse the K 1st. If LHO is the danger hand and can lose control to RHO, finesse the J first (finesse through danger). Missing KQ, play for them to be split (74% chance of success).
4. Don’t distort your bidding too much. You might sink your own chances.
5. If one finesse works means you make your game no matter what, consider what to do if it doesn’t! Cheap insurance is a good idea.

Keywords: Plan the play, imminent risk, countermeasures, stay alive, right finesse in right order