

Learning Points – On Suit Combinations

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Declarer Play Level: Basic

Knowing how to play suit combinations correctly is part of planning the play of the hand and a critical skill for the advancing player. You want to be in the right hand to start the suit, and you need entries to lead for best advantage. Suit combinations can appear complex. There are many to understand. Let's look at few common holdings to build our skill. Our goal is to learn critical thinking skills to improve our chances when faced with new situations.

Some common suit combinations are easy to play.

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| ♠ AQ2
♠ 543 | 6 cards split 3-3 missing KJ10.
2 tricks are possible if LHO holds the ♠K. Lead small to the ♠Q. 1 trick otherwise. The odds of winning 2 tricks is 50%. The odds of winning 3 tricks is 0. The odds of winning 1 trick is 100%. Note you can win the A at 1 st and lead to the Q later and still make 2 tricks whenever the K is onside. If you suspect RHO has the K, you can lead to the Ace and lead toward dummy later, ducking, hoping the K is doubleton. |
| ♠ AQ10
♠ 543 | If you need 3 tricks, lead low to the 10. If you need 2 tricks, lead low to the Q. You will win 3 tricks about 25% of the time and 2 tricks 75% of the time. 1 trick 25% of the time. |
| ♠ AJ10
♠ 543 | If you need 2 tricks lead low to the 10, then low to the J. You make 2 tricks about 75% of the time. |
| ♠ KJ10
♠ 543 | If you need 2 tricks lead small to the 10. If RHO holds the Ace, finesse the Q the second round. |
| ♠ KJ2
♠ 543 | To win 2 tricks you must find LHP with both the A and Q. Lead low to the J and low to the K if the J wins. |
| ♠ K62
♠ 543 | To win 1 trick, lead low toward the K. If you know RHO holds the A, lead 2 rounds ducking both times to play RHO for doubleton A. |
| ♠ Q102
♠ 543 | Lead low toward the 10. If RHO plays A or K, lead low toward the Q. |
| ♠ K62
♠ J43 | To guarantee 1 trick, lead small to the K. If the K loses to the A, then lead small toward the J. Do not lead the J from hand. |

Other combinations require more thought.

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| ♠ A542
♠ QJ3 | Many would wrongly play the ♠Q toward the A, intending to finesse the ♠K. The right play for 3 tricks in the suit is to play small twice toward the ♠QJ twice! If RHO has the ♠K, it will not capture an honor. You will win tricks with the ♠AQJ. If LHO has the ♠K, there is still the chance that ♠s break 3-3 and the ♠2 becomes a winner. Notice replacing the 3 with the 10 makes leading the Q safe. |
| ♠ KJ98
♠ A72 | Here is a prime example where the best play depends on the number of tricks you must have from the suit. The best play for 4 tricks is to play A then small to the J, hoping for 3-3 with Q onside or Q10 onside or Stiff 10 or Q offside. There is an 29.5% chance at 4 tricks this way. Finessing the 10 on the 1 st round is worse, ensuring only 24%. However if we need 3 tricks only, then the right play is small to the K then small to the A, picking up the Qx in either opponent's hand. This offers a 63% chance for 3 tricks, substantially better |

than the 1st or 2nd round finesse of the Q. This layout also allows for a spectacular play – an intra-finesse. Lead the J from dummy. When RHO covers with the Q, win and finesse LHO for the 10! It all depends where the card are!

A	B	C	D	E	
♠ A432	♠ A432	♠ A432	♠ A43	♠ A432	Here the number of cards in the suit and the presence of 8s and 9s changes the play and odds. What you know about the location of honors from the bidding can change your play.
♠ Q765	♠ Q1065	♠ Q1098	♠ Q10982	♠ Q10765	

Suit A plays either small to the Q or small to the A. Never lead the Q toward the A without enough touching cards.

Suit B plays small to the A then low to the 10.

Suit C lead the Q finessing, intending to finesse the J if the Q loses. You are playing for split honors – the most likely arrangement. Sometimes RHO bids and you expect the K is with RHO. Lead small to the Q. If the KJ or J is with RHO, lead small to the 10. Your best choice depends on locating their strength.

Suit D leads the Q finessing as in B.

Suit E - the 9th card in suggests cashing the A first then leading toward the Q.

We can tell how many possible ways the cards can split by knowing the number of cards we are missing. Missing 1 card, there are 2 possible holdings 0-1 and 1-0. Holding 2 cards there are 4 possible holdings 2-0, 1-1, 1-1, 0-2. In general for n missing cards there are 2ⁿ outstanding holdings or cases. So if you are looking for the singleton K, it is much more likely to be singleton when you are missing 2 cards than when you are missing 8 cards in the suit. Sometimes holding more length makes playing for the singleton honor a smart strategy.

Missing # Cards	6	5	4	3	2
Stiff H probability	2.4%	5.7%	12.4%	26%	52%

There are many complex holdings that are not readily solvable at the table. In general, it is right to lead small toward high honors rather than leading unsupported honors themselves. If you know one opponent must have a missing honor (bidding, signals, play) then cater to that possibility. If you are unsure, go with the odds – do not guess. Don't fret about calculating the exact probability at the table. Instead strive to recognize certain suit holdings and recall the theme that gets most of the tricks. Playing solidly is often enough to win club games.

We will expand this discussion in future articles to offer some of the ways experts approach this problem. We'll focus on key principles that are easy to remember.

1. Suit combinations require the best chance (highest probability) play when missing significant honors.
2. The right play to make for a given combination is NOT necessarily the right play to make for the hand. Always choose the right play for the HAND.
3. The number of tricks required from the suit strongly influences which play is RIGHT.
4. Some suit combinations are complex and difficult to analyze at the table – better to remember simple themes that you can apply in diverse situations.
5. Generally we defer play in short suits (6 cards or less) unless we have no other choice. Better to let the opponents lead our problem suits for us. Their lead often solves many problems.

The ACBL Encyclopedia of Bridge (Brent Manley, ed.) dedicates 50 pages to the proper play of suit combinations in the absolute (not taking the hand into account).

Richard Pavlicek's bridge website has a free tool "Card Combination Analyzer" to allow you to explore various hand combinations. The tool calculates the statistics and you provide the scenarios to see what line is successful.

<http://www.rpbridge.net/xcc1.htm>

The easiest tool available is **Suit Play**. See the CBA website "Improve Your Game" page for a link to get your free copy of this useful software (not for Apple Computers).