

## Learning Points – More Suit Combinations

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Declarer Play Level: Basic

Many suit combinations are easy to play properly by following common guidelines. The best play depends on what the hand requires (danger hand, combining chances, end plays) and how many tricks you need from the suit. Taking risk for extra tricks is wrong if doing so puts your contract in unnecessary jeopardy. In Match Point Pairs we often take extra risks for overtricks when just making our contract will be a poor score.

It's often better to lead low to a high card than to lead high toward low cards. Leading unsupported honors for a finesse is often wrong. A newcomer might be tempted to lead the Q from Qxx opposite Axx, hoping to finesse the K. Defense covers and leaves us with 2 losers. The right way to play this combination is small toward the Q, hoping the K is onside (better still have them lead to the Qxx).

Leading a singly supported honor to finesse can be wrong if covering develops winners for the defense. QJx --- Axxx don't lead the Q – instead lead twice toward the QJ, finessing the missing K. Some suits (where opponents have more cards than we do) are often best left for opponents to lead for us (e.g. AJ10 --- K98 a 2-way guess for the Q, but no guess at all if they lead it for us).

Here are some more common suit combinations that we often play in a less-than-best way:

♣ AKJ109 Cashing the A or K then finessing leads to a 50.8% chance of winning 5 tricks. Here the finesse is obvious, but it's better to cash one high honor just in case the Singleton ♣Q is luring with either opponent. The chance of a singleton Q is 5.66% - not trivial. Note that the chance of finding Qxxxx onside is only 1.9% - much less than a Singleton Q.

♣ AKJ1098 Here the proper play is to lead small finessing the Q on the first round. We cannot afford to cash a top honor because we need to protect against a 4-1 split with Q onside – an 11.3% chance. Notice that if ♠s break 5-0 or 0-5 we cannot win more than 5 ♣ tricks. There is a 3.92% chance the suits split that way.

♠ Q987 The best plan for 4 tricks is to assume a 3-2 split and cash the top 3 honors. The only 5-0 split we can handle for 4 tricks is when RHO has all 5 missing cards. We make only 3 tricks if LHO has all 5 cards. We can only pick up J10xx(x) in the RHO's hand. ♠s will split x---J10xx about 8.5% of the time and void --- J10xxx about 1.96% of the time or a total of 10.4% in RHO's hand. Leading small to the ♠Q will allow you to discover the 0-5 split while still being able to double finesse the J10 – the idea is to keep the AK intact if the J10 lie with RHO.

However if we expect 10-Jxxx, J-10xxx, Jxxx-10, or 10xxx-J then we should cash the A or K first! These 4 cases occur a total of 11.3% of the time. We can still do better! If we can count distribution to know RHO is long in ♠s, then playing small to the Q will allow a 2<sup>nd</sup> round finesse and 4 tricks. If LHO plays 10 or J we finesse RHO for the other. If LHO is known to be long in ♠s, then we play for Jxxx-10 or 10xxx-J since we cannot make 4 tricks if LHO holds J10xx-x or J10xxx-Void. Summarizing:

Split	%	Play
x-J10xx or void –J10xxx	10.4	Low to Q then finesse J10
10-Jxxx, Jxxx-10, J-10xxx, 10xxx-J	11.3	A or K, If J or 10 shows, finesse other defender
10-Jxxx, J-10xxx	5.65	A or K, If J or 10 shows, finesse other defender
Jxxx-10, 10xxx-J	5.65	A or K, If J or 10 shows, finesse other defender

*[Note: Knowing RHO is long in ♠s makes low to the Q almost 2 to 1 (10.4 to 5.65). Knowing LHO is long makes playing A or K infinitely better – the only way to make 4 tricks. Getting a count helps!]*

♠ AJT432 Here's one many get wrong. The only way to win 5 tricks is to find the cards split KQx---xxx some 7.1% chance. We can play to win 4 tricks by playing small to the ♠A then ♠2 – hoping to find Hx --- Hxxx or Hxxx --- Hx splits. This has a 64.6% chance of success. (playing low from both hands succeeds when RHO holds a stiff Honor). How can this be? We can ignore the 3-3 cases because we will lose 2 tricks and win 4 no matter what we do. The 4-2/2-4 cases are interesting. There are 18 ways that 4-2 splits occur with split honors or honors doubleton. There are only 12 ways that HHxx---xx splits occur and only 6 of these benefit from a 1<sup>st</sup> round finesse. Comparing the number of 4-2 cases, there is an 18/6 or 3/1 advantage for playing low to the A then small compared to taking the 1<sup>st</sup> round finesse. Absent bidding or discovery (count) information, take the 3/1 odds.

♠ AJT43 Now taking the 1<sup>st</sup> round finesse offers a 30% chance to win 4 tricks and 72.7% chance to win 3 tricks (play for honors split between the opponents). Playing low to the 8 1<sup>st</sup> guarantees 2 tricks 98% of the time (catering to the KQ doubleton with wither opponent). The presence of a 2<sup>nd</sup> small card opposite AJT... changes the play strategy importantly.

♣ KQT43 Lead twice to the KQ ignoring the finesse of the ♣J – a 19.4% chance for 4 tricks and 67.8% chance for 3 tricks. If RHO wins the A, Lead either the Q or small next. Alternatively, lead small to the K then small to the 10 next. Leading small to the K then small to the 10 if the A is still out is inferior. However the margin of difference among the 3 lines is very very small! Line 1 loses to Jxxxx --- A. Line 2 loses to xxxx --- AJ

♣ J9 Leading small to the ♣J picks up a singleton or doubleton 10 with RHO, a 6.1% chance. That raises the chances of winning 3 tricks in this suit to 43% from 36% (3-3 split). Small to the ♣9 picks up the doubleton 10 with LHO, a 4.8% chance. Small to the J offers 2 tricks 86% of the time. Don't play the J toward the A8543 – you do not have the 10 and if RHO covers, you will have to lose to the H10 for certain, and maybe the 6 and 7 too. A 4-2 or 5-1 split will cost you plenty.

While we can't cover the whole gamut of possibilities, we hope you see that proper play of suit combinations impacts our success chances and how we plan the play of the hand. Remember to start suits where we have length and defer suits where they have length. Give the opponents every chance to help us when we can!