

Block Their Suit

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The deal in this column first appeared in *How to Play a Bridge Hand* by Bill Root.

When we learn declarer play, we're often taught a set of technical plays without learning why the play is made. This is a good start, but often if you also know why the play is made, you can recognize situations where it's right to put the textbook away and make a different play.

Deal 1

♠AT

♥Q86

♦A974

♣T532

♠KJ843

♥T97

♦652

♣84

♠Q7

♥J532

♦QJT8

♣A76

♠9652

♥AK4

♦K3

♣KQJ9

Take the hold-up play versus no trump, as in this deal. West leads the ♠4, and this hand looks familiar. The opponents are threatening to take 4 ♠ and the ♣A. No problem, you say. You duck the ♠ lead, win the ♠ return, and drive out the ♣A. East wins but has no more spades, and you cheerfully claim 9 tricks to make your contract. The key idea here is that by holding up the ♠A, you have attacked the communication between the defenders' hands.

It may seem you have played this hand well. But what if we move the ♠A to the West hand? As before the opponents lead the ♠4, you win the second ♠ and play a ♣. Now, however, West

wins and cashes 3 more spades for down 1. Ouch!

There's actually a way to make this hand. Try to find it before reading on. Here's a hint. Remember that the reason we often hold up is to attack the opponents' communications. On the actual hand, this goal is correct, but there is a more effective way to attack their communications.

Did you get it? The key play at trick one is the ♠A, blocking the opponents' spades. Once you do this, East has two bad options. East can retain the ♠Q, in which case the suit is blocked—once west wins the ♣A, east could win the next spade but can't get to west's remaining spades. Alternatively, East can unblock the ♠Q, in which case your ♠9 is promoted to a second stopper.

How do you know to play the ♠A? Your play only matters when spades are 5-2, in which case you have a chance to sever the opponents' communications. If spades are 4-3, the most the opponents could get is 3 spades and a club. If spades are 5-2, then you also know that East has at least one ♠ honor. Why? Ask yourself what you would lead from ♠KQJxx. You would lead the king, not a low card. What all this means is that your contract is a near certainty if you rise with the ♠A, which will block the opponents' suit in the dangerous case where spades are 5-2 and West has the ♣A.