

Intermediate Corner: Avoidance Plays

By Robert Thorstad, thorstads@gmail.com

When many of us learn fundamentals of card play, we learn to apply them in very restricted situations. Some of these fundamentals can actually be applied to many more situations, giving you a lot of opportunities to improve your score if you recognize the positions. Most of us know the avoidance play, where you plan your play to keep a dangerous opponent off lead.

The textbook situation is keeping an opponent from running a long suit in notrump, as in Deal 1. Playing 3NT on a spade lead, you duck the first two spades and win the third, East discarding a heart. You can make the contract if you can avoiding West gaining the lead, and the best way to do this is to finesse West in clubs by playing the Ace and then running the Jack. If East wins he cannot play spades, and you make at least 1♠, 2♥, 2♦, and 4♣.

Deal 1		Deal 2		Deal 3	
South	North	South	North	South	North
♠A42	♠53	♠2	♠AQ	♠AKQ432	♠JT5
♥AK2	♥543	♥642	♥K53	♥642	♥K53
♦AK2	♦543	♦AQ7	♦KJ4	♦A32	♦K7654
♣AJT2	♣K9432	♣AKQ754	♣JT963	♣2	♣A3

You may not know that avoidance plays also occur often in suit contracts. When you can trump, there are some new possible mechanics of avoidance plays. Consider Deal 2, where you play 5♣ on a trump lead. The main chance is to find the ♥A onside, but you also have an avoidance play in hearts. Only West can ever lead hearts for three tricks. You can capitalize on this by taking a seemingly useless finesse: take the “practice finesse” in spades! If the spade finesse loses, East cannot attack hearts, and you will discard a heart on the ♠A and then take the heart finesse. If the spade finesse wins however, you discard a heart on the ♠A and make regardless of the location of the ♥A.

One of the most common avoidance plays at suits is also difficult to spot if you have not seen it before. In this play, you discard a loser from a long suit to set up the suit without losing the lead. For example, in Deal 3, East leads the ♣K against 4♠. You have an avoidance position in hearts, and you may be able to set up the diamonds for heart discards.

The danger is that West may win the third round of diamonds and switch to hearts. You can foil this by the rather spectacular play of ducking the first trick! East can do no better than continue a club, and you discard the ♦2, draw two rounds of trumps, and play three rounds of diamonds, ruffing the third round high. As long as diamonds split 3-2 and trumps are not 4-0, you can cross to the ♠J and use your diamonds to discard hearts, making an overtrick regardless of the location of the ♥A.

There are many chances to apply card play fundamentals, and avoidance plays are no exception. We hope this article inspires you to look for ways to apply avoidance plays to the hands you play!