

DECLARER PLAY - WEEK 5  
PLAYING SUIT CONTRACTS - PART 1  
(Counting Losers)

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The basic strategy that should be followed to make your trump suit contract is similar to the strategy for no trump contracts. But because of the power of the trump suit, there are important differences in the way that a plan for the offense is developed:

1. Listen to opponents' bids.
2. Observe the opening lead.
3. **Plan your offense:**
  - a. **Consider the number of tricks you can afford to lose.**
  - b. **Count losers in the hand with the longest trump suit, *the master hand*.**
    - ✓ **Include losses needed to promote high cards.**
  - c. **Analyze ways to eliminate extra losers.**
    - ✓ Finesse opponent's high cards.
4. **Execute the plan.**
5. Watch defenders play.
6. Keep track of cards played.

There are two main reasons for concentrating on losers instead of winners:

- **You can only count sure winners in the trump suit.**

Unless you draw trump immediately, there is a danger that opponents might trump one or more of the sure winners in your side suits.
- **You might be able to trump side suit losers.**

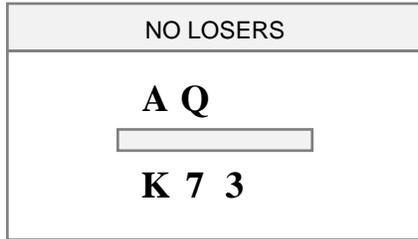
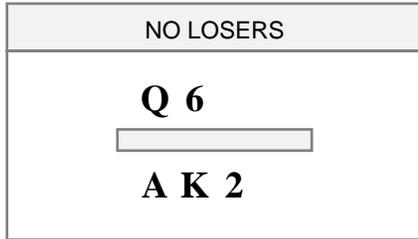
If you plan to ruff one or more of your side suit losers, you may not be able to draw trump immediately.

**COUNTING LOSERS**

The second step in planning your offense is to count the losers in each suit and add up the counts to get the total number of losers. **Losers should be counted in one hand**, the hand with the longest and strongest trump suit. This hand is called the *master hand*. In the vast majority of cases, the master hand will be declarer's (your) hand instead of the dummy.

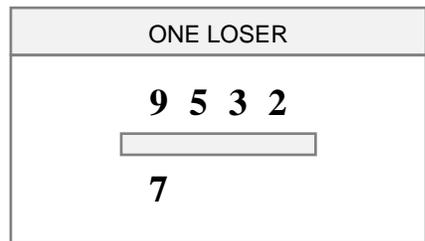
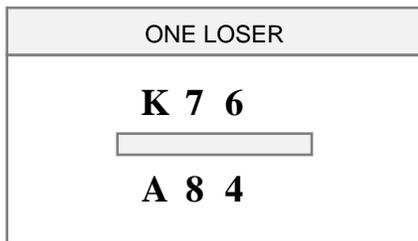
*Unless noted otherwise, assume that South has the longest and strongest trump suit and is the declarer and master hand for the examples that follow.*

A loser is any card **in the master hand** that is not a sure winner and that can not be covered by a high card in the supporting hand. For example, there are no losers in the master hand (South) for any of the following combinations:



In the left example, the deuce in the master hand is covered by the Queen in the dummy. In the middle example, the seven and three in the master hand is covered by the Ace and Queen in the dummy because the master hand holds the King.

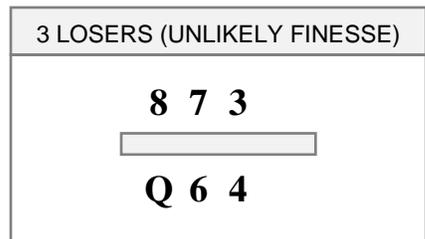
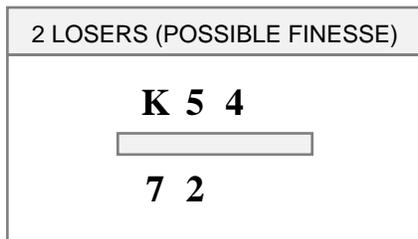
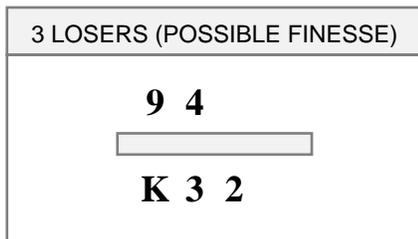
In the following examples, the master hand has one loser that can not be covered by honors in the dummy:



You might be able to *ruff* (trump) the four in the middle example, but it must be counted as a loser in the original count because you may have a better use for dummy's trump.

### UNSUPPORTED HIGH CARDS

If you have only one unsupported high card you must count it as a loser. For example:



In all of these examples, you might be able to finesse the honor and take a trick. But the decision to risk the finesse can not be made until you have a count of your losers and have analyzed various alternatives to eliminate them.

## SOLID SEQUENCES

When you have a **solid sequence in the combined hands**, you can promote cards in the sequence into winners but you must lose tricks to do it. Count the losers in the master hand as the number of missing cards higher than the sequence. For example:

1 LOSER (MISSING A)	2 LOSERS (MISSING AK)	3 LOSERS (MISSING AKQ)
<b>K Q J</b> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 5px auto;"/> <b>7 5 3</b>	<b>J 7 2</b> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 5px auto;"/> <b>Q T 6</b>	<b>9 8</b> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 5px auto;"/> <b>J T 7 2</b>

In the example on the right, you might be able to ruff one of the losers. But you can not make that assumption when you make your original count.

## BROKEN SEQUENCES

Count the losers in a broken sequence in the same way that you count the losers in a solid sequence. For example:

1 LOSER (MISSING K)	2 LOSERS (MISSING AQ)	2 LOSERS (MISSING KJ)
<b>8 4 2</b> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 5px auto;"/> <b>A Q J</b>	<b>7 6 4</b> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 5px auto;"/> <b>K J T</b>	<b>7 5 2</b> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 5px auto;"/> <b>A Q T</b>

You can try a finesse in all of these cases, but you must assume that any finesse will fail when you make your original count. The decision to try the finesse must be based on an analysis of the best way to eliminate extra losers.

## OTHER COMBINATIONS

In the example to the right, you could have three losers. But, if the missing cards are split 3-2 (68%) you only have two losers. And, if West has the missing Ace, you might be able to finesse the King and Queen to reduce the count to one loser. A conservative count is two losers.

2 LOSERS
<b>K Q 8 3</b> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 5px auto;"/> <b>7 5 4 2</b>

## FAST AND SLOW LOSERS

There are two types of losers:

- **Fast Loser**

A fast loser is one that defenders can take as soon as they get the lead because they have the high cards in the suit.

- **Slow Loser**

A slow loser is one that defenders can eventually take but only if they can drive out your high cards in the suit.

If you have too many fast losers, your plan should avoid giving up the lead because opponents will be able to defeat the contract. If your losers are slow, you can plan to give up the lead because you will be able to regain the lead before opponents take too many tricks.

### COUNTING LOSERS (1 FAST • 2 SLOW)

#### OPENING LEAD: ♥K

**Listen:** The bidding is no help.

**Observe:** The ♥K should be top of connecting honors. West should have the ♥Q.

**Pause:** Can afford 3 losers.

**Pick:** South should be the master hand because it has the longest and strongest trump suit. The dummy should be the supporting hand.

**Look:** 3 South losers (0 ♠ + 1 slow ♥ + 1 slow ♦ + 1 fast ♣).

**Analyze:** There is no way to eliminate any of the losers.

**Execute:** Take the first trick with the ♥A. Draw trump to ensure the opponents can not ruff any of your winners. Then lead a club to promote two club honors. When you regain the lead take your winners and make the contract.

#### NORTH - DUMMY

♠ A J 6  
♥ J 7 3  
♦ 9 6 4 3  
♣ Q J T

East	South	West	North
Pass	1 ♠	Pass	2 ♠
Pass	4 ♠	Pass	Pass
Pass			

#### SOUTH - DECLARER

♠ K Q T 8 7 4  
♥ A 6  
♦ A 2  
♣ K 4 3

If you pick the dummy as the master hand, you would count six losers (no spades, two slow hearts, three slow diamonds, and one fast club). You would still make the contract but the analysis would be complicated because you would need to decide how to eliminate three losers.

## COUNTING LOSERS (4 FAST • 1 SLOW)

## OPENING LEAD: ♦ J

**Listen:** East should have at least 11 declarer points (opened third seat) and probably at least four diamonds. Since the eight missing diamonds are most likely split 5-3 (47%), East probably started with five.

**Observe:** The ♦ J is probably the highest card in partner's suit. East should have the ♦ A.

**Pick:** South should be the master hand because it has the longest and strongest trump suit. North is the supporting hand.

**Pause:** You can afford 5 South (master hand) losers.

**Look:** You have 5 South (master hand) losers  
(1 slow ♠ + 3 fast ♥ + 1 fast ♦ + 0 ♣).

**Analyze:** There is nothing you can do about the fast losers but you can make an overtrick if a finesse against the ♠ K is successful. Because East opened there is a good chance that East has the ♠ K and the finesse will work.

**Execute:** When you gain the lead in the dummy, lead the ♠ T to draw trump and try the finesse.

## NORTH - DUMMY

♠ J T  
♥ 8 7 4 2  
♦ K 6 2  
♣ A K 5 3

VULNERABLE

West	North	East	South
Pass	Pass	1♦	2♠
Pass	Pass	Pass	

## SOUTH - DECLARER

♠ A Q 9 6 5 4  
♥ 9 6 5  
♦ Q 4  
♣ J 6

VULNERABLE

If you pick the dummy as the master hand you would count nine losers (one spade, four hearts, two diamonds, and two clubs). You would still make the contract but the analysis would be complicated because you would need to decide how to eliminate four losers.

## DRAWING TRUMP

As long as defenders have trump they have the potential to ruff one or more of your winners and defeat the contract. This means that you should usually draw your opponents trump as soon as possible.

You definitely should draw trump if you do not have any more losers than you can afford. You should also draw trump if you plan to promote high cards in a side suit or develop a side suit to create extra winners. If you fail to draw trump and there is a bad distribution of the cards in one or more of the side suits, a defender may be able to ruff a trick and defeat the contract.

## COUNTING LOSERS • DRAWING TRUMP

## OPENING LEAD: ♦ A

**Listen:** East has at least 9 points and five diamonds. West has at least 6 points and 3 diamonds.

**Observe:** The ♦ A should be the highest card in partner's bid suit.

**Pause:** Can afford 3 losers.

**Pick:** South should be the master hand because it has the longest and strongest trump suit.

**Look:** 4 South losers (0 ♠ + 1 fast ♥ + 2 fast ♦ + 1 slow ♣).

**Analyze:** You can expect to lose the two diamonds on the first two tricks. Your only hope is that the missing clubs are split 3-1 (50%) or 2-2 (41%) so that you can develop the fourth club into a winner. But you must draw trump before you can develop the clubs.

**Execute:** When you gain the lead, lead a trump and continue until you drive out the ♥ A. When you regain the lead again, finish drawing trump and then play the clubs.

## NORTH - DUMMY

♠ A 8  
♥ Q 8 7 6  
♦ J 7  
♣ A Q 5 3 2

## VULNERABLE

West	North	East	South
Pass	1♣	1♦	1♥
2♦	2♥	Pass	4♥
Pass	Pass	Pass	

## SOUTH - DECLARER

♠ K Q  
♥ K J T 3 2  
♦ 9 4  
♣ K 8 6 4

## VULNERABLE

## COUNTING LOSERS • DRAWING TRUMP

## OPENING LEAD: ♦ Q

**Listen:** The bidding is no help.

**Observe:** The ♦ Q is probably top of connecting honors in the unbid suit.

**Pick:** South should be the master hand because it has the longest and strongest trump suit. North is the supporting hand.

**Pause:** You can afford 3 South (master hand) losers.

**Look:** You have 3 South (master hand) losers  
(3 fast ♠ + 0 ♥ + 0 ♦ + 0 ♣).

**Analyze:** There is nothing you can do about the fast trump losers although there is a small chance that two of the missing honors will fall on one trick.

**Execute:** You can not risk a defender trumping one of your sure tricks. Everytime you gain the lead, lead a spade to draw trump. If the five missing spades are split 3-2 (68%) and the three missing honors are split 2-1, you might make an overtrick.

## NORTH - DUMMY

♠ T 9 3 2  
♥ A J 4 3  
♦ K 6  
♣ A Q 3

South	West	North	East
1♣	Pass	1♥	Pass
1♠	Pass	4♠	Pass
Pass	Pass		

## SOUTH - DECLARER

♠ J 8 7 4  
♥ K Q 5  
♦ A 4  
♣ K J 8 2

Because you do not need to ruff any tricks to make the four spade contract, this hand would also make four no trump for a slightly better score!