

Notrump Techniques

To Duck or Not To Duck

When you are declaring a notrump contract, your LHO is going to lead either his longest suit or you're his partner's longest suit. He'll know what it is because his partner will have bid it during the auction.

Therefore, the declarer will most likely be short in that suit and stoppers, if they exist at all, will be in short supply.

Often, the best strategy for overcoming this disadvantage is the declarer hold up play. The theory is that with a limited number of stoppers, you, as declarer will use the stopper on the same trick one of the defenders will be playing his last card in the suit. So that when he gets the lead, he will be void in the suit and will have to switch to another suit. Then you hope you will take the necessary tricks before the holder of the long dangerous suit gets the lead again.

For example, say hearts are led and you hold the ace as your only stopper. Say also that you and your dummy hold 6 hearts between you. You would like use that ace on the same trick that your RHO plays his last heart. If LHO started with 5 hearts, then RHO started with two hearts. You play your ace on the second heart. That is, you hold up once.

If, instead you hold only 5 hearts between you and dummy, you play the ace on the 3rd trick; you hold up twice.

There is a rule that helps you compute the number of times to hold up. This is the Rule of Seven. You subtract the total number of cards you and dummy hold in the suit and subtract from 7. The difference is the number of times to hold up. In our example, we held 5 hearts. Five from seven is 2; we hold up two times.

What's the danger if we use the ace too early? When either opponent later gets the lead they can resume the hearts. What's the danger of waiting too long? You've given the opponents an extra trick which might be one too many for you to make your contract.

How do you know how many cards LHO started with? Assume it was five. If it was, in fact, only four cards, they can only take 3 heart tricks and you can afford to lose an outside suit to either opponent. If LHO started with six hearts, you'll find out when the third heart is led.

It's only when one opponent holds five cards that you have to be very careful about ducking.

Let's play a hand that demonstrates the classic holdup play.

Play Deal NTT 1-1 (PAB1-1) Dealer is North; declarer is North

D 1	N North	WES NOF EAS SOL
	♠AJ3 ♥AK43 ♦QJ42 ♣J6	1N P 2♣ P 2♥ P 3N P P P
W West		E East
♠10865 ♥J96 ♦A97 ♣K54		♠92 ♥Q107 ♦K10853 ♣732
	S South	
	♠KQ74 ♥852 ♦6 ♣AQ1098	
3NT North NS: 0 EW: 0		

Let's plan the play for North, the declarer after East leads the ♦5. The fact that he led a low diamond indicates he has 1 or 2 honor in the suit and wants to develop the suit for his primary source of defensive tricks.. Every time the dummy comes down, the declarer must make a plan for his contract. In a notrump contract, he first counts his top tricks and then looks for ways to make up the difference between those top tricks and his contract tricks. Here he has 3 spades, 2 hearts and 1 club; 6 in all. He must develop 3 more and the best place in in the club suit. He needs to finesse in the club suit and depending on the location of the ♣K, he will take 3 or 4 club tricks. The critical feature is the direction of the finesse. If he had to take the finesse into the East hand, it wouldn't matter if he ducks the diamond lead or not. East is the dangerous opponent and a losing finesse will end in failure of the contract.

In this case the losing finesse will be into the West hand, so declarer wants to make sure West is out of diamonds when and if he wins the ♣K. So apply the Rule of 7 and duck twice.

Notice that if North plays the ♦J on the second trick, East will duck and when West later wins the ♣K, he will send his last diamond thru declarer's remaining stopper for a total of 4 hearts and 1 club.

But just as important as the duck in many hands, there will be many hands where you shouldn't duck.

Play Deal NTT 1-2 (PAB17-5) Dealer is East; declarer is South

2 D	N North	WES NOF EAS SOL
	♠754 ♥QJ4 ♦4 ♣QJ10876	P 3N P 2N P P P
W West		E East
♠Q6 ♥K10853 ♦KJ98 ♣95		♠J10983 ♥92 ♦762 ♣A43
	S South	
	♠AK2 ♥A76 ♦AQ1053 ♣K2	
3NT South NS: 0 EW: 0		

West leads the ♥5 in South's 3NT contract. The top tricks consist of 2 spades, 1 heart, and 1 diamond. Declarer needs 5 more tricks and they can come from clubs, once the ♣A in knocked out. The declarer and dummy, together hold 6 hearts so many would hold up 1 time. That would be correct if exhausting East of hearts was the only consideration.

Look at the clubs. A good East, will hold up his ♣A until declarer has played his last club. That will be apparent by virtue of the cards West plays to the club leads. He will start with his ♣9 and follow with the ♣5, showing an even number of cards. This must be a doubleton and therefore, South must have started with a doubleton. East will play the ♣A on the second trick.

Now declarer needs a dummy entry to run the rest of the clubs. This must be in the heart suit. But to get to the dummy, he will have to lead to the ♥QJ twice. If he ducks the first trick, or even puts up the ♥J on the first trick, he will never get to the dummy. West will put up the ♥K on the first try, and the declarer will become blocked in his hand with the ♥A.

Here's another example of when not to duck:

Play Deal NTT 1-3 (PAB 17-3) Dealer is South; declarer is North

3		N North		WES N O F EAS S O U	
D		♠AJ5		P P 1N P 3N	
		♥A43		P P P	
		♦KJ102			
		♣A65			
W West		E East			
♠8632		♠KQ109			
♥K76		♥QJ109			
♦9875		♦64			
♣43		♣K72			
		S South			
		♠74			
		♥852			
		♦AQ3			
		♣QJ1098			
3NT North					
NS: 0					
EW: 0					

East leads the ♠K against North's 3NT contract. Declarer has 7 top tricks: 1 spade, 1 heart, 4 diamonds and 1 club. He must get the additional 2 tricks from clubs. Depending on the location of the ♣K, he can get 3 or 4 more club tricks. He has 5 total spade and from the Rule of 7, he would have to duck 2 times. However, notice the direction of the club finesse. He must take the finesse into the East hand and if it loses it will lose to the dangerous opponent; the opponent with the long spades.

Notice also, that North holds the ♠J which can serve as a stopper if East and only if East gets the lead. Since there is no danger of West getting the lead, declarer should win the first spade and go directly to the dummy in diamonds and run the ♣Q. East will win the ♣K on the first or second trick and will only be able to take 1 more spade before giving up the lead to the declarer.

Let's play another and see if we can decide whether to duck or not:

Play Deal NTT 1-4 (PAB 23-7) Dealer is West; declarer is West

D 4	N North	WES: NOR: EAS: SOL
	♠K10542 ♥J108 ♦73 ♣752	P 1N P 3N P P P
W West	E East	
♠AJ9 ♥A653 ♦AK94 ♣109	♠863 ♥742 ♦QJ10 ♣AQJ8	
	S South	
	♠Q7 ♥KQ9 ♦8652 ♣K643	
3NT North NS: 0 EW: 0		

North leads the ♠4 against West's 3NT contract. The declarer has 1 spade, 1 heart, 4 diamonds and 1 club; 7 in total. He needs two more and the can come from clubs. But here, the finesse will be into South and South is the dangerous hand. He must not be allowed to lead a spade back to North. Therefore, the spades must be extracted and the Rule of 7 must be used to compute the number of times spades must be ducked. $7-6=1$. West must take the second spade. Now when South wins the ♣K, he will not have any spades left.

Play Deal NTT 1-5 (PAB 19-7) Dealer is North; declarer is North

D 5	N North	WES: NOR: EAS: SOL
	♠A73 ♥A104 ♦J82 ♣AQJ10	1N P 3N P P P
W West	E East	
♠KQ109 ♥KJ95 ♦K5 ♣863	♠8652 ♥Q763 ♦43 ♣972	
	S South	
	♠J4 ♥82 ♦AQ10976 ♣K54	
3NT North NS: 0 EW: 0		

East leads the ♥3 against North's 3NT contract. The declarer makes his plan. He counts top tricks: 1 spade, 1 heart, 1 diamond and 4 clubs. He needs only one extra diamond trick for his contract. Should he hold up? No. There are two reasons not to hold up. First, the lead is from a 4-card heart suit. You know this because of the lead of the ♥3. The only card lower is sitting in the dummy. Leading the 4th best, West must be leading from a 4-card suit. The second reason not to hold up is that South can win the trick and switch to spades. South will knock out the ♠A. Then, when the defenders take their ♦K, they can gather 3 more spade and two more hearts. By taking the first trick and attacking diamonds right away, you give the defenders only 3 hearts and ♦K.

Play Deal NTT 1-6 (PAB 1-2) Dealer is East; declarer is South

6		D		N North		WES NOR EAS SOL	
				♠754		P 1♠ P 1N	
				♥J93		P 3N P P	
				♦KQJ109		P	
				♣62			
W West		E East					
♠9832		♠106					
♥874		♥KQ10					
♦832		♦A65					
♣1094		♣KJ875					
				S South			
				♠AKQJ			
				♥A652			
				♦74			
				♣AQ3			
3NT South							
NS: 0							
EW: 0							

There will be a few times that the defenders should hold up in a notrump contract. This is such a deal.

East opens 1♣ and South doubles. He is too strong to overcall 1NT. This shows a maximum of 18 points. So he doubles and plan to rebid 1NT on the next round. North will raise him to 3NT.

West leads his partner's suit, the ♣10. When you haven't supported your partner, it is standard to lead your highest card in his suit. When you have supported him in the bidding, lead the card that shows count. Here, it would have been the ♣4.

Declarer wins the first trick and counts 7 top tricks. 4 spades, 1 hear, and 2 clubs, given the lead. He attacks diamonds immediately. East sees he must hold up because the declarer has no outside entries to the dummy. If East thinks declarer holds 3 diamonds in his hand, he may hold up twice. That give declarer the two needed tricks and he will run for home. If East takes the first trick, declarer will easily return to diamonds after he win the next trick. East must hold up exactly once. How does he know this? By the way West plays his cards. If he plays the ♦2 on the first diamond lead, East will know he started with an odd number of diamonds. If he started with only 1 diamond, the declarer has a clear path to success. So East assumes his partner started with 3 diamonds. That means declarer started with only 2 diamonds and he will capture the second diamond lead with his ♦A to defeat the contract.

Play Deal NTT 1-7 (PAB 24-2) Dealer is South; declarer is East

7		D		N North		WES NOR EAS SOL	
				♠92		P P 1N P P	
				♥J1082		3N P P P	
				♦J983			
				♣A76			
W West		E East					
♠A74		♠K65					
♥Q65		♥AK3					
♦K42		♦A76					
♣J953		♣Q1084					
				S South			
				♠QJ1083			
				♥974			
				♦Q105			
				♣K2			
3NT East							
NS: 0							
EW: 0							

South leads the ♠Q against East's 3NT contract. Declarer makes a plan by counting top winners. He has 2 spades, 3 hearts and 2 diamond; 7 in total. He needs 2 more and they must come from clubs. He first decision is what to do with the spade lead. If he

wins it, he is set. When declarer leads the first club, the defender with the short spades should try to win the first trick. Then he can use his remaining spade to knock out the second stopper. Now when South wins the ♣K he will be in a position to clear the spade suit.

It is a different story if declarer ducks the first trick. North will return a spade and now he will not have another spade to lead when he wins the ♣A. The guideline here is when you have two stoppers in the defenders' suit and you have two stoppers to knock out in your own suit, you should always duck the first trick.

Play Deal NTT 1-8 (PAB 23-8) Dealer is West; declarer is West

D 8	N North	WES NOR EAS SOU 1N P 3N P P P
	♠K10542 ♥J108 ♦K3 ♣752	
W West	E East	
♠AJ9 ♥A653 ♦A984 ♣K9	♠863 ♥742 ♦QJ10 ♣AQJ10	
3NT West NS: 0 EW: 0	S South	
	♠Q7 ♥KQ9 ♦7652 ♣8643	

The lead from North is the ♠4 and the contract is 3NT by West.

Declarer counts top tricks. He has 1 spade, 1 heart, 1 diamond and 4 clubs; 7 in total. He plans to get the extra 2 tricks in diamonds and will take the finesse against the ♦K. Should he duck the first trick? No need to. He is going to take the finesse into the North hand, where he is safe from a heart attack. He should win the first trick with the ♠A and lead the ♣K to the ♣A. Then he can lead the top diamonds and get back to the dummy with his ♣10.

In summary, I'll say that not every notrump deal requires you to duck – even when you hold a single stopper. When it does require, use the Rule of 7 to determine the number of times to duck. But first consider whether it's necessary and whether it's safe.