§53. Safety Plays and Precaution Plays.

By the end of this chapter you should understand the following terms:

A Precaution Play: A play in a suit made to take care of abnormal or bad breaks. A *precaution play* does not cost any tricks, it simply aims to minimise potential losses.

A Safety Play: *A play in a suit in such a manner as to protect against an abnormal or bad break in that suit, thereby minimising the danger of losing the contract*. (Encyclopaedia of Bridge. 1975 ed.)

This chapter is concerned with how to handle certain suit combinations to best advantage. Some of these are within the context of a full deal and some can be considered by themselves.

Let's look at a couple of *precaution plays* to start with.

Ex 1.	**Ex 2.**
♠ K 10 8 7 6 N W E S ♠ A Q 9 3	♥ K 8 7 6 5 N W E S ♥ A Q 9 3

In Example 1 you have to make five Spade tricks; in Example 2 you have to make five Heart tricks. You may assume plenty of outside entries in both hands. What is the essential difference, though?

The only thing that might go wrong in either case is a 4-0 split. In Example 1, you must cash (or lead to) the Ace first. If all follow suit, then the suit is 3-1 or 2-2 and everything is hunky-dory; you can simply carry on playing high cards from the top. If, though, someone shows out you can take a *marked finesse* through the ♠J × × ×, whoever has the four-card holding.

Example 2 may look the same but certainly isn't. You are missing ♥J 10 × × this time and if West has them you are doomed to defeat – you have a certain Heart loser. However, you can pick the suit up for five tricks should East have all four. To discover the lie of the land, you must cash the ♥K first. If East shows out, you have an inevitable loser. If West shows out, though, you have a *double marked finesse*. You lead up to the ♥A Q 9 and, should East *split his honours*, you'd return to the North hand and repeat the marked finesse.

There are any number of suit combinations to study (*The Encyclopaedia of Bridge* 1975 edition has 54 closely detailed pages of examples!) – we suggest you confine yourselves to the more common positions, such as Examples 1 and 2 for starters.

There are also hands that involve the idea of *safety finesses*. Hand 1 provides such an example. Suppose you were playing in 4♠ as South against the lead of the ♦K. How should you play?

Hand 1
South plays in 4♠.
West leads the ♦K.

	♠ J 10 9 3 ♥ A K Q J ♦ J 6 ♣ 7 3 2	
♠ 7 ♥ 8 6 4 3 ♦ K Q 10 9 2 ♣ A 5 4	N W E S	♠ Q 6 4 ♥ 7 5 2 ♦ 7 5 4 ♣ Q J 10 9
	♠ A K 8 5 2 ♥ 10 9 ♦ A 8 3 ♣ K 8 6	

The danger on the deal is that East might gain the lead and fire a Club through the unprotected ♣K. West, however, is no danger to you if on lead. This concept has echoes with the ideas of the *danger hand* and the *safe hand* when playing applying the hold-up in No-trumps. (See §29 and §51).

You should take the ♦A, cash the ♠A, cross to a Heart and run the ♠J. If West were to win (with the doubleton Queen of trumps) your contract would be in no danger as West could not attack Clubs from his side of the table. Eventually, you'd make four Spades, four Hearts, a Diamond and a Diamond ruff on table. As the cards lie, you actually make an overtrick. Virtue has its rewards. Sometimes…

Safety Plays.

Now let's look at the idea of a *safety play* (or two).

Ex 3. ♦ A Q 7 6 N W E S ♦ 8 5 4 3 2	**Ex 4.** ♣ 9 7 6 2 N W E S ♣ A Q 10 8 3

How would you handle the Diamond suit in Example 3 and the Club suit in Example 4? Again, assume plenty of outside entries to both hands.

The key point is that these questions are *in context of the full deal*, because the important, even crucial subsidiary question is, "*How many tricks do I need from these suits*?". And the answer to that question determines how you should play them.

Suppose, first, that you require **five** tricks in both cases. Now you would need some luck. In Example 1, you have to hope that the finesse is successful and that the suit breaks 2-2. With Example 2 you have the slight additional chance that West has the singleton Jack.

In both cases, you play a small card from the hand with small cards and finesse the Queen. If that holds, you call for the Ace and cross your fingers. Your chances of success? Around 20%, so not very good.

Now suppose that you only require **four tricks** in each case. Taking the finesse is now the wrong play. The idea here (and the idea in all *safety plays*) is to maximise your chances of making the desired number of tricks while giving up the chance of making the maximum number of tricks.

To clarify: here you should play the Ace in both occasions. If nothing interesting happens (if the King does not fall singleton), you cross to the other hand and lead up to the Queen. This way, you are able to make four tricks whenever it is possible to do so (whenever the suit is 2-2, whenever it is 3-1 with the King lying onside and when the King is singleton offside). However, by this play you can never make five tricks in Diamonds (Example 3) and rarely in Clubs (Example 4).

> To reiterate: *A safety play maximises your chances of making the desired number of tricks while giving up the chance of making the maximum number of tricks*.

Now, a completely different type of *safety play* is seen in the following type of deal (Hand 2). How would you play 3NT as South against the lead of the ♠Q?

Hand 2
South plays in 3NT.
West leads the ♠Q.

	♠ K ♥ 9 7 3 ♦ A K Q 7 6 3 ♣ 8 6 4	
♠ Q J 10 9 7 ♥ K 5 ♦ J 10 9 4 ♣ K 10	N W E S	♠ 8 5 3 ♥ Q J 10 6 ♦ 5 ♣ Q 9 5 3 2
	♠ A 6 4 2 ♥ A 8 4 2 ♦ 8 2 ♣ A J 7	

Your **Count** and **Plan** shows you that you have a potential ten tricks (two Spades, one Heart, six Diamonds and one Club) but that count is based on a 3-2 Diamond split. Suppose Diamonds were 4-1? With no entries to the dummy, now that the ♠K has gone, you could make no more than three Diamond tricks and seven in all.

The *safety play* is to duck a Diamond at trick two, giving up on making six Diamond tricks, but just about guaranteeing making five. And five Diamond tricks are all you need to fulfil your contract. Thus, you are prepared *make a play in Diamonds in such a manner as to protect against an abnormal or bad break in that suit, thereby minimising the danger of losing the contract*. (See the definition in the box at the head of this chapter).

§53. Quiz on Safety Plays and Precaution Plays.

Here are three full deals for you to try.

In each case you are South, declarer. Obviously, your first act is to **Count** and **Plan**.

The Preliminary Analysis talks you through the first trick or two. What is your best subsequent play?

The answers are overleaf.

Q1.
How should you play in 3NT?
West leads the ♥Q.

Preliminary Analysis.

You reach 3NT after an invitational sequence. West leads the ♥Q and your **Count** and **Plan** reveals that you need four Club tricks for your contract.

Can you **guarantee** this against any adverse distribution?

♠ 9 5 2
♥ A 6
♦ A 7 4
♣ Q J 7 5 2

Dummy
W E
Declarer

♠ A 7 6 3
♥ K 5
♦ K 8 3
♣ A 9 4 3

West	North	East	South
			1NT
Pass	2♠[1]	Pass	3♣[2]
Pass	3NT	Pass	Pass
Pass			
3NT by South		Opening lead: ♥Q	

1. Raise to 2NT or a very strong hand.
2. Maximum 1NT with no five-card suit.

Q2.
How should you play in 4♥?
West leads the ♣A.

Preliminary Analysis.

A deal from the mists of time.

It comes from Great Britain vs The Netherlands in a long-ago Ladies' European Championships.

One declarer made an overtrick, the other failed. How should you play it?

♠ K 9 7 2
♥ 7 5
♦ K Q 5 4 2
♣ K 5

Dummy
W E
Declarer

♠ A Q
♥ A Q 10 8 4 3 2
♦ 7 3
♣ Q 7

West	North	East	South
			1♥
3♣[1]	Dble[2]	Pass	4♥
Pass	Pass	Pass	
4♥ by South		Opening lead: ♣A	

1. Weak, pre-emptive.
2. Negative, for take-out.

Q3.
How should you play in 3NT?
West leads the ♠Q.

Preliminary Analysis.

You reach 3NT after opening 1♠. Despite this, West leads the ♠Q and your **Count** and **Plan** reveals that you need three Heart tricks for your contract.

You cannot guarantee this, but how can you maximise your chances?

♠ 6 4
♥ K J 4 3
♦ K 7 4
♣ A 8 3 2

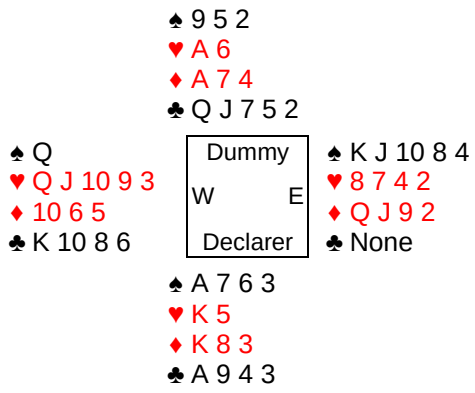
Dummy
W E
Declarer

♠ A K 7 3
♥ A 6 2
♦ A Q 3
♣ 7 6 4

West	North	East	South
			1♠
Pass	2♣	Pass	3NT
Pass	Pass	Pass	
3NT by South		Opening lead: ♠Q	

Answers.

A1.

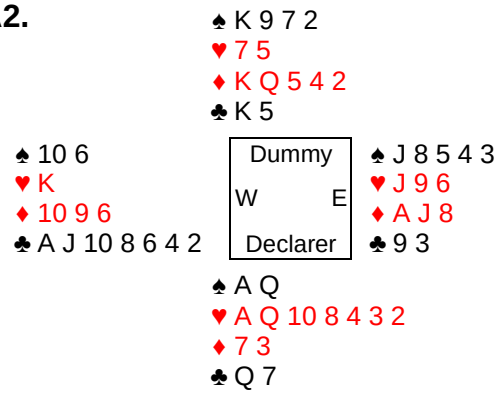


You play in 3NT and receive the ♥Q lead. Your **Count** and **Plan** reveals that you have one Spade, two Hearts and two Diamonds, so four Clubs would swell the coffers to nine.

Any non-foolish play would work if Clubs split 2-2 or 3-1; the key is to make 3NT against either 4-0 break. The way to do that is to win the Heart lead in hand with the King and to lead a low Club towards the Queen. Here, the Jack wins (West can gain nothing by playing the King *on air*), so you come to hand with the ♣A and play another Club.

If East held all four Clubs you'd still be fine. After the ♣J lost to the ♣K you'd be able to take the marked finesse of the ♣9 to pick the suit up.

A2.

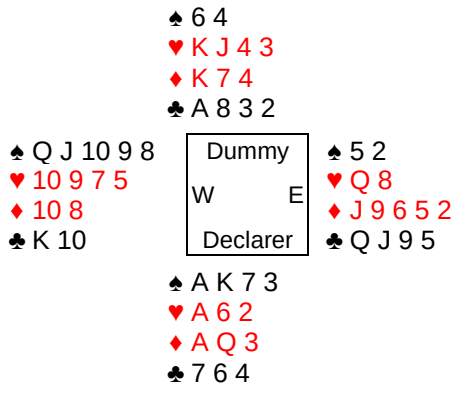


Both tables in a Ladies' International match played this in 4♥ after West had shown long Clubs. Both Wests led the ♣A and another Club, hoping to find partner with a singleton. Winning on the dummy, what should you do?

The unsuccessful declarer played a Heart to the ♥Q at trick three. Later, after an agony of indecision, she tried the ♥A, hoping for a 2-2 trump split – and lost two Hearts and two Aces for one off.

The successful declarer knew her *suit combinations*. At trick three she played a Heart to the ♥A. When the King fell, she crossed to dummy, finessed the ♥10, drew the last trump and claimed an overtrick.

A3.



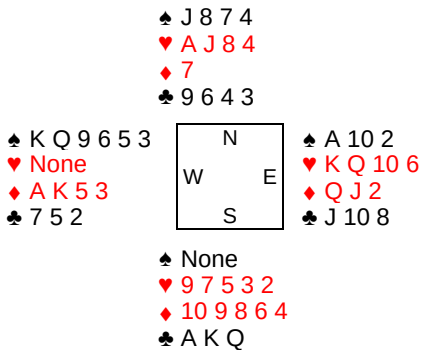
You play this one in 3NT after you have opened 1♠, despite which, West leads one. You can count six top tricks outside Hearts, so need three Heart tricks; what is the best way of doing that?

Intuitively, you may feel you should play a Heart to the ♥J; should that lose you later hope for a 3-3 split. In fact, you can improve on that by cashing the ♥K, the ♥A and then leading up to the ♥J. This provides three tricks whenever it is possible to make them – whenever Hearts are 3-3, whenever West has the ♥Q and whenever East has the ♥Q singleton or doubleton.

This is the essence of a *safety play* in that you give up any chance of four Heart tricks (when West has ♥Q × ×) for an increased chance of three tricks in the suit.

§53. Example hands 1 to 4.

Hand 1 Love all, dealer North

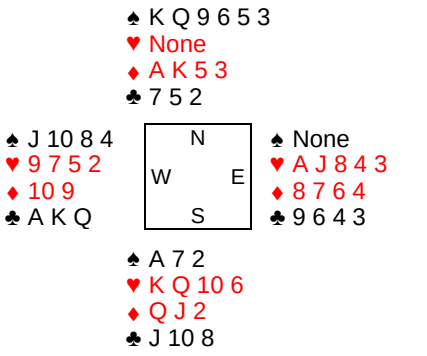


West	North	East	South
	Pass	1NT	Pass
2♥	Pass	2♠	Pass
4♠	Pass	Pass	Pass

4♠ by East — Opening lead: ♣A

East declares 4♠ after an opening bid of 1NT and a transfer sequence. South cashes the three top Clubs and East has to make the rest of the tricks by **not** losing a trump trick. Taking the Diamond switch at trick four in hand, declarer must play a Spade to the ♠Q next. This is a *precaution play* in Spades; if Spades were 2-2 or 3-1 East could simply draw all the trumps and claim the game. If either opponent shows out (as South does here) there is a *marked finesse* against North's ♠J. Here, declarer continues with a Spade to the ♠10, the ♠A, a Heart ruff on table as entry (careful! **Not** another Diamond), in order to draw the last trump and claim the contract.

Hand 2 North-South game, dealer East

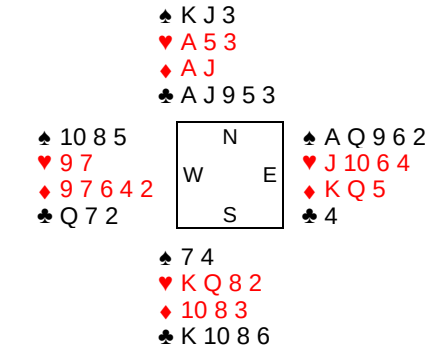


West	North	East	South
		Pass	1NT
Pass	2♥	Pass	2♠
Pass	4♠	All Pass	

4♠ by South — Opening lead: ♣A

This may look like Hand 1 but looks are deceptive; this is not the same. Again, the contract is 4♠ and, again, West cashes three top Clubs before switching to the ♦10. Now what? Well, if ♠J 10 × × were all with East the contract would be doomed as there would be no finesse position. The only 4-0 break that can be catered for is if West is the culprit hoarding all four trumps. To cater for this, South takes the Diamond switch in hand and cashes the ♠A. Now, after East shows out, he has a *double marked finesse* to led Spades twice and pick the suit up, using the ♦Q as entry. Another *precaution play* against the one unpleasant distribution South can deal with.

Hand 3 East-West game, dealer South

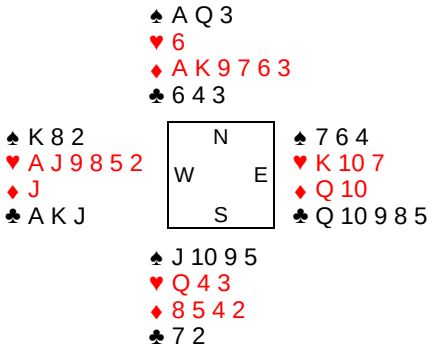


West	North	East	South
			Pass
Pass	1♣	1♠	Dble
Pass	3NT	All Pass	

3NT by North — Opening lead: ♠6

North plays in 3NT after East has overcalled 1♠. East duly leads his long suit and North is off to a flier when he wins trick one with the ♠J. The contract is now in danger only if West were to gain the lead to fire a Spade through North's remaining ♠K ×. North's **Count** and **Plan** tells him that he only needs four Club tricks, so can afford to lose one – as long as it's not to West. Accordingly, he plays the ♣K next and runs the ♣10 as a *safety finesse*. Declarer doesn't mind the finesse losing as East could do no harm to the contract if on lead. As it happens, the finesse works, so declarer wraps up one Spade, three Hearts, one Diamond and five Clubs for an overtrick.

Hand 4 Game all, dealer West



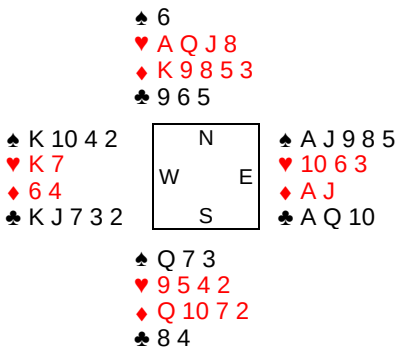
West	North	East	South
1♥	2♦	2♥	Pass
4♥	Pass	Pass	Pass

4♥ by West — Opening lead: ♠K

This deal has echoes of Hand 3; it's another *safety finesse*. West plays in 4♥ after North has overcalled in Diamonds and East has dredged up a Heart raise. North leads the two top Diamonds and West's **Count** and **Plan** can see potential losers in Spades, trumps and Diamonds. As against that, he can see ten winners, if he can get at them (five Hearts and five Clubs). The danger is that South might gain the lead and fire a Spade through the unprotected King. The solution is to ruff the second Diamond and to finesse trumps through South. No matter if North were to win a trump trick with ♥Q ×, he could do no damage. As it is, West can draw trumps, cash out the long Clubs and secure a deserved overtrick for his pains.

§53. Example hands 5 to 8.

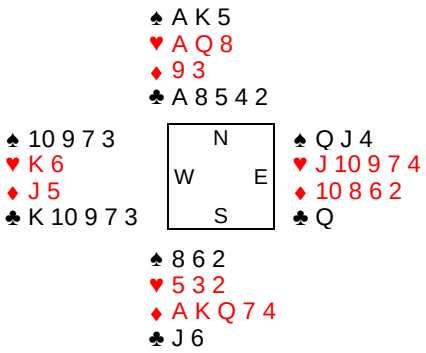
Hand 5 North-South game, dealer North



West	North	East	South
	Pass	1♠	Pass
3♠	Pass	4♠	All Pass
4♠ by East		Opening lead: ♦2	

The third deal in a row that features a *safety finesse*. East plays in 4♠ and South decides to attack by leading a Diamond, hoping to establish a trick there. North obligingly produces the ♦K and now 4♠ is in trouble. If declarer were to win, cash the two top Spades and play on Clubs he would be defeated; South would ruff the third Club, play a Heart through the ♥K and the defence would make two Hearts, a trump and a Diamond. This hand requires two pieces of astute declarer play to protect the ♥K from attack by South. Firstly, East has to duck the ♦K at trick one. Next, he has to take the trump finesse through South, not caring if North were to win. 4♠ is safe now. Yes, an initial Heart lead might defeat 4♠.

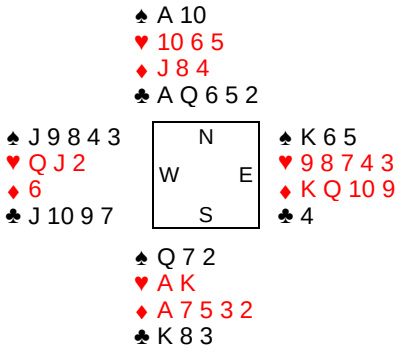
Hand 6 East-West game, dealer East



West	North	East	South
		Pass	Pass
Pass	1♣	Pass	1♦
Pass	2NT	Pass	3NT
3NT by North		Opening lead: ♥J	

The first of two deals that feature *safety plays* where declarer sacrifices a potential overtrick for a greater chance of making his contract. Here, North plays in 3NT and receives a Heart lead round into the ♥A Q. Declarer's **Count** and **Plan** shows him five top tricks outside Diamonds, so four tricks in that suit will suffice. Playing off the ♦A K Q would make all five Diamond tricks (and ten in all) if Diamonds were 3-3 but with dummy having no entry would lead to defeat in the more likely event of a 4-2 split. To maximise the chance of nine tricks, North should **duck a Diamond** at trick two. Winning the return, North can play off the ♦A K Q, making the ♦7 as his ninth trick.

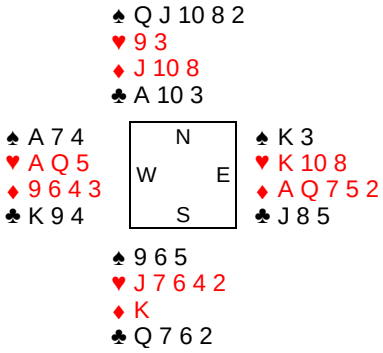
Hand 7 Game all, dealer South



West	North	East	South
			1♦
Pass	2♣	Pass	2NT
Pass	3NT	All Pass	
3NT by South		Opening lead: ♠4	

South plays in 3NT and the defence starts off with a Spade lead to dummy's ♠10 and East's ♠K and a Spade return knocking out the Ace. South's **Count** and **Plan** reveals five top tricks outside of Clubs, so four tricks in that suit will make up the shortfall. Declarer may think of playing off the ♣K, the ♣Q and then hope to run the remaining Clubs, but that is a case of making ten tricks (on a 3-2 Club split) or eight (if Clubs break 4-1). To maximise the chance of making the contract, South should duck a Club, either at trick three or by cashing the ♣K and then ducking one. This *safety play* gives up on overtricks but does all but guarantee the contract.

Hand 8 Love all, dealer West



West	North	East	South
1NT	Pass	3NT	Pass
Pass	Pass		
3NT by West		Opening lead: ♠Q	

West's **Count** and **Plan** in 3NT shows him five top tricks in the majors, so four Diamond tricks would be enough to record his game. If West required **five** Diamond winners, he'd need to find North with precisely ♦K ×, a 20% chance. As it is, four Diamond tricks require much less in the way of good fortune. To maximise the chances, declarer should play the ♦A first and then, if nothing interesting happens, cross to hand with a Heart and play a Diamond towards the ♦Q. This picks up four tricks in the suit on all 2-2 breaks, on all 3-1 breaks when North has the King and this one, where the ♦K is singleton offside. This is a classic *safety play*, giving up on five Diamond tricks but giving a greater chance of four.

