

Coping with 4-0 trump breaks

We've all been there. You're looking a nine-card trump fit, missing the queen, perhaps something like this:

♠A5432 ♠KJ97

If you could afford one loser, but definitely not two, you would make the safety play of a low card to the king first, ready to cope with a 4-0 break either way. More often, though, you would like to play the suit for no loser. So you start with the ace and both defenders follow low. You continue with a small one and North plays the ten. Do you finesse or play for the drop? Other things being equal, the odds very slightly favour playing for the drop. But other things very rarely are equal. There are, no doubt, numerous pointers in the bidding and play so far. There may be advantages in losing a trick to one defender rather than the other, should you guess wrong. The minutes go by as you weigh up all the factors. Eventually, you make your decision, cross your fingers and ... that is *so* unlucky!

This article is not about how to get more of those guesses right. It's about coping with 4-0 breaks. The secret is in anticipation and forward planning. If you're too busy thinking about the potential 2-2s and 3-1s, you've probably missed your chance! Here's a deal that came up in the Dawes (Midland) League recently – indeed, it was the penultimate board of the entire season and helped to settle the final placings:

| | | | |
|---------|---------------|---|----------|
| N/S Vul | Dealer: South | | |
| ♠KJ763 | N | | ♠A985 |
| ♥– | W | E | ♥543 |
| ♦AK1084 | S | | ♦– |
| ♣764 | | | ♣QJ10932 |

The auction was quite lively:

| West | North | East | South |
|------|-------|----------|-------|
| | | | Pass |
| 1♠ | 2♥ | 3♥ | Dble |
| 4♦ | 5♥ | 5♠ | Pass |
| Pass | Dble | All Pass | |

East's 3♥ was intended to show a 'good' raise to 3♠ while 4♦ was either lead-directing or a control-showing slam-try. Over North's surprising jump to 5♥, East (your partner) has, quite reasonably, taken the push to 5♠ and North has expressed his opinion of that contract's prospects with a double.

When no one has anything further to say, North leads the ♣K. North/South are playing standard defensive methods, so the king asks for count. South follows with the eight. North then switches to the ♥A and you are obliged to ruff in hand. What now? Take your time...

Declarer, as at other tables, was quick to play a small trump from hand, planning to put up the ace, ready to make a big decision on the second round of the suit. It was no

great surprise when North discarded a heart, revealing that South had started with ♠Q1042. Good news, surely? We can play to run the ♠9 and, if that's covered, win with the jack, and repeat the finesse when we get back to dummy...

The bad news is that 5♠ doubled can't be made from here against accurate defence. Perhaps we should have thought a bit longer before leading that trump?

Understanding where we went wrong is, perhaps a bit easier if we look at the full deal:

| | | | |
|-----------|---------|----------|--|
| N/S Vul | ♠- | | |
| Dealer: S | ♥AQ9876 | | |
| | ♦QJ975 | | |
| | ♣AK | | |
| ♠KJ763 | N | ♠A985 | |
| ♥- | W E | ♥543 | |
| ♦AK1084 | S | ♦- | |
| ♣764 | | ♣QJ10932 | |
| | ♠Q1042 | | |
| | ♥KJ102 | | |
| | ♦632 | | |
| | ♣85 | | |

The club position, as seemed likely after trick one, is very favourable for declarer. We can establish the suit without sustaining a ruff and get back to dummy with the third round of the suit once trumps are out of the way. It's just the 4-0 trump break that needs to be anticipated.

Here the key is to start with the ♦A and ♦K at tricks three and four, discarding dummy's remaining hearts. Only then should we play a spade to the ace. When North shows out on this trick, we are ready. We continue with the ♠9. Let's say South plays low and the nine holds the trick. Now we switch to clubs, knocking out North's ace. Whichever red suit North returns, we ruff on table, take the marked finesse of the ♠J, draw South's last trump with the king, and claim four club tricks on the table.

See the difference if you miss that diamond play. After the ♠9 is allowed to hold and a club is led, North has only to return a heart and you are forced to ruff it with the ♠J in hand. South still has the ♠Q10 and therefore a certain setting trick.

Would it have been any better to lead the ♠5 towards the ♠KJ76? No. This time, a canny South would stick in the ten (or queen). Declarer wins and tries a club but dummy is then forced to ruff the heart return with the ♠9 or the ♠8. When the other one of those is now led, South plays the four and the suit is blocked for declarer.

All that pain could have been avoided if only the 4-0 trump break had been anticipated and the ♦A and ♦K had been cashed before testing trumps. Well done if you saw the need for that.

See if you can repeat your success on this lot:

E/W Vul Dealer: North

| | | | |
|---------|---|---|-------|
| ♠6 | | N | ♠A985 |
| ♥AKQ | W | E | ♥72 |
| ♦AK2 | | S | ♦8543 |
| ♣KJ7532 | | | ♣A64 |

This time you get a clear run at the bidding:

| West | North | East | South |
|------|----------|------|-------|
| | Pass | Pass | Pass |
| 1♣ | Pass | 1♦ | Pass |
| 3♣ | Pass | 3♠ | Pass |
| 3NT | Pass | 4♣ | Pass |
| 4NT | Pass | 5♥ | Pass |
| 6♣ | All Pass | | |

That's one possible auction to the reasonable club slam with 5♥ as a Blackwood response showing two of the five 'aces' and *not* the ♣Q. Anyway, the play's the thing. North leads the ♥J. How do you plan the play in 6♣?

Dummy has the two promised aces but few other potential tricks. There seems to be no way of avoiding a diamond loser. So the contract will surely hinge on picking up the trumps for no loser. We will start with the ace and, unless the queen appears, face a tricky decision on the second round. Finesse the ♣J or play for the drop? There will be few clues to guide us...

You've probably guessed what happens. You lead a small club to the ace at trick two and one of the defenders shows out – let's say it's South who discards a heart. What!? Is it time to give up and go home, reasonably hopeful that nobody will be making 3NT or 5♣ either?

But perhaps you have remembered this article and considered the possibility of a 4-0 trump break *before* playing to trick two. All hope is far from lost. This is the lie of the cards that would give you a chance:

E/W Vul ♠Q1042
 Dealer: N ♥J108
 ♦J6
 ♣Q1098

| | | |
|---------|--------|-------|
| ♠6 | N | ♠A985 |
| ♥AKQ | W E | ♥72 |
| ♦AK2 | S | ♦8543 |
| ♣KJ7532 | | ♣A64 |
| | ♠KJ73 | |
| | ♥96543 | |
| | ♦Q1097 | |
| | ♣— | |

The key to success is to plan for a trump-reduction *before* you test the layout of the club suit. You need to cross to the ♠A and ruff a spade before trying a trump to the ace. If both defenders follow to the ♣A, it really is time for an inspired guess on the second round of trumps. But when South shows out, there is no guess to be made and you can proceed with Plan B. Ruff another spade. Cash the ♥K, then ruff the ♥Q! Cross those fingers ... ruff the fourth spade. Phew! Both defenders have followed suit.

Continue with the ♦A and ♦K. When North is obliged to follow to both of these cards, it is time to stand on your chair and wave the flags about. With as much casualness as you can muster, you plonk the ♦2 on the table. North, with ♣Q109 as his last three cards, is obliged to ruff and lead from the ♣Q10 into your ♣KJ. 6♣ bid and made!

"Sorry, got a bit lucky with the 4-0 trump break," you say. "3-1 offside would have left me with no play."

While it is true that you needed to find North with a 4-3-2-4 shape exactly, you reflect that this was far from unlikely (after the trump break is revealed), given the fact that neither North nor South took the chance to open the bidding at green. ("The more I practise, the luckier I get," as Gary Player is believed to have said.) You would also have made 6♣ had South been the defender with a 4-3-2-4 shape.

On both of these deals, the 4-0 break saves you a tricky guess and the key is to make the right preliminary moves before getting the "bad" news.

