



## Declarer Play -Establishing long suits

Today we're going to look at a wonderful source of extra tricks, that crops up often when you are declarer – long suits.

We will be looking at both NT and suit contracts – there are some obvious differences, but also a lot of common features.

As soon as the opening lead is played, and dummy is tabled, we need to count and plan. We need to identify NOW, before we play to the first trick, whether we have a long suit that might be established to yield extra tricks, and whether to include that in our plan.

Often things go wrong by a hasty play on trick 1, before you've thought things through properly. You have that sinking feeling when you realize you've already blown your chances - it's too late to recover.

Taking time to plan your play, BEFORE playing your card from dummy to trick 1, is a key part of how to get better results- and it will give you the chance to think about establishing a long suit for that vital extra trick or two (or more!)

In this lesson we're going to explore how to work out whether a long suit might be profitably established.

As all good players know, long suits are like gold dust. Little cards in a long suit will make tricks, once all the opposition's high cards in that suit are gone (and in the case of a suit contract, opposition trumps have been drawn). However, it's easy to fail to spot the opportunity, as we are used to concentrating on our high cards, and the tricks they will take.

So, how can we tell if we might be able to set up (ie establish) a long suit, and take advantage of the long cards to win tricks? An obvious consideration is **how many cards we are missing in the suit**, and how they will **split**.

As a first assumption, we will plan on the most likely distribution. Unless we have extra information, eg from the bidding, we will assume

- Missing an odd number of cards, they will split as evenly as possible, eg 2-1, 3-2.
- Missing an even number of cards, they will split unevenly, eg 2-0, 3-1, 4-2.

Of course, we can't guarantee the split will work like that, but we do need to make assumptions in order to plan. If we embark on the play and encounter a bad split, eg 4-0, we might well have to revise our plan and try some other approach to make our contract.

Bridge is a game of probabilities, and if we understand and play to the odds, over the long term we will get good results.

Here's a little aside on the odds of a certain split: if you have two possible suits to work on, one missing 5 cards and one missing 6 cards, a 3-2 break (68%) is nearly twice as likely as a 3-3 break (35%).

Look at this suit combination, in NT

in hand	in dummy
♥8 6 3	♥J 10 9 7 4 2

You are missing just 4 cards, the A K Q and 5.

The likeliest layout is the missing cards will split 3-1 (if it's 2-2, so much the better). You will probably have to lose 3 tricks in hearts, but once you have, your three long hearts will be worth 3 tricks. But notice, if you can't get back to dummy, they will be stranded, and worth nothing. This raises the vital concept of **ENTRIES**.

An **entry** is a card that gives you access to a hand, either to your own hand as declarer, or to dummy, so you can lead from it. Managing entries is a key part of declarer play.

### The entry rule

How do we easily work out how many entries we need, in order to set up a long suit **and** reach the established winners to cash them? We use the **entry rule**: in order to establish a suit by force (ie not assisted by a helpful play from opponents), you need **one more entry than the number of times you have to give away the lead (in NT contracts) or the number of times you have to ruff in the suit (in suit contracts)**. This will become much clearer when we look at examples.

### Ducking

Say you don't have enough entries – high cards – to establish a suit and access the long cards to cash them. Is the long suit necessarily a lost cause? Maybe not! Let's now look at the concept of **ducking**.

Ducking is deliberately losing an early trick in the play of a suit. Why might we want to do that?

Ducking is actually a very common and very valuable technique, to reduce the number of **ENTRIES** required to set up a long suit.

Take this example

♣4 3 in hand	♣A 9 8 7 6 2 in dummy
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and we have only 1 entry to dummy outside clubs, the ♦A.

We are missing 5 cards in clubs, so we assume they are splitting 3-2.

If we lead up to the ♣A, and play a second ♣ from dummy, we will lose that second trick. When we regain the lead in hand, we can lead up to the ♦A and lead a third ♣. The opposition will win that trick, but that is 3 club tricks played, so they are now out of clubs, and our 3 long cards in dummy are winners. BUT we have used up our 2 entries, the ♣A and the ♦A, and we have no way of reaching dummy. Drat! We have set up the suit, but it's a waste of time, because those 3 little clubs are now useless.

Is there a way around the problem? Yes. We can **duck** the first club trick, and let the opposition win it. Watch what happens.

We lead a club towards dummy, and play SMALL from dummy, deliberately losing the trick.

When on lead again, we lead our second club towards dummy, and play the ♣A, then a 3<sup>rd</sup> club from dummy, which the opposition will win. That's three club tricks, and the opposition are now out of clubs. We can then lead up to the ♦A, and cash our three long clubs. By ducking once, we have reduced the number of entries required by one, and we now have enough entries.

The only way we could exploit our beautiful long club suit was by the technique of **ducking**.

**Note (1)** you can count only one high card entry in the long suit itself.

**Note (2)** you can save entries by ducking; the number of entries this can save is the number of *spare* low cards in the shorter holding

**Note (3)** you don't know how the suit will break, so plan for the most likely break, as described above.

**It's important to work out the number of entries you need to establish a long suit. If you don't have enough, there is no point embarking on trying to establish the suit, and you must try an alternative line.**

### Timing

Another consideration is **how many times we have to lose the lead** in order to establish our long suit. If it's too many, even if we're OK for entries, so that the opposition can knock out our stop(s) in another suit and defeat us by running off their winners in that suit, before we've had time to set up our long suit winners, then our plan isn't going to work, and we should not embark on it – we should look for an alternative plan.

### Defence

If the opposition see that you are establishing a long suit in dummy, they will do their best to scupper your plan to leave your long cards stranded: another reason that planning as declarer is key to success. Ways they might do that are

- to hold up a winner, until your short hand is exhausted in the suit, and you don't have a card left in the suit to lead up to your length.
- To knock out an entry in an outside suit, to stop you gaining access to the long cards.

Bear in mind what the opposition might do to foil you, and avoid giving them any unnecessary opportunity.

### Examples

In order to help us grasp the points – the entry rule, ducking, etc – we need to work through some examples.

1. Contract 3NT, and here is your heart suit

♥4 in hand

♥A 9 8 7 5 3 in dummy

You are missing 6 cards, so assume a 4-2 split. You have only one card in the short hand, so ducking is not an option. The ace is one entry, but you need to lose three heart tricks before the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> hearts are established, so you need the A♥ plus 3 more entries. Work it out- lead to the A♥ (entry #1), play another heart, and lose that trick. Entry #2 to dummy, then play a 3<sup>rd</sup> heart trick, and lose that trick. Entry #3 to dummy, then play a 4<sup>th</sup> heart, and lose that trick. Entry #4 to dummy, and cash the two long hearts. Four entries required: if you don't have them, don't start trying to establish the hearts.

2. Contract 3NT

♦6 2 in hand

♦A 9 7 5 4 3 in dummy

Here you are missing 5 cards, so assuming a 3-2 split, you need to lose the lead twice in diamonds to establish the suit, so need 3 entries. But you have one spare low card in the short hand, so can duck once, reducing the entries required to two; the A♦ is one, so you only need one outside entry (an entry NOT in the diamond suit).

3. Contract 3NT

♠6 4 2 in hand

♠A 9 8 7 5 3 in dummy

You are missing four spades, so assuming they split 3-1, you need to lose the lead twice in spades to establish the suit, so need 3 entries. But you have spare cards in hand, allowing you to duck twice and reduce the entries required to 1: the A♠ is that entry. So you don't need any outside entries to establish the spades. Just duck two rounds, then lead up to the A♠, and cash 3 further spades. You can see that the spade suit here yields 4 tricks, despite missing K, Q, J and 10 (unless you are very unlucky and the suit splits 4-0).

4. Contract 1NT

♦6 3 in hand

♦A K 8 7 4 in dummy

This common situation is when you want to generate a trick from a small card in a 5-card suit. You are missing 6 cards, so you assume they're splitting 4-2. You will have to lose the lead twice in diamonds, so you need 3 entries. You can duck the first diamond trick, reducing the entries required to 2. A top diamond provides another entry, so you need only one outside entry, to reach your established diamond length winner.

5. Contract 4♠

♥4 in hand

♥10 9 8 7 5 3 2 in dummy

You are missing 5 cards, so assume a 3-2 split. You have only one card in the short hand, so the first heart trick will be to lead from hand. You now need to ruff two further rounds to exhaust the opposition of their hearts, so you need three entries, two to reach dummy to lead a heart, and a third to reach dummy to cash the 4 long cards. You might need to use trumps as entries, but will need to ensure the opposition are out of trumps when you start cashing the long cards. If they trump in and you need to overtrump, and you've no further entries to dummy, the hearts will go to waste. Timing is important.

6. Contract 4♥

♣4 in hand

♣A 8 7 6 2 in dummy

Here you are missing 7 cards, but if the suit breaks 4-3, you can still establish an extra trick via your 5<sup>th</sup> club. You will need to ruff three rounds, so need 4 entries. You have one with the A♣, so you need three more. So now we're starting to see why a 5-card suit is so valuable. Even if we've only a singleton facing it, there are 7 cards missing. If they split 4-3, the likeliest distribution, then the 5<sup>th</sup> card might still generate an extra trick!

7. Contract 4♠

♦6 3 in hand

♦A K 8 7 4 in dummy

Here you're missing 6 cards, so assume a 4-2 split. If you lead to the A♦, cash the K♦, and ruff a diamond, you need two outside entries, one to play a 4<sup>th</sup> diamond rick to ruff, and a second to reach dummy to cash your 5<sup>th</sup> diamond. However, if you're short of entries, you can duck the first round of diamonds, then lead to A♦, cash the K♦, and play a fourth round to ruff. Then you only need one outside entry, to reach your established long diamond. Your choice of play here will depend on your entries. The first way needs two entries but avoids a diamond loser. The second way concedes one diamond trick, but only needs one entry. So if you have your two entries, play it the first way.

8. Contract 4♠ by West, lead Q♥.

♠A K J 6 5 2

♠Q 10

♥A 8 4

♥7 6 5

♦9 8 7

♦A K 2

♣2

♣J 8 7 6 4

We can only see 9 tricks- 6 spades, ♥A and ♦A K. Where can we find a 10<sup>th</sup>?

If we assume the most likely club split of 4-3, we can establish a 5<sup>th</sup> club as a winner. We need to lose a club then ruff clubs 3 times, and have another entry to reach our long club. That's 4 entries. Have we got them? Yes: the two spades in dummy are entries, by leading low towards them, plus the two top diamonds. So our plan is to win the opening lead with A♥, and lead a club. The defence will win, and cash two hearts, so we need the rest. Win the next lead, and lead a low spade to 10♠. Ruff a club. Cross to Q♠, ruff a second club, cross to A♦, and ruff another club. That's 4 club tricks, so hopefully the defence are exhausted of clubs. Draw the remaining trumps, and go over to the K♦ to enjoy your long club, upon which your remaining small diamond goes away. 10 tricks and game made.

9. Contract 6♥ by W, lead 10♥.

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

The club suit is crucial. You're fortunate not to have received a diamond lead, so you can play for the likely 4-2 split in clubs. You will need to ruff two clubs, so you need 3 entries – but you only have two, a club and the ♠A. (you can only count 1 entry in clubs). So after winning trick 1, lead a small club and duck! (Key play). The defence will win, and lead, say, a diamond. It doesn't matter what they lead here, you win the trick, then draw trumps. Then lead over to a top club, and play another top club, discarding your losing diamond. Ruff a club in hand. That's 4 club tricks, and you are pleased to note that the defence are now exhausted of clubs. Lead over to A♠, and cash your long club, on which your remaining little spade goes away. Note: if you'd received a diamond lead, you'd be forced to play for a 3-3 break in clubs. Also note that if you received a spade lead, you must win in hand and preserve the A♠ entry in dummy. It's essential to plan BEFORE playing to trick one!

10. Contract 3NT by W, lead J♥

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

9 tricks is easy, off the top, but is it a good score? Always check if a long suit can be established before starting to play the hand. Here, you have 8 clubs. If the missing clubs split 3-2, you need to lose the lead twice to establish them, so need 3 entries. You only have two, the two black aces. But you have one spare club in hand, so you can duck once, saving an entry. Win the heart lead and immediately duck a club. Win the return in hand, and lead to the A♣. Play another club from dummy, the 3<sup>rd</sup> club trick. Opponents will win, but if the split is 3-2, they're now out of clubs. Win the return, and the A♠ is your entry to cash 3 small clubs. 11 tricks made, losing only two club tricks. Would you have spotted that line at the table, before reading this lesson? Or would you have happily recorded 9 tricks and game made, only to be astonished to later find that other pairs have made 11 tricks ("How did they do that?"), and you've scored poorly?

11. Contract 4♠ by W, lead J♥.

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

Most players would look at this hand, and be content to count 6 spades, two hearts, a diamond, and two diamond ruffs in dummy. That's not a bad plan, and gets you an overtrick. But those of us who've studied this lesson can do better! What about establishing the clubs? If they split 3-2, you need two ruffs and an entry to dummy to cash the long clubs. That's 3 entries, and you have them with the ♥K, the ♠A, and the ♠9 (and another by ruffing a diamond if you needed it). Win the lead, performace in dummy, and lead a club! (key play). The defence will win. Win the return, and enter dummy with ♠A and ruff a club. Enter dummy with ♠9, and ruff a second club. That's 3 club tricks played, and hopefully you'll observe that all the opposing clubs have appeared. Now you can safely draw the remaining trumps (assuming you didn't get a 2-2 trump split), lead over to your remaining top heart, and cash the long clubs. You have 12 tricks, and probably a top score.

12a.    ♠K 8 3                      ♠A 7  
          ♥A K 4 3                  ♥8 7  
          ♦A K J 9                  ♦6 5 4  
          ♣K 2                        ♣A 7 6 5 4 3

12b.    ♠K 8 3                      ♠A  
          ♥A K 4 3                  ♥8 7 6  
          ♦A K J 9                  ♦6 5 4  
          ♣K 2                        ♣A 7 6 5 4 3

In both cases, the contract is 3NT by West, lead J♠.

If the clubs split 3-2, because you have A and K, you only need to lose the lead once (ie give up one club trick) to establish the clubs; so you need two entries, and you have them: the two black aces. In hand 6a, you win the spade lead with the K, carefully preserving A♠, and play K♣, then over to A♣, then a 3<sup>rd</sup> club. When the clubs break 3-2, your A♠ provides the entry to cash 3 long clubs.

But look what happens in 6b. The spade lead knocks out an entry, so you can no longer establish the clubs. Those long clubs are now useless, so your only chance is to try the diamond finesse. After winning the opening trick with the A♠, lead a small diamond towards the J♦. If the finesse wins, use the A♣ to enter dummy and repeat the diamond finesse. With the Q♦ onside, you make 9 tricks, and a bonus 10<sup>th</sup> if the diamonds also split 3-3.

13. Contract 3NT by W, lead J♥

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

It's tempting to play on hearts, and you make 10 tricks if they're 4-2 (likely from the lead). You need hearts to split 3-3 to make 11 tricks. But if you play on clubs, you make 11 tricks if clubs split 3-2 – almost twice as likely, even without the heart lead which skews the odds even further. Duck a club, lead to A♣, and play a 3<sup>rd</sup> club. Your K♠ is the entry to enjoy the 3 club-suit length winners. You lose only two club tricks. If you're unlucky and the clubs split 4-1, you can revert to hearts, and still make 11 tricks if hearts split 3-3. On this hand, your best plan is to start by playing on clubs!

14. Contract 3NT by W, lead 7♠

         ♠K 5 4                      ♠A J 10  
          ♥8 4                         ♥A K Q 5 2  
          ♦7 4                         ♦A 8 2  
          ♣K Q 6 5 4 3              ♣J 2

A diamond lead would have been awkward, but you got a friendly ♠. Clubs is your trick source, and you must establish them while you still have a diamond stop. You must also preserve your precious K♠ as an entry to enjoy the clubs. So win the A♠ on trick one, then lead J♣. If clubs split 3-2, you're making 12 tricks. Whenever the opposition take their A♣, you have an entry to enjoy the rest of the clubs. How many declarers would **fail to plan, and go wrong on trick one by playing J♠??** If that's covered by the Q, you either withhold the K♠ and face a ♦switch, or use up your precious entry, and the clubs are useless! **Beware the trick 1 blunder!!**

15. Contract 3NT by W, lead Q♠.

♠ K 8 5 4	♠ A 3 2
♥ A K 9 4	♥ 7 6 5
♦ A K 6 5	♦ 4 3
♣ K	♣ A J 10 9 8

You must preserve your A♠ to enjoy the clubs, but think. You have no suit with only one stop, so you're not worried about a switch. You don't need to win the first trick: if the spades split 3-3 you'll have an extra trick with your 4<sup>th</sup> spade. Duck the opening trick, then win the second trick- if they lead a second spade, take it with K♠. Lead the K♣, but use it as an entry, not a trick! Overtake with the A♣, and continue clubs. Whenever opposition take their Q♣, you have the A♠ to get back and cash the remaining clubs. An easy 10 tricks, with chances for an 11<sup>th</sup> in spades or hearts.

16. Contract 3NT by W, lead Q♠.

♠ 5 4	♠ A K
♥ A K 4	♥ 9 7 6 5
♦ A K Q	♦ 9 4 3 2
♣ A 9 4 3 2	♣ 8 7 6

To establish clubs, you'd need to lose the lead twice- by which time the opposition will have knocked out your spade stops, and will cash all their spades. No good! You have 8 tricks on top, but your only chance of a 9<sup>th</sup> is to cash AKQ of diamonds, then AK and a 3<sup>rd</sup> heart. If *either* red suit splits 3-3, you have a top spade to reach your winner.

Jim Steele, May 2022

