

Playing Notrump Contracts

Notrump contracts are in some ways the easiest and in other ways the hardest contracts to play. They are pure battles in all four suits, unsullied by the ability of a trump suit deuce to slay an off-suit ace. Notrump contracts are inherently a race between the two sides to see who can score their tricks first. The Declarer usually has the advantage of greater high card points at his disposal. (The exception being my favorite contract: 1NT-pass-pass-pass.) Defenders get to decide which suit to attack first. Sometimes the opening lead presents you with the contract on the proverbial silver platter; but if defenders pick their opening lead well, you might struggle to bring your contract home.

Planning notrump play should start once the lead is made and dummy displayed. Because there is no trump to either bail us out of a problem suit or allow the opponents to ruff our good tricks, we plan the notrump play from a glass half-full perspective: as a first step, count off-the-top winners.

Aces are always notrump winners; kings are only immediate winners if you also have the ace. For queens to count as immediate winners, you need both the ace and king. Follow that procedure down the line. If you have thirteen of suit all in one hand, don't count any winners because the opponents cannot lead that suit!

Unless you are in a six or seven notrump contract (you're not going to be that lucky in this article), the chances are very high that you will not have sufficient immediate winners to bring your contract home. Generally, you need to keep in mind the ***Length Makes Strength*** adage and set up lower-ranked cards in longer suits to score the remainder of your needed tricks.

Enough verbiage, let's look at a hand. You're a little slow sorting your hand. When you glance at the board you notice you are vulnerable (red) and they are nonvulnerable (white) and that everyone else has passed. Your hand contains ♠8-6 ♥A-7-5 ♦K-J-10-9-5 ♣A-K-6 and you bid 1NT. West bids 2♠, alerted as a spade suit. Your partner blasts to 3NT, which is passed out. West turns a card face down and after asking his partner if she has any questions, faces the ♠5. Dummy reveals her hand and you make your plan. (Which you should do before reading further!)

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

Count off the five top winners: one in spades, two in hearts and two in clubs. You need to develop four additional tricks. If West led away from the ♠K you can score another spade trick. Hearts do not look promising for a third trick. Diamonds can deliver all four needed tricks once you drive out the ace. Barring miracles, you can't get any additional club tricks. The play looks easy enough: drive out the ♦A and cash winners—assuming you can hold spade losers to a maximum of three.

For this article, assume you are playing a team game that is scored in IMPs. Without going into a long discussion about IMPs versus matchpoint scoring, suffice it to say that with IMPs the main emphasis in playing the hand is to make the contract. Scoring extra tricks is good, but only when your play does not risk your chance of making the contract.

What did you learn from the bidding and the lead? West presumably has spades and some points for his bid. When asked, the opponents state they use standard leads. (For a nanosecond you're jealous because it seems all of your leads are substandard.) Using the rule of 11, you know

everyone other than West has six spades higher than the ♠5. Your side has four, so East has two. You guess West started with at least five and more likely six spades; something like: ♠K-J-x-5-x-(x).

Time to call a spade from Dummy. Which one did you choose?

I'm going to bet most readers called for the queen—and promptly went down on the actual lay of the cards. It turns out East has the ♠K. If you play Dummy's ♠Q, East wins the trick and clears the spade suit. If (as is likely from the bidding, especially when East turns up with the ♠K) West has the ♦A, West will win the first diamond trick and cash his remaining spades. You're down one or two tricks before you can claim the remaining tricks.

We can certainly arrange E-W's cards so playing the ♠Q garners the most tricks. With other arrangements playing Dummy's ♠A will be most beneficial. In *ALL* cases, calling for the ♠3 will guarantee your contract.

East must win the trick (or you get a freebie). If East attacks diamonds for you, put her on your Christmas card list. A spade return heads directly into your ♠A-Q tenace, giving you two spade stoppers. You also have two stoppers in hearts and clubs. You can win whatever East leads, drive out the ♦A and still be able to win whatever E-W next leads. You'll score at least one spade, two hearts, four diamonds and two clubs. Contract made. Plus 600 for the good guys.

Admittedly, I introduced a false expectation of where the ♠K was when I had West bid spades with that garbage suit. Given their white versus red vulnerability, a few players at the club and more at tournaments might just try to keep you out of your cold game with that bid. At a tournament West could psych a 2♠ bid with only a couple of spades.

Remember in IMP scoring the key is to make your contract. Take a line that guarantees a plus score even if you give up an overtrick along the way. Here was the entire board.

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