

Errors in declarer play – not counting tricks

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Perhaps the most common error at declarer play is failing to count tricks and make a plan at the beginning of the hand, preferably before playing to trick 1 from dummy.

Consider the hand below: you're in 3NT by South after 2C-2D (waiting)-2NT (19-21 hcp)-3NT. I'm not suggesting I endorse the bidding methods, but this time it does you no harm, because West leads ♠5.

♠ K974

♥ Q3

♦ QJ43

♣ K93

♠ A102

♥ A74

♦ AK6

♣ A754

You have 9 obvious top tricks. What do you think this lead suggests?

Well, it could be fourth highest from 4 or 5 cards, which may include one or both missing spade honours, or it could just possibly be low from 3 to an honour, but that seems very unlikely.

If it is fourth highest, what else do you know? Apply the rule of 11: there should be only 6 cards higher than the ♠5 between your hand, East and dummy. You can see 5 of them. So what turns up when you play low from dummy? East produces the ♠Q!

Of course you win with the ace, but now what else do you know? The answer is that unless West made the against-the-odds lead of ♠5 from Jxx, he must also hold the ♠8. So one part of your plan for this hand should be to lead the ♠10 at trick 2 and then, if it's covered by the jack and taken with the king, to later lead the ♠2 and finesse against the presumed ♠8. That gets you up to 11 tricks.

But is that all? Where else might you harvest another trick? What about in clubs? If they break 3-3 you will have 12 tricks!!

How should you play the clubs? To keep control in the suit, you should duck one round i.e. play low from both hands. Then if the suit doesn't break 3-3 you can take your 11 tricks anyway.

| | |
|---------------------|------------------|
| BD: 24 ♠J865 | Dlr: W |
| ♥JT8 | Vul: None |
| ♦975 | |
| ♣QJ8 | |
| ♠AT2 | ♠K974 |
| ♥A74 | ♥Q3 |
| ♦AK6 | ♦QJ43 |
| ♣A754 | ♣K93 |
| | ♠Q3 |
| | ♥K9652 |
| | ♦T82 |
| | ♣T62 |

This is the board (West was actually the dealer with the 19-point hand). On the friendly spade lead declarer can indeed take 12 tricks, but it does need a bit of planning.

Counting your tricks and making a plan is vitally important. If you make a habit of doing this, you may be able to avoid taking a finesse, even if it is available. For example, see the hand from 19 November in the newsletter at [this link](#).

Another simple approach to increasing your total number of tricks is to look at whether you can concede a trick while throwing a loser, to establish a winner on which you can then throw another loser. Consider this hand:

♠ K
♥ K873
♦ J1093
♣ AK76

♠ AQ109864
♥ 102
♦ 8
♣ J92

Your pre-emptive 3S opening is passed out. West leads the ♦A and then, after some thought, continues with the ♦K. You ruff, of course, and play a spade to the singleton king in dummy. What next?

The answer is that you need to make use of the \spadesuit J10 in dummy to deal with your remaining 3 potential losers (two hearts and one club). Play the \spadesuit J and pitch a heart. West returns \heartsuit J and it turns out that East has the \heartsuit AQ, but you can ruff the second heart and draw trumps. When they break 3-2, you are able to cross to a top club in dummy and discard a club on the \spadesuit 10. That way can take 10 tricks ... I have to admit I got this wrong at the table. Here's the board – North was the actual declarer.

| | | |
|--------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| BD: 29 | \spadesuit AQT9864 | Dlr: N |
| | \heartsuit T2 | Vul: All |
| | \diamond 8 | |
| | \clubsuit J92 | |
| \spadesuit J3 | | \spadesuit 752 |
| \heartsuit AQ654 | | \heartsuit J9 |
| \diamond 752 | | \diamond AKQ64 |
| \clubsuit Q43 | | \clubsuit T85 |
| | \spadesuit K | |
| | \heartsuit K873 | |
| | \diamond JT93 | |
| | \clubsuit AK76 | |

Here are some other common declarer oopses – like the errors in defence mentioned last week, these too are all avoidable:

- Cashing high cards too early and losing control (try ducking a round of the suit instead, as was done to test the clubs in the hand on page 1)
- Taking your ace too early at notrump (it's sometimes correct to do so, but it is usually a better idea to try to exhaust at least one defender of the suit led)
- Drawing trumps without taking available ruffs (count your tricks first).

Remember, there are no prizes for making mistakes quickly!