

Defending No Trump Contracts – Overtaking and Unblocking

Last week, we discussed situations where Third Seat does best by not playing high. We saw that by playing the lower of equals and the use of surround plays, Third Seat could help partner plan the defence.

Now, we consider more techniques that help in establishing and running a suit.

Unblocking

Let's say we are in third seat and partner leads from a long suit. We have a doubleton honour, something like Q5. Irrespective of what card is played from dummy, it is nearly always right to play the honour.

Example 1

After partner's 3♠ bid, your left hand opponent bid 3NT. Partner leads ♠J and dummy has a singleton ace.

The Lead is	Dummy has	Third Seat has	
♠ J	♠ A	♠ Q 6	What card does Third Seat play?

From the auction, we know that partner has a long spade suit. Your left hand opponent must have ♠K to bid 3NT. From the opening lead, the suit must be JT9xxxx (top of a perfect sequence) or JT8xxxx (top of a near perfect sequence).

It is essential to play the queen to **unblock** the suit. Here is the full deal.

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

West	North	East	South
3♠	Pass	Pass	3NT
Pass	Pass	Pass	

West leads the ♠J and the ace is played from dummy. Suppose East were to play the six.

Declarer has eight tricks and needs a ninth trick from the heart suit. When declarer tackles hearts, West will win and play another spade. East will play the queen and an astute declarer will allow it to win.

East has no more spades so what is East to do? East may play a heart to partner's ace. If East plays anything else, declarer will win and return another heart. Either way, West wins and can play a spade but it is too late. Declarer has set up hearts and will make the contract.

How different it would have been had West played the queen at trick one. Again, declarer tackles hearts and West wins. West plays a spade. If declarer ducks, West plays another spade. Declarer will win and lead another heart. West wins that and runs off the rest of the spades, beating the contract.

By dumping an honour at trick one, East has **unblocked** the suit.

Example 2

Defending 3NT, partner leads a small heart.

The Lead is	Dummy has	Third Seat has	What card does Third Seat play?
♥ 5	♥ Q 6	♥ J 3	

With only four hearts in dummy and third seat, it looks like the lead is from a long suit; possibly five or six cards. If dummy plays low, naturally Third Seat plays the Jack. If dummy plays the Queen, it is still right to play the Jack.

The full deal.

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

West	North	East	South
	1♠	Pass	3NT
Pass	Pass	Pass	

If declarer plays a low heart from dummy and allows East to win the trick, the contract will be safe. East may continue hearts but then East will have no hearts left when winning the ♠A.

Fortunately for the defence, declarers sometimes make mistakes. Then, the defence needs to take advantage of them.

Assume the ♥Q is played from dummy at trick one. If east plays low, declarer will start on the spades. East will win the ace and play the ♥J - but now declarer can duck. East has no more hearts to lead and the contract is safe. If West overtakes East's jack with the ace, then declarer still has the king as a stopper.

If east **unblocks** at trick one by playing the Jack, declarer is doomed. On winning the ♠A, east plays the ♥3. West's AT is sitting over declarer's K9. No matter what declarer does, West will take five heart tricks.

Overtaking

Example 1

Partner opened 2♠, North doubled and South bid 3NT. Partner leads the queen of spades. The lead of the queen indicates that partner has AQJxxx or QJTxxx or QJ9xxx.

The Lead is	Dummy has	Third Seat has
♠ Q	♠ 7 3	♠ K 2

Overtake by playing the King.

This may be the full spade lay out.

	Dummy	
West	♠ 7 3	East
♠ Q J T 9 6 5	South	♠ K 2
	♠ A 8 4	

If you play low, declarer will duck and duck the second spade too. Now you can't continue the suit and declarer still has ♠A.

If you overtake the Queen with the King, it doesn't help declarer to duck. You play another spade to West's Jack. West continues spades to force out the Ace.

Example 2

After you opened 1♠, the opponents ended up in 3NT. Partner leads the jack of spades. This is surely a singleton or a doubleton. Partner would lead low with three to an honour.

The Lead is	Dummy has	Third Seat has
♠ J	♠ 8 6 3	♠ K Q T 9 5

Overtake but play the queen. Lower of equals.

	Dummy	
West	♠ 8 6 3	East
♠ J	South	♠ K Q T 9 5
	♠ A 7 4 2	

If partner has a singleton as here and you play a low card, partner will not be able to continue the suit.

Signalling on Partner's Lead

While we have worked our way through a lot of Third Seat plays, there may still be cases where it seems as if it doesn't matter what card is played. All cards seem equally useless. Rest assured, we can usually find a reason for playing one card rather than another.



The Bath Coup

South is playing in 3NT.

	Dummy	
West	♠ 7 3	East
♠ K Q T 9 4	Declarer	♠ 8 6 5
	♠ A J 2	

West leads the ♠K, dummy plays low and declarer lets the king win. When West plays another spade, declarer makes two spade tricks.

This ducking technique is known as the Bath Coup.

From West's point of view, it is difficult to know what to do next. If partner has either the Ace or Jack, another spade would be right.

Despite East's miserable spade holding, East can help partner make the right decision. East gives an **Attitude Signal**. If East plays a low card, East is discouraging the suit. If East plays a highish card, East is encouraging the suit and will most certainly have an honour.

(Some people have the opposite agreement where low encourages and high discourages. If you wish to do that, you should discuss it with your partner before you start play.)

In the above example, East can spoil declarer's fun by playing the five. This is a low card and West will know not to continue the suit. Later in the play, East may get the lead and be able to lead a spade through declarer's high cards.

On the other hand, if the layout were this:

	Dummy	
West	♠ 7 3	East
♠ K Q T 9 4	Declarer	♠ J 8 5
	♠ A 6 2	

East would play the eight to encourage the suit. West can safely continue spades to force out declarer's Ace.

Deal 1

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

West	North	East	South
	2NT	Pass	3♣
Pass	3♦	Pass	3NT
Pass	Pass	Pass	

Even if East bids 3♥, North-South will find their way to 3NT.

East leads ♥J, top of a sequence. On dummy's ace, West should **unblock** by playing the King.

If West fails to unblock, East will win the first round of spades and play another heart.

West wins but has no more hearts to play. Eventually, East will win a second spade trick but declarer still has a heart stopper.

If West unblocks, East wins a spade and plays hearts to drive out North's Queen. When East wins a second spade, the heart suit is set up.

Deal 2

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

West	North	East	South
		1NT	Pass
3NT	Pass	Pass	Pass

South leads ♥Q, top of a sequence. North should **overtake** with the King to **unblock** the suit. If declarer doesn't win, North plays another heart. South wins and drives out declarer's Ace.

Sooner or later, declarer will take the spade finesse. South will win the King and run off the rest of the hearts.

If North fails to unblock, declarer will allow the Queen to win. Declarer will hold up on the next heart (the King) too and now North has no more hearts to lead. When the spade finesse loses, declarer still has the ace of hearts.

Deal 3

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

West	North	East	South
			1♣
Pass	1♦	1♥	1NT
Pass	3NT	All Pass	

West respects partner's overcall and leads the ♥Q. East knows it must be a singleton or a doubleton. It can't be a longer suit because then East would have led a low card.

If it is a doubleton, it doesn't matter what East plays. However, East must overtake in case it is a singleton. East can continue with hearts until declarer takes the ace. Eventually, East will get the lead again with the ♦K and can cash the remaining hearts.

Deal 4

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

West	North	East	South
1NT	Pass	3NT	All Pass

North leads the ♥K, top of a near-perfect sequence.

With three cards to an honour, South will play low – but how low?

Partner desperately needs to know whether or not the suit should be continued. South plays an encouraging highish card, the ♥8.

Seeing the signal, North plays a low heart to South's Ace. A heart back and West's J9 is trapped by North's QT.