

Learning Points – How Counting Informs Declarer Play – Fast and Slow Losers

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Declarer Play Level: Basic

NORTH ♠ J954 Let's say you and partner bid to the ♠ game on this hand. The bidding is lost to posterity to protect the guilty. You are South and declarer. LHO leads the ♥Q. How do you plan the play?

♥ K54

♦ AJ2

♣ J10

We are in a suit contract. First we count losers. We have 1 ♠ loser (♠A), 1 ♥ loser (3rd round loser – a "slow" loser - defenders have to get our A and K out of the way). No ♦ losers, and 2 ♣ losers. This totals 4 losers. Since we need 10 tricks, we are at risk of going down! [TIP: Assume opponents will defend perfectly. You'll be amazed how quickly your game will improve].

SOUTH

♠ KQ1032

♥ A32

♦ K3

♣ Q43

Now let's count winners. We count only top cards we can take right away and not length cards we need to develop later. Zero ♠s, 2♥s, 2♦s and zero ♣s. We have only 4 top winners and need to develop 6 more to make 10 tricks.

Now let's look at *potential* winners. Once we lose the ♠A we can count 4 ♠ tricks. Once we lose the ♣AK we can count the ♣Q as 1 trick. There is also the possibility of a 3rd ♦ trick if the ♦ finesse is working.

What would you do? If you are tempted to lead trump at trick 2, you are likely to go down in a cold contract. The ♥ lead has attacked our **weakness**. We now have only one more ♥ stopper before they take our slow loser. We must play to discard a ♥ from either hand before the defense regains control. This eliminates the slow loser, reducing our loser count to 3.

Discarding a loser means developing an extra winner in a side suit. Since our loser is in ♥s we have to look to ♣s or ♦s for help. We have one more stopper in the ♥ suit so we can afford to lose the lead to the defenders only one more time. To develop the ♣ winner, we have to lose the lead 2 times. Playing on ♣s now is wrong. To see why, think what happens when they win the 1st ♣. They return a ♥ and knock out the remaining stopper (♥K). Then when they win the 2nd ♣, they will return a ♥ to cash a winner (our slow loser).

Let's look at ♦s. We can play the ♦K and finesse the ♦J. If the finesse wins, we can pitch the slow loser ♥ from declarer's hand on the ♦A. If the finesse loses, we still get to pitch a ♥. We will have lost 3 tricks and are no worse off than without the finesse. The right play for declarer after a ♥ lead is to try the ♦ finesse.

If instead we lead trumps before finessing ♦s, then the defense will lead back a ♥, exposing our loser. Now if the ♦ finesse loses we are down for sure. Timing is everything.

What if the lead is a ♠ or ♣? At the moment the lead is made we have 2 stoppers in the slow loser suit (♥s). We can afford to lose the lead 2 times instead of 1. Regardless which black suit is led, the right play is to drive out the ♣AK. Now the 50% risk for the ♦ finesse is unnecessary to take! We can make our game without it. The ♦ finesse is essential when they threaten our suit with a slow loser, and is a practice finesse when they lead a black suit. What is a practice finesse? It's a finesse that if right adds nothing to our trick total but if wrong loses a trick we didn't have to lose!

1. Counting losers in a suit contract tells us how much risk our contract faces.
2. Counting SLOW losers tells us whether we need to establish discards in a side suit.
3. Counting the number of control cards we hold in the slow loser suit tells us how many times we can lose the lead safely. Whenever we can lose the lead fewer times than necessary to develop the winner we need we need to look to another suit. The number of controls to count is how many we have after the 1st trick is complete.
4. **NEVER** take practice finesses **NEVER**. Repeat this...