

Suit Contract Play – Counting Losers

Great play of the hand starts with planning your play at trick one. For suit contracts counting losers will help you decide your line of play. Here are simple guidelines for counting losers:

Choose the Main Hand

The main hand is the one with the most trumps. If trumps are equal, choose the hand with the most trump honors. Here are some examples with spades as trump:

♠ K 10 8 6	<table style="border-collapse: collapse; margin: 0 auto;"> <tr><td style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	♠ A Q J 3 2
N					
W E					
S					
♥ A 10	♥ Q 8 6 2				
♦ K J 10 7 5	♦ A 4				
♣ 9 2	♣ Q J				

Here the main hand should be East because they have the most trump.

♠ A K 8 4	<table style="border-collapse: collapse; margin: 0 auto;"> <tr><td style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	♠ J 9 7 6
N					
W E					
S					
♥ Q 9 8	♥ 7 6 4				
♦ Q 10 6 3	♦ 8 4				
♣ A 8 4	♣ K Q J 2				

In this hand trumps are 4-4 but West has more honors and should be the main hand.

Counting Losers

Once you have identified the main hand you can count losers. For this technique, any trick that is not a guaranteed winner is a loser. Let's show what we mean using the following example with hearts as trump:

♠ 9 4 3	<table style="border-collapse: collapse; margin: 0 auto;"> <tr><td style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	♠ A K Q
N					
W E					
S					
♥ A Q J 10 6	♥ 6 5 4				
♦ K 4	♦ A 8 5 2				
♣ A Q 7	♣ 8 6 3				

With longer trumps West should be the main hand and has 3 losers:

- Spades: No losers (3 losers are covered by dummy's AKQ)
- Hearts: 1 loser (King)
- Diamonds: No losers (1 loser is covered by dummy's Ace)
- Clubs: 2 losers (Queen is not guaranteed to take a trick)

Planning the Play

Once we have identified our losers, we can use techniques like establishing side suits for discarding, ruffing in the short hand or finessing to avoid them. Using our last example, there is a chance to avoid 1 heart loser and 1 club loser if finesses are successful. To make a finesse, we need to start in dummy. Can we get to dummy enough to take these finesses? Yes, we have 3 spade entries (AKQ) and 1 diamond entry (A). We need to make sure to preserve these entries until we have taken our finesses. A reasonable line of play for this contract will be to draw trump taking your finesse and once opponents trumps are gone, take your club finesse.

Suit Contract Play – Counting Losers Worksheet

For the following hands identify the number of losers in the main hand (West) and possible lines of play to make the most tricks:

Hand #1

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

Hand #2

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

Hand #3

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

Hand #4

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

Answers:

Hand #1: 4 losers (1S, 1H, 2C). You can finesse hearts and clubs for the King, pitch a spade or club loser on the third diamond, possibly pitch a club loser on the fourth spades (if they break 3-3).

Hand #2: 4 losers (1S, 1H, 2C). You can ruff two clubs, finesse the heart king and possibly pitch a spade loser on long diamonds.

Hand #3: 4 losers (1S, 1H, 2C). You can finesse hearts and clubs for the King. Possible endplay in spades to force a club lead (Advanced).

Hand #4: 5 losers (1S, 1H, 2D, 1C). You can finesse the heart king. You can establish diamonds to pitch your club and spade losers. Make sure to preserve entries to dummy (like CK) to make this strategy work.