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This Week in Bridge

(494) Endplays in Suit and NT Contracts

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General

Expert players look for ways to avoid taking a finesse. A finesse is usually a fallback plan that is taken only when no other line of play works. One way to avoid taking a finesse is to get the opponents to lead a suit for us. Of course, most opponents are not cooperative, and do not help us in this way, but there are times when we can force the opponents to lead a suit and accomplish what we want for us. One of the ways to get them to lead a suit is to put them on lead when they happen to have nothing but that suit remaining - but this does not happen all that often. Another way to accomplish this is to eliminate all the other suits and then put the opponents on lead, so they must lead what we want them to. This is a removal play (or stripping the hand) as it takes away the opponent's other potential "exit" cards. Let's see how to make this work.

Suits to Be Led by the Opponents

Before we look at the full concept of a "Strip and Endplay" let's first look at suits that we want to avoid leading ourselves, where we want to force the opponents to lead the suit instead of us.

Example 1
Axx

KJx
In this situation, we are guaranteed three tricks if LHO leads the suit.

Example 2
AJx

KTx
Here we win three tricks if either opponent leads this suit.

Example 3
Axx

Qxx
Again, it is best if the opponents lead this suit for us. If LHO leads the suit then we are guaranteed two tricks, while if we lead the suit we may get one or two tricks depending on the location of the King.

Example 4
Qxx

Jxx
Here if we lead the suit, we may win no tricks.   But if either opponent leads this suit we are guaranteed a trick in this suit.

There are many more card combinations where we want to force the opponents to lead the suit for us!

Removal of Side Suits
Now that we know what kind of suits we want our opponents to lead, we need to look at how to get them to lead those suits for us. The main way that we force our opponents to do this is by removing their ability to play another suit. We eliminate the other suits both in our hand and the dummy. We usually do this by ruffing away or playing all the cards in these side suits, leaving us void in both hands.

This removal of the side suits leaves an end position where we put the opponent on lead and have only trump and the suit we want the opponents to lead in both hands. This act of "removing" the side suits is also called "*stripping the hand" or "eliminating the suits"*. This is a key part, the removal or strip, of the *Remove (Strip) and Endplay* line of play.

The Throw-In
Another important part of the *Removal and Endplay* is to put the opponents on lead at the time we want them to be. What this requires is a trick that we plan to lose to give the desired opponent the lead. This act of giving them the lead, when we are ready to, is called a *"Throw-In Play".* Throw-in plays are valuable in many situations as declarer. Before we throw the opponents in here, we must prepare the hand to be how we want it so that the opponents will not be able to have an easy suit to lead back to us. We must strip the hand, then we can execute our "Strip and Endplay"!

"Strip and End-Play" (Removal and Endplay)

Let's look at how we combine stripping a hand (removing the side suits so the opponents cannot use that suit as an *exit card* to get off lead) with throwing the opponents in (putting them on lead) so that they must either lead the suit we want them to lead or give us a ruff and a sluff. Let's look at an example of this.

Example 5
♠ QJ8754
♥ K3
♦ AT6
♣ A2

♠ AK932
♥ A65
♦ KJ7
♣ 64

In a ♠ contract on a ♣ lead, we draw trump, play the ♥K, then ♥A, and ruff South's final small ♥, stripping the ♥ suit. We exit with our last ♣, leaving the opponents on lead in this position:

♠ QJ8
♥ --
♦ AT6
♣ --

♠ 932
♥ --
♦ KJ7
♣ --

Now our opponents must either lead a ♥ or ♣ and give us a ruff-sluff (allowing us to get rid of our third round ♦ loser) or lead a ♦, on which we can play second hand low and guarantee three tricks.

Endplays in NT Contracts

The *endplay* is a valuable tool for avoiding taking a finesse that we expect not to work (or avoiding having to make a guess in a suit). The idea is to force our opponent to lead away from their honor (and into our holding) instead of leading into them. In a suit contract, we can often ruff away or otherwise eliminate the side suits and create a situation where the opponents are forced to either give us a ruff-sluff or lead into the suit we want them to lead, called a strip and endplay. Let's look at how to apply a similar endplay technique in notrump contracts and get better at end-playing our opponents.

Throwing an Opponent on Lead – Ducking a Trick into Them

One way to set up an end play in a notrump contract is to play off the other suits so that our LHO has nothing left but the suit we want to force them to lead for us. At this point, we lead a card from dummy and attempt to force our LHO (assuming they are the player we wish to endplay) to win the trick.

Example 6

```
          ♠ xxx
♠ KJx              ♠ xxx
          ♠ AQT
```

If we know (or strongly suspect) that our LHO has only ♠ remaining in this 3-card end position, then we can lead a ♠ from the dummy and play the ♠T from our hand. Even if LHO wins the trick with the ♠J (the finesse not forcing out the King) they will be forced to lead a ♠ into our ♠AQ. They are endplayed.

Note: This can be done when we have a smaller spot card than the Ten: all we have to do is be able to cover the card played by our RHO, forcing our LHO to win the trick.

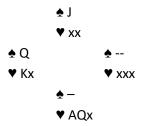A similar play can be made from many other holdings.

Example 7

```
          xxx
AQx              Jxx
          KTx
```

If we lead from dummy and RHO does not play an honor card, then we can simply play the Ten. This puts LHO on lead and forces them to lead into our King (if they have only this suit remaining). They are endplayed.

Throwing an Opponent on Lead – Using Their Winner

Another way to endplay our LHO is to put them on lead using a winner in another suit.
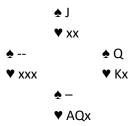
Example 8

```
          ♠ J
          ♥ xx
♠ Q              ♠ --
♥ Kx              ♥ xxx
          ♠ –
          ♥ AQx
```

If we know that LHO has the ♠Q, we can use the ♠J to throw them on lead and force them to lead into our ♥ tenace – ♥AQ. They are endplayed.

Example 9

Even if we do not know that LHO has the ♠Q, if the ♠Q is the only remaining card other than ♥, this play is "free" – it has no risk. If LHO has the ♠Q, they are endplayed, and if RHO has the ♠Q, they win this trick and must lead a ♥ for us.

```
            ♠ J
            ♥ xx
♠ --              ♠ Q
♥ xxx            ♥ Kx
            ♠ –
            ♥ AQx
```

We play the ♠J; if RHO wins with the ♠Q, they must play a ♥ for us and we can then take the ♥ finesse.

Note: One of the dangers of throwing an opponent on lead, hoping for an end play, is in some situations they may have a large number of winners in another suit and we may not get a chance at our finesse. This is a danger when we do not have an exact count on the hand.

Conclusion

As a declarer we are always looking for ways to avoid taking a finesse. This is especially true when we have information that leads us to believe that the finesse is failing. The endplay is a useful tool for forcing the opponents to lead to you, instead of you leading to them (often the side that gets to play last has an advantage). You should look for ways to make use of the endplay in both suit and notrump contracts. These play are especially effective if there is a finesse you "know is going to fail" – don't take it, find a way to get them to lead to you!