

Getting your Ducks in a Row

♠ AQT2	♠ 8763
♥ A82	♥ 73
♦ AT	♦ KQ84
♣ KT92	♣ AJ3

Bidding:

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

You are West in 3NT and receive the 9H lead from North in response to her partner's opening 1H bid. How do you play the hand?

Thoughts:

Despite having some ruffing value in hearts, partner has not chosen to enquire whether you hold a four card spade suit. A 3NT contract looks riskier than 4S because you have only one stopper in hearts which has been led but if you can make the same number of tricks at Matchpoint scoring you will get a much better result in 3NT. The key question is whether that 9H lead is top of a doubleton or top of three rags.

A strategy when playing 3NT to ensure that you make your contract is all about keeping the dangerous opponent, South in this case, off lead. South should have at least 5 x hearts so you cannot afford South to get in and run her suit. Firstly, if you can, you need to duck sufficient times to ensure North's heart holding has been exhausted. Once you win the AH you need to finesse for the QC through South because even if that proves wrong, North can no longer lead a heart to partner. You can finesse the spade suit with impunity because it will be carried out through the South hand.

The following guidelines apply to where you want to optimise your chances of making a 3NT contract, rather than make the most tricks, such as in Butler or Team's scoring or in "Kitchen Bridge" for that matter.

These guidelines around declarer hold-up plays in 3NT contracts, all relate to the expectation that one of the defenders holds at least five of the outstanding cards. If declarer has the Ace as the only stopper, she should duck twice with a combined five cards in the suit, once with six cards and not duck at all with seven, the last on the basis that if one defender has five in the suit, the other has

only one. At Matchpoint scoring, declarers may choose to duck even when holding seven cards in the suit but, in this case, there is often risk from another suit where a switch by the defence might prove to be even more damaging.

There are somewhat more complex hands than the one above where declarer has to let the defence in twice in order to set up her long suit in 3NT. Providing she has two stoppers in the suit led by the defence, she should now aim to let the dangerous hand with the long suit in first so that when the non-dangerous hand gets in later she has no more cards in the dangerous suit to lead. With a five card holding headed by, for example, the AK, declarer now has to duck once.

The Board was played on Monday August 18 where a riskier approach to a 3NT contract scored better at Matchpoint than the safer spade contract if declarer took the risk of ducking only the first heart lead, relying on North having no more than a doubleton. Declarer can win 11 tricks by finessing the QC and KS through South which includes a further spade trick after losing the JS to the North hand.

Declarer can also make 11 tricks in the safer spade contract by taking the same finesses without risk but record a worse result at Matchpoint scoring for her pains.

BOARD 18					
BD: 18	♠ J54		Dlr: E		
	♥ 94		Vul: NS		
	♦ J97653				
	♣ 85				
♠ AQT2		♠ 8763			
♥ A82		♥ 73			
♦ AT		♦ KQ84			
♣ KT92		♣ AJ3			
	♠ K9				
	♥ KQJT65				
	♦ 2				
	♣ Q764				
	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
N	-	-	-	-	-
S	-	-	-	-	-
E	5	3	2	5	5
W	5	3	2	5	5
				2	
				17	10
					11