

## PLAYING IT SAFE

One of the things I have emphasised so far is that when you need a card (or cards) to be in a particular hand, you assume it is, and then you also place other cards accordingly. On the other hand, when a contract looks easy, you have to allow for bad breaks and work out how to allow for them.

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

♠ A K 7  
♥ A 8 5 3 2  
♦ A Q 4  
♣ 7 4

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
	3♣	Pass	3NT

All Pass

West leads the ♠4 to the Queen and your King. How should you play the clubs?

If you needed seven tricks from clubs, that would be a different matter. Your best chance then is to cash the Ace and King, with a first round finesse of the ♣J a close second chance. But if you have no need for seven tricks (let's say you are playing teams), you need to guarantee at least five for your contract. This is a sure thing, as long as West follows to the first club when you lead them. [Bear in mind, if East has all four clubs your contract is in trouble.]

You simply duck! If clubs are 2-2 or 3-1, the remaining clubs will fall under the Ace and King on the next two rounds. However, if clubs break 4-0 (with East having all four), you will notice East's first-round discard. Now you just finesse the ♣J on the second round and make six club tricks.

Funnily enough, if West plays the ♣Q on your first club lead, you should also duck – if you think West knows about safety plays. The Queen would be a sensational card when holding Q-10-9-5, because declarer's reflex would be to win, and down goes the contract.

There are many standard safety plays when holding particular suit combinations. The more that you know about them, the better, because it is really hard to work them out at the table. However, safety plays are not just about playing a single suit; very often, it is about the whole hand.

Here is an example of what I mean:

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

♠ A Q 2  
♥ A J 6 3  
♦ A K Q  
♣ J 10 4

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
Pass	6NT	All Pass	2NT

*[Note: The play on this hand is no different if you are playing in 6♥.]*

North leads the ♦9, a passive lead.

You would look at this heart suit and think, "There's a safety play to ensure three heart tricks." It is one of the standard safety plays: you cash the Ace, then lead low towards the K-9. If West plays an honour (the 10), you win the King and now your Jack and 9 are equals against the Queen, so you can establish the third trick. If West plays low, you put in the 9, and either you win the trick (if West started with Q-10-x-x) or else the suit is breaking 3-2. If West shows out, you win the King and lead back towards your Jack.

If you held the ♠K, instead of the ♠Q, that would be the correct play, because you only need three heart tricks.

On the actual hand, three heart tricks may not be enough, because you may have only one spade trick. So, the 'secret' to this hand is to cross to dummy with a club and take an immediate spade finesse. If it wins, you can take your safety play in hearts, as explained earlier. But if the spade finesse loses, you will need four heart tricks, so you should lead low to the Jack on the first round – not even cashing the King first. You will then make four tricks when hearts are 3-2 with East holding the Queen, but also when East has the singleton Queen. (If you think about the singleton Queen, you will see why you cannot cash the King first.)

Good safety play involves not just knowing your suit combinations, but thinking about the whole hand not just a single suit in isolation. That means you may have to find out about other suits before playing the critical suit!

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