

## Declaring a Hand

### Part 4: Detective vs. Magician

In many aspects, being a good declarer is like being a good detective. On many hands, the detective's goal is to figure which is the best line of play to take. In particular, a good declarer will ask himself a number of questions:

1. What did I learn from the opponent's bids?
2. What did I learn from what the opponent's DIDN'T bid?
3. What did they lead to the first trick? Was it unexpected?
4. What can I learn from their leads and carding?

By answering these questions, you will usually get a much better understanding of the missing cards.

With that information, you can often find the "right" way to attack the contract.

At the same time, it's worth noting that the defenders are trying to do the same thing. While they usually have the advantage of having more information from the bidding, they can only see half of their side's assets (i.e. the cards in their own hand). They have to try and figure out what, if any, valuable assets partner has. That's where signaling comes in: when done consistently, this can be a fast and easy way for your opponents to get the full picture of the deal. So, part of your job as a declarer is to mess that plan up! Think of it as being part magician: you're trying to get them to "see" things that aren't there. Consider these two examples:

#### Example #1:

Dummy - A Q J 6 5

Let's say you want to get to Dummy in this suit. How would you play this holding? Unless RHO is the danger hand, you would likely finesse the Queen. But, what if you have the King in hand? Well, now

you may blindly lead to the Ace knowing you can use the Queen and/or Jack later. However, you should avoid that temptation if possible: the defenders can see Dummy's holding. So, if you take the Ace on the first trick, they'll know to put the King in your hand. If you "finesse" the Queen, then at least RHO won't know who had the King.

### Example #2

Dummy – 8 6 3

LHO opponent leads the Queen of this suit. (Note: That should indicate that she also holds the Jack.) The trick goes 3, 7 from RHO and 4 from you. What should LHO do next? Let's assume that the opponents are playing standard signals: a high card is encouraging, a low card is discouraging. In that case, LHO should continue the suit. Why? Well, the key question is: "Who has the 2?" If declarer had it, he probably would have discarded it instead of the 4. If her partner has it, then LHO can expect that her partner's most likely holding is something like K 7 5 2 with the 7 being an encouraging card. Could RHO be playing high-low with a doubleton 7 2? Yes, but that leaves declarer with both the Ace and King and length. With that holding, he would likely win that first trick.

Why do I bring this up when talking about declaring a hand? This seems more like a defensive signaling discussion. That's where the magic declarer comes in. If you know the opponent's signals, then you can use deception to muddy the waters. For example, assume you have the following holding opposite that Dummy: A K 5 4 2. You're hoping to get 4 tricks in this suit, but have to lose one trick early on first. So, you're going to hold up hoping that LHO will lead the suit again. Unfortunately, you can see that RHO is sending a negative signal. If you just drop the 2, then LHO may deduce that partner's 7 could be a negative signal. But, what if you drop the 5? As far as you're concerned, it's the same card since

you played Dummy's 3. But, LHO can't see your cards! She may place K 7 4 2 in her partner's hand. And, if she does, she's going to lead the suit again.

The basic idea here is: mimic their signals. If you want LHO to continue the suit, "signal" with a high card. If you're hoping for a switch, play a low card. This won't always work. For example, if RHO drops the 2, there's no way for you to confuse LHO. But, don't be afraid to try. In fact, if you regularly try it, even when you know it won't work, you won't hesitate when you need to make the play for real. Remember: if you hesitate, it is perfectly legal for LHO to take an inference from that.

### Learning from the Bidding

The first thing you should do when deciding how to play your contract is take stock of your assets, in particular your combined HCP. The next thing you should do is use any bidding to dole out the remaining HCP to the opponents. As a general rule, you should expect the following:

- An opener will have 12+ HCP, maybe 10+ in 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> seat
- An overcaller will have 8+ HCP
- A responder will have 5+ HCP
- Preempters will have 10- HCP

You should also understand any range bids (e.g. 1NT showing 15 to 17) they have made. Let's look at an example to see this in practice:

### Hand 1

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

The bidding went: 1♣ – 1NT – Pass – 3NT – All Pass. LHO dutifully leads the 5♣. What's your plan?

Well, between the two hands, you have 27 HCP. Since we expect RHO to have 12+ HCP, that leaves LHO with, at most, a Jack. Given that, you can see your way to an "easy" 11 tricks by doing the following:

- Play the Jack from Dummy at trick 1. RHO will cover with the Queen and we win the trick with the Ace
- Lead a low ♣ back to Dummy. If LHO shows up with 2, then we have 4 tricks in the suit. So, let's assume that she shows out on the second round.
- Lead a low ♠ from Dummy and finesse the Jack.

Quick sidebar: At this point, you might be saying: "But Dan, North is the danger hand here because of Dummy's ♦ holding." First, kudos for remembering our last lesson. But second, that doesn't apply here because we "know" that RHO has the King of ♠. There are hands where someone will open with only 10 HCP, but it's not going to be 1♣ with a Q X X X holding.

- When the finesse wins, return to Dummy with the Ace of ♥ to repeat the ♠ finesse.
- Now, run your remaining ♥ discarding a low ♦ from Dummy on the last one
- Assuming normal discards, we know that RHO is down to 2♣, the Ace and Queen of ♦ and one other card in a pointed suit. To find out what that card is, cash your Ace of ♠ for your 9<sup>th</sup> trick.
- You can now throw RHO in by cashing Dummy's remaining high ♣ and then leading the last one.
- RHO can win this trick, but now has to lead away from his Ace – Queen of ♦. So, you'll be able to score Dummy's King for your 11<sup>th</sup> trick.

If RHO sees this endplay coming, then he may try and muddy the waters by discarding the Queen of ♦ to try and trick you into another line of play, especially if he also holds the Jack. But, even then, you should be able to get a count on the hand well enough to make the right decision.

## Learning from the Non-Bidding

The converse of this is also true: we can learn from what the opponents didn't bid. The most obvious information comes from a Pass. Specifically, if an opponent didn't open the bidding, then they probably have 11- HCP. However, you need to be careful in not taking this too far. For example, consider the following hand:

### Hand 2

♠ A Q J  
♥ Q J 2  
♦ 8 3 2  
♣ A 6 4 3

Given the chance, this hand would open 1♣ since it has 14 HCP. But, what if your RHO opens 1♦ in front of you? What are you going to bid: a light 1NT with no ♦ stopper? An off-shape Double? Most likely, you're going to pass and hope you get another chance to bid later.

There is also the matter of style. If I have 6♥ and 5+ HCP, I'm opening the bidding. First, second or third seat. Vulnerable or Not. If my hand looks like a preempt, I'm placing it on the table. But, what if it's too strong, say a good 11 HCP? Then, I'm opening 1♥: there is no gap between 2♥ and 1♥ for me. While that style is becoming more common, it's not universal. Ask yourself: do you know someone that wouldn't preempt with one of these hands?

### Hand 3

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

### Hand 4

♠ K 10 7  
♥ 10 9 8 7 5 2

♦ 8 3

♣ A J

Of course you do! Hand 3 has a 4 card ♠ suit. Hand 4's ♥ are atrocious. Would I open both 2♥? Yes, I would in a heartbeat. Can I assume that an opponent holding them would? Not unless I'm very familiar with their bidding style. But, I can be reasonably sure they're not holding this if they Pass:

#### Hand 5

♠ 10 7 6

♥ K Q 10 7 5 2

♦ 8 3

♣ A 3

It's also important to realize that every bid the opponents make reflects a choice. For example, if they open 1♣, that means they chose not to open 1NT or 3♣. So, we can put additional bounds on their holding. For example, let's assume that LHO opens 1♣. Then, during the play, they show up with Ace, King, Queen of ♣ and the Ace of ♥. Given that, how should you play this ♦ holding:

♦ A 10 7 6

♦ K J 9 3

Your natural reaction is probably to finesse LHO for the Queen. She opened the bidding, so she has most of the opponent's HCP. But, let's reassess based on what's happened in the hand so far: LHO has already shown up with 13 HCP. If she also has the Queen of ♦, then she's got 15. In that case, why didn't she open 1NT? It would have to be that she has an unbalanced hand (e.g. the Queen is singleton). So, our best play is likely to play Dummy's King and then finesse RHO(!) for the Queen. He may not have many HCP, but he's much more likely to have those.

Our data collection shouldn't stop there: we should consider the entire auction. In many competitive auctions, the opponents will have multiple opportunities to describe their hands. So, we should be on alert for what each action tells us about their holdings. Consider this simple auction: 1♠

by RHO followed by 2♥, 2♠, 3♥, All Pass. This is a pretty typical competitive auction: they've got ♠, we've got ♥ and both sides have about half of the HCP. It may seem pretty cut and dry, but the opponents have a big advantage: ♠ are higher than ♥. As a result, they can take the contract without raising the level. If the bidding was reversed (i.e. they got to 3♠), then we would have to go up another level. That gives the opponents a strong incentive to "find a reason" to bid. They've got a fit and opened the bidding, so we're going to have a hard time doubling them into game, especially at IMPs! So, both opponents will be looking for a reason: an extra trump, unexpected shortness, a King beyond the bottom of their bid. Anything which will let them push the bidding up one more round. The fact that neither of them did suggests that they're both close to their minimum. Specifically, we should place 12 HCP and 5♥ in RHO's hand and 6 HCP and 3♥ in LHO's hand.

### Learning from their Leads and Carding

In some auctions, we have a pretty good idea what the lead is going to be. In both of these bidding sequences, I would expect to get a ♥ lead.

#### Auction 1

<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>
1♣	Pass	1♦	1♥
2NT	Pass	3NT	All Pass

#### Auction 2

<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>
1♣	Pass	1♦	Pass
1♠	Pass	2♥*	Pass
3NT	All Pass		

\* Fourth suit forcing to game

In the first auction, partner bid the suit. Since East doesn't rate to have many HCP based on the bidding, we'd expect her to just lead partner's ♥ suit. In the second auction, ♥ is the unbid suit. (Note: 2♥ is

just a forcing bid: it doesn't say anything about the suit.) Yes, we expect that North has something in ♥ to bid No Trump, but it still rates to be better than leading one of her actual suits.

If we get the expected ♥ lead, then we next try and figure out what the lead "means". Since LHO didn't bid the suit, we expect that a high spot card is top of nothing. A low spot card indicates they have an honor in that suit. When combine that with RHO's card, we usually have a very good idea of how that suit is breaking at trick 1. What if we get a different lead? In that case, our "spidey senses" should go on high alert. That usually means one of two things. First, they could be void in the expected suit. That's possible on the first hand, but very unlikely on the second one: holding 6+ ♥, we expect RHO would have thrown in a bid. Second, LHO has a really strong suit and at least one outside entry. Remember, just setting up your suit isn't enough: you need to be able to get back in to cash it at some point.

We can get similar information from the opponents when they discard. Remember, they're often not sure where their combined strength is, so they often need to use their discards to signal the location of their HCP. (Note: That is why I always ask the opponents their lead and carding at the start of each hand I declare, even if it's the third board of the round! It ensures that I'm locked in on how to interpret their signals. For example, some pairs use different approaches for Suit vs No Trump contracts. It also gives me an extra second to develop my plan, which can cover up any hesitation I may have when seeing Dummy for the first time.) Assume they're playing standard discards. In that case, if they discard a high card, they "like" that suit. Discard a low one, they don't "like" that suit. The hope is that if partner wins a trick, she'll be able to use that information to try and find another one.

That being said, you need to be careful about how strongly you read into these signals, especially at higher contracts. For example, in any slam, I would ignore them completely. For example, say you're declaring 6NT. In order for RHO's signal to matter, we need all of the following: 1. LHO needs to win a trick, 2. LHO doesn't have the setting trick in her hand and 3. She needs help figuring out where



RHO's trick is. That's a LOT to hope for when your side may only have 6-8 HCP! RHO knows this too. So, he's pretty free to try and make you guess wrong by sending out a misleading signal. In fact, since you'll be winning most of the tricks, getting you to take the wrong line of play may be his ONLY chance at setting the contract!

Now, let's put this all together into an analysis of a single hand. The bidding was simple Pass - 1NT - 3NT with the opponents passing throughout.

### Hand 6

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

LHO leads the Ace of ♣ and RHO follows with the 5. (Note: You find out they're using standard signals.)

At trick 2, LHO switches to a low ♠. What's your plan? First, let's unravel the ♣ holding. Based on RHO's 5, we assume that he doesn't have an honor in that suit. (Note: Maybe Q 5, but that's about it.)

So, we place all three honors: A K Q in LHO's hand. If that's the case, then we can put the Ace ♦ of in RHO's hand: if LHO had that card, she would have had 13 HCP and would have opened the bidding.

That's also consistent with the play: if LHO had A K Q X X in ♣ and an outside entry, then she would have continued the suit to establish her 5<sup>th</sup> card. That would be enough to set the contract. But, without the Ace of ♦, LHO needs to find another trick. Plus, switching at trick 2 makes it more likely that RHO will be able to lead a ♣ when the time is right.

We would have been quite happy with a ♣ continuation, which is why we dropped the 8 on trick 1. But, now we've got a bit of a communication problem: we need to cash the Ace and Jack of ♥ while we can still get back to our hand to cash our major winners. Plus, we still need two more tricks. Plus if we drive out LHO's ♣, she will be able to establish at least one ♠ trick for her side, as long as she

has at least 3 of them. So, what do we do? Given all that, our best bet is to win two ♦ tricks. To that end, win the 2<sup>nd</sup> trick in hand and cash Dummy's Ace and Jack of ♥. Now, lead a low ♦ from Dummy. If RHO flies with the Ace, you're home free. But, what if he doesn't? In that case, win the Queen in your hand and run your ♥ winners pitching 2 ♦ from Dummy. At this point, you need to make a decision: did RHO only have 2 ♦? If either of those is true, then you should lead a ♦ now and duck(!) in Dummy. If RHO only started with 2 in that suit, then he'll be forced to win his Ace. He can play a ♣ back to partner, but that will only hold you to making 3. If you think that's not the case, then you should lead a ♣ and hope that LHO either started with a singleton or J X in ♦. In either of those cases, LHO won't be able to set up partner's long ♦, assuming you duck the Jack. So, the Defense will only get 4 tricks, which lets you make.