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Play & Learn

Those pesky losers

When playing in a trump contract, declarer's plan involves counting losers. I'm often asked why we count winners in notrump, but we count losers in suit contracts. Take a look at this layout to see how counting losers works better when playing a suit contract:

♠ Q 9 7 2
♥ 7 6 2
♦ A K Q 10
♣ Q 6

♠ J 10 8 4
♥ A 5 3
♦ J
♣ A K J 10 9

West	North	East	South
			1♣
Pass	1♦	Pass	1♠
Pass	4♠	All Pass	

Opening lead: ♥K.

With a weak hand, North might have bid spades immediately. With enough for game, North bid diamonds before spades to cater to a variety of possible contracts.

North-South have 10 winners outside the trump suit: five clubs, four diamonds and one heart. If North-South had reached 3NT, declarer would take

those 10 winners and run after the opening lead. Trying for additional tricks would probably lead to defeat before these 10 tricks were secured.

Playing in notrump is like driving a car without brakes. There is nothing you can do to stop your opponents from running all the tricks they have coming once they gain the lead.

In 4♠, declarers who count only winners could be lulled into a false sense of security. The opponents would surely ruff if declarer tried to run both minors, so declarer might attack trumps to prevent that. But when East-West gain the lead with a high trump, they can cash two hearts and another spade to set 4♠.

If you are declaring 4♠, you are immediately aware that you have four losers. One loser must be eliminated.

There are three main ways to eliminate a loser in a suit contract — ruff it, dump it or finesse to avoid it:

- ♦ Ruff it in dummy. Consider this play in a suit when you see lopsided distribution in a side suit (non-trump suit) where declarer's hand has losers and more cards than dummy.
- ♦ Discard it. This frequently involves looking for a long side suit where declarer is shorter than dummy and dummy will have good cards remaining once declarer runs out of the suit. Those winners in dummy can be used to absorb declarer's losers in another suit.
- ♦ Finesse to try to make good a high card you originally counted as a loser.

Counting the losers in your hand can help you focus on exactly what needs to be done to make the contract. Focus on the two spade and two heart losers. Nothing can be done about the top trumps, so something must be done about the two heart losers. With no other high hearts, rule out a finesse. With three hearts in each hand, there is no hope of ruffing a heart loser in dummy. The only remaining solution is to discard at least one heart, and dummy's diamond suit provides a place to do that.

Now plan the timing. The opening heart lead made all four losers fast losers — tricks that can be lost as soon as East-West regain the lead. You cannot let East-West in with a high spade until a loser is eliminated. Even though drawing trumps is important, declarer sometimes has something even more critical to do first.

On this deal, the most important thing to do is get rid of at least one heart loser. After winning the ♥A, immediately play diamonds to get rid of a heart. Once one heart is discarded, 4♠ can be made.

There is no risk in going for an over-trick. With eight missing diamonds, it's very likely that you will be able to cash three high diamonds and pitch both heart losers. Even if the opponents ruff the third diamond, the contract is safe. Once the heart losers are eliminated, draw trumps. Best scores will go to declarers who discard both heart losers to take 11 tricks in 4♠. They even beat pairs who stumble into 3NT and make four. □