# COMBINING CHANCES by Maritha Pottenger

When figuring out play as Declarer (and also on defense), it is good to have several alternative lines available. Then, your major challenge is to work out the correct timing. You want to be able to try each of your options, one after another. (Defenders, naturally, want to take as many of your options away from you as soon as they can.)

One option is **dropping honors**. If you need only ONE extra trick and you can finesse in 3 suits (but cannot afford to lose the lead), your best course is to cash the top honors in the two suits in which you have the most cards (hoping that a singleton king or doubleton queen or tripleton jack will fall). If that does not work, then take a finesse in the suit in which you have the fewest cards (between your hand and dummy).

If you are in a suit contract, you may have the possibility of hoping that an **honor can be ruffed out** in one suit before trying a finesse in another suit. If, for example, you have a singleton opposite an AQxx combination (and plenty of trumps), try to ruff out the King in that suit before risking a finesse in your suit that has xx opposite AQxx. Sometimes it would require that **two honors be ruffed out** (KQx or QJx), but it is still worth trying if you have plenty of trumps and transportation—before you try a finesse. Be alert for combinations where you can **promote key spot cards**. For example, AK98 opposite 10xx. If your **only** chance is to finesse twice hoping that QJx(x) is on your right, go for it!

Sometimes you have a choice between trying for a favorable split in a particular suit versus trying a finesse (or a double finesse). If there is only **one suit** involved, you should make your decision based on percentages (if no clues are available from the bidding or play). For example, AKJxx opposite xx. If you have enough trumps, it is superior to play for the suit to split 3-3 OR 4-2 and plan to ruff out the queen in one or two rounds. Only if you don't have enough trumps (or are in no trump), should you risk the 50% finesse.

Many times, **more than one suit** is involved. If you can make your contract with favorable suit breaks in one suit OR on a finesse, it is better to **try for the suit break first** (if you cannot afford to lose the lead). So, try for the 3-3 break (even though it is only 33% chance) before trying the 50% finesse in another suit. You have nothing to lose by trying it first. If, however, playing for the break would mean losing the lead and you cannot afford that, go by the percentages and prefer a finesse to seeking a 3-3 break.

**Avoidance plays** are very important in preserving your options and combining your chances. Sometimes you will play suit combinations in an unusual way—in order to preserve an option in another suit. You might, for example, play a low card away from AQxx toward your Jx because if the King rises on your right you will have enough discards to take care of your other losers and if the King if on your left, you still have a finesse in a 2nd suit to try. If you played the Jack around toward the Queen originally and it lost to the King, you would not have enough tricks. Or, you may take a "backwards finesse" because you can afford to lose to one specific opponent but not the other. That would often be the case when you can finesse (or backwards finesse) in one suit and then test that suit for a 3-3 break even after the finesse loses. A 3-3 break will still bring you home. If the break is 4-2, you'll have to risk a finesse in a different suit. If you lose the finesse in the 1st suit to the wrong opponent, s/he will return the 2nd suit immediately (if a good defender) before you have had a chance to check on the break in that first suit. Hence, the avoidance play!

As always, you must ask yourself "**What could go wrong** with this contract and how could I guard against it?" Assume a key card is badly placed and look for protective steps you can take. In aggressive contract, assume that the cards are placed in such a way that the contract is **makable**—and play for that!