

RETAINING AN OPTION by Maritha Pottenger

When playing a hand, it is advisable to have a Plan A, Plan B, and often Plans C and D as well. You will get the best results by having several options available. Then, your challenge is to investigate each of your options in such a way that you can try subsequent options also if the first one or two do not pan out. This means that you must be very careful in your timing (what you do first).

A typical example would be if you have 8 tricks in no trump and cannot afford to lose the lead (as the opponents can cash tricks in their long suit). You can hope for a 3-3 break in one suit; a 3-3 break in another suit, or a finesse to produce your 9th trick. Clearly it is better to play the top cards in the two suits that might break 3-3. If either suit breaks favorably, you have made your contract. If neither suit breaks favorably, then resort to the finesse.

Another example would be when you have 8 tricks in no trump, and cannot afford to lose the lead. You have a choice of 3 suits in which you can finesse for a queen. If you guess correctly and the finesse works, you have your 9th trick. The best way to preserve your options is to play the Ace and King in your longest suit-- your longest suit in terms of cards in both your hand and in dummy. If the queen does not fall singleton or doubleton, then play the Ace and King in your next-longest suit. If that queen does not fall singleton or doubleton, then take the finesse in the third suit.

If you are in a slam contract and need one of two finesses (missing two kings), if one finesse is opposite a singleton, first try to ruff out the King in that suit. If you cannot do that, then try finessing in the other suit. If either finesse is opposite a singleton, cash the Ace in the suit in which you and dummy have the most cards. (Once in a blue moon, the King will be singleton.) If the King does not fall, finesse in the other suit.

Many avoidance plays are also designed to help you retain your options. If you can avoid letting a dangerous opponent in, you can avoid having your vulnerable honors led through (e.g., Kxx or KJxx). You may be able to avoid leading toward those honors at all (arrange for an end play), or you may be able to gather enough information from playing other suits, that the "guess" of a KJx combination (which opponent has the Ace & which has the Queen) is no longer a guess based on how many HCP each opponent has shown up with already and what their bidding was.

Sometimes you will even take a finesse "backwards" because it allows you to retain the option of trying another play if the opponent's honor is poorly placed for you.

Another example would be if you have two finesses to choose from in a slam contract, but even if one finesse loses, a 3-3 break in that suit will allow you to avoid the other finesse. Obviously, you would want to try that finesse first so you can try for 3-3 break even if the finesse loses.

Suppose you need either a finesse of an Ace (Kx opposite xx) or the finesse for a queen (AJx opposite Kxx) for your 12th trick in a slam contract. You have one quick discard available. To combine your chances, cash the Ace and King in the suit missing the queen. If the queen falls, discard one of your cards from the Kx opposite xx holding. If the queen does not fall, discard your loser in the first suit and lead low toward your Kx in the second suit.

When you have plenty of trumps, some combinations offer extra chances. For example, with 10xxx opposite AK, you should cash AK and trump one round. Perhaps the QJx exists. Or, with AJxx opposite a singleton, trump two rounds. The KQx might come down.

If you can train yourself to look (at Trick One!) for at least a Plan A and a Plan B, you will do much better at bridge!