

UNBLOCKING

By Maritha Pottenger

Unblocking is the art of getting rid of your high cards (especially honor cards) when holding on to them would be detrimental to your side. To review, here are situations that call for unblocking:

1) There are a several circumstances in which you must drop an honor under an honor in order to create a finessing position and an extra trick. An example would be when LHO (left-hand opponent) leads the King of hearts promising the Queen. You have Jx of hearts and Dummy has A10x with NO other entries. You must drop the Jack under the King, so that you have the A10 remaining behind LHO's Qxx to get two tricks next time the suit is played. Similarly, LHO leads the Jack of hearts (promising 10) and dummy has A9x (and NO other entries) while you have Qx. Duck the heart. When RHO wins the King of hearts, DUMP that queen. Then you have two tricks coming with Ace and the 9. Or, LHO leads a small heart (promising an honor) and dummy shows up with Q10x and no other entries. RHO takes the Ace and you hold Kx. DUMP that King so you can finesse LHO out of the Jack next time you play the suit.

2) When Declarer is running a suit and the “short side” has high intermediate cards that will “block the suit” and prevent it from running *unless* Declarer ditches the high intermediate cards under higher cards in the opposite hand. Example would be AKQ43 opposite 10982—play 1098 under AKQ & finally the 2.

3) When partner leads from an honor sequence, particularly in no trump, and you have a doubleton honor. It is imperative to “get out of the way” of partner. Consider your hand the “short side” and play your honor right away so that partner can run the suit as soon as possible.

4) When defending, if you can see that your honor puts you at risk for being thrown in (on an end-play) and forced to assist Declarer. Consider getting rid of your honor (particularly if there is any hope that partner has an honor just below it).

5) Many times, you must unblock in order to create entries to a hand that has very few entries. (Generally Dummy will have fewer entries than your hand, but the opposite situation comes up often enough as well.) As an example, suppose you hold AKQJxxxx AKxx A --- and dummy has x xxx KQJxx AQxx in a contract of 6S. The opponents lead the Jack of clubs. In order to make your contract, you must play the ACE of clubs and DISCARD the Ace of diamonds from your hand. Then play the King and Queen of diamonds, discarding two losing hearts. Then, pull trumps.

6) It is good technique to try to keep as many possible entries to both hands as possible. This is keeping your entry situation “fluid.” If you have plenty of entries in both hands, play suits in such a way that you preserve possible entries to both hands. (For example, if you have a trump suit that is AK642 opposite J10953, play the Ace (unblocking the Jack) and then play the King (unblocking the 10). Assuming the suit is 2-1, you have the option of being able to use that suit to get to EITHER hand at least twice. Another common situation is a suit that is KQJ2 opposite A543. If the hand with the Ace has very few entries, you can create a second entry IF THE SUIT BREAKS 3-2. Play the King and then play the Queen. If both opponents follow, you know the suit is breaking 3-2. Now, play the Jack over to the Ace. Take whatever finesse you need to take from that hand. Later, when you need to get to that hand again, play the 2 over to the 5!

Another example would be a hand that is AKJ10852 K x Axxx opposite Q93 Qxxxx Qx xxx and you are playing 4S with the lead of a top diamond followed by another top diamond. You must trump the 2nd diamond with a HIGH TRUMP (AKJ10 or 8—even the 5 is OK, but you cannot spare the 2 of spades!). Then play King of hearts, losing to Ace. The defense will probably shift to a club. Take the Ace and play the Jack or 10 of trumps over to the queen. Trump a heart (HIGH!). Now play the 8 of trumps over to the 9 and trump another heart HIGH. Last, play your carefully preserved 2 of spades over to the 3. Cash the queen of hearts (discarding a club). If hearts were 4-3 (very likely), your 5th heart is now good and you discard another losing club. Making 4. Ruffing the 2nd trick with your 2 of spades ensures that you go down in a makable game!

7) As Declarer, you want to block defenders' suit(s) when given the opportunity. A common example is when you have Ax in a suit opposite 10xxx in dummy and defenders lead it against 3NT with RHO putting in the 9. You know that RHO also has **one** of the top honors in that suit (because LHO would have led King if s/he had KQJx(x)). By taking the Ace at trick one, you block the suit for the opponents if the suit is 5-2. LHO now needs TWO entries—one to play over to partner's honor and a 2nd one to get back and play his/her honors. S/he is unlikely to have two entries and you are odds-on to make your game.