

THE PRINCIPLE of VACANT SPACES

by Maritha Pottenger

If, as Declarer, you have a two-way finesse (e.g., A10x opposite Kjx), your best choice is an end play. If an end play is not available, you fall back on counting out the distribution of the opponent's hands and using the principle of vacant spaces.

The idea of **vacant spaces** is that whoever has more “vacant spaces” in their hand is more likely to have a card which matters to you. Vacant spaces are used when you do not have a complete count on the hand, but you do have a complete count of at least one suit. If you are forced to make a decision early and you only know that one opponent has six cards in a suit (because they opened a weak two bid) and their partner has two cards (because you have two and dummy has three cards in that suit), you know that one opponent has seven vacant spaces for other cards and their partner has eleven vacant spaces for any other cards. (This is ignoring the issue of high cards at the moment.)

If you know two suits, you have more information. Suppose that your opponents did not bid, and you reach a four spade contract. LHO leads a club; RHO takes the Ace and LHO ruffs the club return. You started with 3 clubs and partner started with 3 clubs. You regain the lead and pull trumps. LHO started with 3 spades and RHO starts with 2 spades. So, LHO has 9 vacant spaces for hearts and diamonds. RHO has only 5 vacant spaces for hearts and diamonds. If you have a two-way finesse in either red suit, you should finesse LHO for the missing honor.

When you have a complete count on the hand, your choice is straightforward odds. If, for example, you have the standard two-way finesse for a queen in a suit in which you and dummy have a seven card fit, and you discover that RHO has 4 cards in that suit and LHO has two cards in that suit, the odds are 4 to 2 (or 2 to 1) that RHO has the queen which concerns you.

Vacant spaces should influence you to adjust your play at times. For example, with the queen missing, when you have a nine-card fit, you usually play for the drop. This is because the chance of a singleton queen, combined with 2-2 breaks totals 52% while the finesse is only a 50% shot. If, however, one opponent has preempted (a weak two or a weak three), that opponent has considerably fewer vacant spaces for your trump suit. You should play for trumps to be 3-1 and finesse the partner of the preemptor for your missing queen.