

ELIMINATION AND END PLAYS

By Maritha Pottenger

In bridge, it can be to Declarer's advantage to **give up the lead** (lose a trick) at a particular point in the play—a point **when whatever the opponent(s) do is advantageous to your side!** Giving up the lead at that advantageous time (or to the particular opponent who must make a helpful lead) is known as an “end play” (because it often occurs toward the end of playing a hand) or a “throw-in play” (because you are “throwing in” the opponent who must be helpful to you **at that time**).

An end play can often allow you to REFUSE TO TAKE a losing finesse. (A finesse is only a 50% shot. An end play—if properly executed—is a 100% shot!) Classic end plays occur when you still have trumps in BOTH Declarer's hand and in Dummy. This requires a 4-4 trump fit [with 3-2 break] OR a 5-4 (or longer) trump fit in which the opponents' trumps can be eliminated in 3 rounds.

Be alert for situations when you can eliminate (or “strip”) the same suit from both your hand and dummy's hand. In such cases, you can often force the opponents to make a lead that is favorable for you: either a sluff-and-ruff—allowing you to trump in one hand while discarding a loser in the other hand—or a “free finesse” where the opponent leads into an AQ with you playing 4th hand or is forced to “break” a suit in which you are trying to locate a queen, e.g., AJx opposite K10x, thus guaranteeing you will “find” the queen.)

Proper technique is:

- 1) **Pull trumps** (making sure at least one trump remains in both Dummy and Declarer's hand).
- 2) **Eliminate one side suit** from both Declarer's hand and Dummy.
- 3) **Eliminate a second side suit**, giving up a trick or tricks in that 2nd side suit which **must be EVENLY DIVIDED** between Declarer's hand & Dummy. (The opponents may take 1, 2, or 3 tricks in 2nd side suit.)
- 4) The opponent on lead is forced to give Declarer either a ruff-and-sluff (discarding a loser from one hand and trumping in the other) if that opponent leads either of the two side suits that have been eliminated from Declarer's and Dummy's hands. OR, the opponents will have to provide a “free finesse” in the third side suit. Or, by breaking the 3rd suit, either opponent eliminates one of your losers in that 3rd suit. Examples of suits you want opponents to lead first include **Qxx opposite Jxx; K10x opposite AJx; A10x opposite Jxx**, etc.

Partial Strips: Sometimes it is not possible to **completely** strip the hand, but a **partial strip is better than none**. If, for example, you have AKxxx opposite xxx in one side suit and a different side suit will be the throw-in suit, play the AK before throwing in an opponent. If that opponent only has TWO cards in your AKxxx suit, s/he will still be end-played.

Trump Suit as Throw-In Suit: Particularly in 4-4 trump fits, you can sometimes use the trump-suit as your throw-in suit (after eliminating two other suits from your hand and dummy). An example would be when you have AK43 opposite 6789 in trump. You must lose one trump trick (if trumps split 3-2 in opponents' hands). Eliminate two side suits and give one opponent the lead in the trump suit. S/he will have to give you a ruff-and-sluff or a “free finesse” in the 4th suit.

Hands with **mirror distribution** (when Dummy and Declarer have the same, exact distribution in all the suits) are good candidates for elimination & end plays. As an example, AKQx AKx AJ10 xxx opposite Jxxx xxx Kxx Axx in a contract of 4S with the lead of the King of clubs. Take the Ace of clubs. Now play the 3 top spades. IF spades break 3/2 (likely), cash the two top hearts. NOW (and only now) give up a club trick. Your opponents will cash two clubs and a heart. HOWEVER, after that, they must either give you a ruff-and-sluff OR “find” the queen of diamonds for you. **Note that it does not matter which opponent has the lead.** You are guaranteed to make 4! **The end play is 100% to make your contract.** Trying to “guess” the queen of diamonds finesse is 50% to make your contract & 50% to go down!

Even if you do not see an end play initially, if you begin by pulling trumps and eliminating suits, an end play may become clear when you have fewer cards to consider.

Certain holdings are “classic” and you should actively look for an end play when you have particular card combinations. **With AQ9 opposite xxx**, try to pull trump, eliminate suits, and end up so that you can lead low TOWARD the AQ9. If the opponent playing 2nd plays low, insert the 9, and you are guaranteed two tricks in the suit. If the opponent playing 2nd plays the Jack or 10, cover with the queen, and you are guaranteed two tricks in the suit. Similarly, with **AQ10 opposite xxx**, try to pull trump, eliminate suits, and lead low to the 10. (In this case, you can play the 10 OR the queen first, and your opponent will be end played.)

With **AJ10 opposite Kxx** (or any combination where the two hands have the AKJ10 between them, but three cards each in the suit (or 3 in one hand and 4 or 5 in the other), you want a “throw-in” opportunity. If you pull trumps, eliminate suits, & give up the lead with the last card (in both hands) in another suit that is evenly divided between your hand & Dummy, **whichever opponent has the lead** will have to give you a ruff-and-sluff OR “find” the queen for you. Note that with this combination, you do not care WHO gets the lead.

With any vulnerable holding in a suit, consider whether you can try a throw-in first (rather than trying to guess where the opponents’ high cards are or “hoping” they are placed favorably). As an example: **KJx opposite xxx or Kx opposite xx(x)**. Yes, you can play low to the Jack, and then low to the King in the first case. However, if you have plenty of entries, it does not hurt to try an elimination and throw-in first. If the opponent BEHIND your KJx is forced to take the lead, s/he must give you at least one trick in the suit! Sometimes, you KNOW from the bidding that the Ace is behind your Kx, so a throw-in is your only hope to make the contract! For example, Declarer has **AKQJx Kx xxx xxx** and Dummy has **xxxx Jxx AKQ AK9** and the bidding has been: **1S-2H-3H** (showing limit raise or better)-**P-3NT-P-4S**. The lead is the Queen of clubs. You KNOW that LHO has **AQJxx** of hearts and **QJ10(x)** of clubs (10 HCP to bid at the 2 level). If you play low toward your King of hearts, you are doomed to lose 2 heart tricks and one club. Instead, pull trumps (probably in 2 or 3 rounds), eliminate diamonds, play the other top club, and “throw in” your LHO with the 9 of clubs. S/he must either give you a ruff-and-sluff (trumping in dummy and dumping a heart from your hand) or lead hearts for you—either way limiting your heart losers to one. Making 5!

Suppose, for example, that you are playing a contract of 4 spades. You have **AKQxxx AKx K10x x** opposite dummy’s **J10xx 987 AJx xxx**. The opponents lead the Ace, then the King of clubs (which you trump in your hand). Counting your tricks, you see 6 spades, 2 hearts, 2 diamonds. So, you will have no trouble making your contract. But, you’d like to make an overtrick. If you can guess who has the queen of diamonds, you’ll make one more trick. That’s a 50% shot. But you can ensure your overtrick with a 100% shot. Go to dummy by playing a low spade to the Jack and trump dummy’s 3rd (last) club. Then play one or two more rounds of trump (depending on whether opponents’ trumps break 2-1 or 3-0). Then play the A, K, and a low heart. The opponents get the heart trick to which they were always entitled, but must now either play diamonds (providing a “free” finesse for you) or play clubs or hearts (providing a sluff-and-ruff). Making 5!!

When playing no trump, you may be able to eliminate two suits from one opponent’s hand, throw him/her in with the third suit, in order to force a favorable lead in the 4th suit! An example: you hold **AKxx Kxxx xxx xx** opposite **Qxx AQx A10x AQx**. The lead is the K of diamonds. You can count 8 top tricks: 3 spades, 3 hearts, 1 diamond, and 1 club. You need to develop one more. You could duck 2 round of diamonds, and then try for 3-3 spades OR 3-3 hearts OR (if neither of those works) fall back on the club finesse. However, if you duck only ONE round of diamonds, you preserve yet another chance for yourself! Take the 2nd diamond with the Ace and play the Q, K,A of spades. They don’t break 3-3. RHO has 4 of them. Take the A, Q, and K of

hearts. Again, RHO has 4 of them. Instead of trying for the 50% club finesse, go for the 100% end play. Play the 10 of diamonds. LHO must take that trick (LHO has KQJ of diamonds from the lead with either 4 or 5 diamonds total). LHO will take either 1 or 2 more diamonds, but must then lead into your AQ of clubs. Making 3 no trump!!