The Play of the Cards – Tips for the improver

This month's article is the first of two devoted to **safety plays**. The previous series on the finesse had the objective of maximising the number of tricks in a single suit whereas the safety play is often used to minimise the number of losers. As such, safety plays are more common in teams (and rubber) bridge where making the contract is much more important than overtricks. In pairs, of course, an overtrick can be the difference between an average and a top, so our play often reflects the percentages in favour of particular 'splits' rather than provision for those that are less likely.

The following suit illustrates the simplest form of safety play, where care provides certainty:

(1) AQ1064
K952

Playing the ace (or queen) first enables you to pick up Jxxx in either defender's hand. Most safety plays are not similarly guaranteed but rather designed to improve prospects above the norm. Take these two suits:

(1)	AJ543	(2)	KQ953
	K9862		A642

In (1) South cannot win all of the tricks if East holds Q107. However, leading the king is the safety play that enables South to pick up that holding with West . In (2) the safety play is the ace first, enabling declarer to take two finesses against J1087 in West's hand. The same principle arises with these hands:

(1)	AQ9642	(2)	KJ74
	J853		Q8652

In (1), with K107 missing, the finesse offers the better chance than playing off the ace. The safety play is to lead the jack, enabling you to pick up the suit without loss if East shows out. With (2) the safety play is to lead the queen first, restricting your losers to one when West has A1093.

In working out a safety play, you often have to consider what the situation will be if particular cards appear on the first round, For example,

(1)	Q932	(2)	A1072
	AK64		QJ53

In (1) you should begin by playing ace and king as a finesse will be playable if East plays the jack or ten on the first round and then shows out. The second position is somewhat more complicated. The lead of the queen costs a trick if East has a singleton king. Conversely, where East drops the eight or nine on that initial lead and this turns out to be singleton, the whole suit can be picked up. On the face of it then, the lead of the honour (two chances against one) looks the best but in practice, South is more likely to be influenced by whether he expects East or West to be long in the suit. IN that context, it is often a close question whether to finesse or play for the drop.

(1)	AJ753	(2)	AJ7532
	K84		K84

In (1), after you have played the king, the odds favour a finesse against the queen. In (2) with one extra card, the odds slightly favour playing for the drop but if there is any evidence from the bidding or earlier play that the suit might split 3-1, declarer should finesse.

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