

TRICK ONE THINKING

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Larry's Advice

"Think at Trick One!" This is a theme I constantly try to drill into students. I am still drilling.

So many hands are lost at trick one due to failure to think. Usually, this is associated with declarer play, but defenders, too, must think at trick one. Here is a recent example from a deal I played in a knockout teams:

You hold:

♠A 7 2
♥K 10
♦K 7 2
♣8 6 5 4 3

The dealer on your right opens 1♣. The eventual dummy, on your left responds 1♥. RHO rebids 1♠, and LHO bids 2♦, 4th suit Game Forcing. RHO bids 2NT, raised to 3NT:

West	North	East	South
You			
--	--	---	1 ♣
Pass	1 ♥	Pass	1 ♠
Pass	2 ♦*	Pass	2NT
Pass	3NT	(All Pass)	

It sounds like they are prepared for all four suits. You try a ♣, selecting the 6. You don't want to lead low, because that will encourage partner to continue the suit. When he sees your highish spot, maybe he can read it as from a bunch of low cards, and switch if appropriate. Down comes the dummy:

♠K Q 10
♥A J 9 7
♦Q 10 9 8 2
♣10

♠A 7 2
♥K 10
♦K 7 2
♣8 6 5 4 3

Declarer thinks about the hand for maybe 10 seconds, then tries dummy's ♣10.

Your partner plays the ♣J and declarer thinks some more.

What are you thinking? Are you thinking? Are you daydreaming? Is this hand too difficult (they made all those bids, alerted, etc.)? Should I just wade through this deal and hope I don't have to do anything important and just wait for the next deal which might be simpler and more fun? What was the bidding again? Why are you bothering me with this?

Here are the many things to consider:

1. **What is the club situation?** Declarer was maybe hoping dummy's 10 would hold. Partner's jack is making him think. Declarer won't have ace-king-nine--he would take partner's jack without being too troubled. Partner would have played the king with king-jack (third-hand high), so the most likely scenario is that partner has queen-jack (if he had only the jack, declarer wouldn't be thinking). Also, partner rates to have the 9. (Again, declarer would not be thinking so long with ace-king-nine). So, it looks as if you might have hit partner with the QJ9 of clubs -- a good lead for a change.
2. **Did your thinking end there?** I hope not. Are you ready for trick two? What if declarer wins the club and plays a spade? In general, it is never good to play second-hand high. Grabbing your ace will almost always help declarer in these situations. Not only will it help his timing and entries, but he might be missing the ♠J, and face a guess in this suit. You don't know enough about the full deal yet, so the best policy would be to duck and to do so smoothly! If you think about it at trick 2, you will be telling declarer where the ace is. So, you should be getting yourself ready for a spade play at trick 2 (smooth duck).
3. **Is that all?** No. What if declarer leads a low diamond from hand at trick 2? Again, you should follow general principles. Be prepared to duck, and to duck smoothly. Don't give away the location of the king.
4. **Are you still thinking?** Are you ready for a heart at trick two? This is a (rare) situation where you should actually play second hand high! If declarer has the queen, he is always entitled to four heart tricks--your play won't matter. But, if your partner has the queen, and you play the 10, dummy's jack will go to partner's queen. This will simplify the suit and the entries for declarer. Meanwhile, if you hop with the king, he will have more difficulty. He might duck (playing you for king-queen). Even if he does win the ace, he will have to come back to his hand in some other suit to lead hearts again (he doesn't know your ten is falling). Lastly, if he happens to have ♥Q83, he might win the ace and finesse into your ♥10 on the next round of hearts.
5. **Do you play Smith Echo?** This is a wonderful defensive signalling method. When declarer starts his suit (for the first time), you don't give count. Instead, you tell partner if you are happy with the opening-lead suit. Playing high-low says "I like the opening lead." Playing low-high says "try some other suit--not the suit our partnership led at trick 1." This method applies to either defender (opening leader or third hand). Almost all experts use this method. If you are playing **Smith Echo**, it is a good (ethical) idea to try to make your signal without lots of thought. So, in addition to all the above thinking, you should be ready to play the right Smith card. On a heart play, your king won't mean anything (honors are honors). BUT--if declarer plays a spade or a diamond, you plan to duck. Which spot you duck with will send a message. Are you happy with clubs? Do you want partner to continue? If so, you will follow (smoothly) with the ♠7 or ♦7. If not, you will play the deuce of that suit.

In fact, declarer does cross in spades. When dummy's king wins, he plays the ♦10 and lets it run. And you? Were you ready for a smooth duck of your ♦K?

I'll leave you here. The full deal is not important. I just wanted to illustrate how many things there are to think about. The time to do this thinking is at trick one. Part of good defense is not only knowing what to do, but being able to do it in tempo when the time comes. The way to become a good defender is to think through all of these matters at trick one. You must give every deal your full concentration. And, yes, I suppose some of you are wondering about slow play. You can't sit there forever at trick one--sometimes you can't prepare for everything.