

Fifth Chair



Finesses

aka Playing Small Towards Big

The three fundamentals of play are:

- a) Play Small Towards Big
- b) Attack Your Length
- c) Keep Winners, Toss Losers

While the latter is good advice at dating as well as bridge, it is that first fundamental which is most frequently violated by novices. In fact, failure to play small towards big will account for almost half the errors that a new player will make!

Most of us have heard the admonition to play "2nd hand low" and "third hand high". Let us look at the prototypical first trick. The opening leader shoots out the H-2. Dummy contributes the H-3; "2nd hand low". The next defender interjects the H-King--third hand high--to force out Declarer's Ace. Notice that both pairs have played a small card (H-2 to H-King, H-3 to H-A) towards a big one! In this way, the maxims about playing "2nd hand low" and "3rd hand high" are merely applications of our fundamental "play small toward big rule".

Take this common situation:

Dummy
C-K4

Declarer (you)
C-32

If a Club is played from Dummy we will never take a trick. The defense will simply stomp on the C-King whenever it is played to them. But, if Declarer comes to his hand and plays small towards Dummy's big card (i.e. the C-King here) we will score a trick whenever the C-Ace is in the West hand.

Now let's revise this hand slightly.

Dummy
C-AQ

Declarer (you)
C-32

Here we will take one trick with the Club Ace but might get a second trick if we come to our hand and lead a Club towards Dummy, inserting the C-Queen (if and only if West has the C-King, a 50% chance). We have, in effect, increased our chances of taking two Club tricks from almost 0% to 50%! This simple plan is called a "finesse" but, like "2nd hand low" and "3rd hand high", is nothing more than another application of our simple "play small towards big" rule.

This same plan pops up again when we have a holding such as:

Dummy
C-AQ10

Declarer (you)
C-32

One Club trick is all we get if we play from Dummy. But if we lead towards our big Clubs in dummy and insert the C-10 (on the first round) and then again towards the C-Queen we might win three tricks in the suit if West (LHO) has the C-King and the C-Jack (a 25% chance)! Because we are hoping West has two cards (i.e. C-King and C-Jack here) this is called a "double finesse".

We occasionally have to lose a trick in a suit in order to finesse later.

Dummy
C-AJ10

Declarer (you)
C-32

Once more, playing the C-Ace from Dummy will win us only one trick. But if we lead towards the C-10 and, when that loses to the C-King or C-Queen, repeat this finesse we can make two Club tricks whenever West has the C-King and/or the C-Queen (a 75% chance). Note that we can only make these two tricks if we lead towards our big cards (i.e. Dummy's C-AJ10) twice here, finessing each time. Inserting the C-10 on the first round here is called a "deep finesse".

There are two corollaries to this basic "play small towards big" tenet:

a) Long Towards Short

When we have big cards in both hands we want to play towards the shorter length first. This helps unblock the suit so that we can run it later. It also helps us finesse in the suit later if an opponent shows out.

Dummy
S-Q4

Declarer (you)
S-AK1032

If we play the S-Ace or S-King on the first round we will block the suit. If we play the S-Queen first we can run the suit whenever the S-Jack falls doubleton or tripleton. If West shows out on the first round we can even finesse for the S-Jack on the second round.

Dummy
D-Q4
West East
D- KJ8 D-976
Declarer
D-A10532

Again, we start with a Diamond towards our D-Q4 first. If West rises with the D-King our troubles are over when the suit breaks 3-3. If West ducks the Diamond, though, we will win the Queen. When the suit breaks 3-3 we will take four Diamond tricks.

b) Opener Towards Hidden

Dummy
H-K10432
West East
H- J98 H-A765
Declarer
H-Q

If Declarer were to lead the H-Queen here East would likely take it with the H-Ace. But if we play from the "open" (i.e. visible) hand, Dummy, East might duck and allow our H-Queen to win this trick.

Practicing and mastering this rudimentary technique will take us a long way towards becoming an expert.