

Duck or Goose?

In my last column, I talked about when you might want to duck instead of winning a trick. Sometimes you have to duck to make your contract, or to keep declarer from making his. But you should never duck unless you have a good reason to do so! Once you've lost a trick, you can't get it back. So before you duck, consider these situations when it may be better to "goose."

Goose when you fear a switch

When you're declarer in a notrump contract, often you'll want to duck the opening lead in order to sever communications between the defenders' hands. (See "Duck to create a safe hand" in my July/August column.) Usually the suit the opponents attack first will be the one they're strongest in and you're weakest in, so that's the suit you're worried about them running.

But the opening leader doesn't always know where the bulk of his side's points are! Sometimes there's another suit that you have no high cards in at all. If you're more worried about the opponents switching to a different suit than continuing their first-led suit, you may need to win the first trick so as not to give them the chance to switch. If you have enough winners off the top to make your contract, go ahead and cash them before you let them back in the lead. If you don't have enough tricks off the top, you may want to win the first trick and try to find the plan that gives you the best chance to make your contract by finessing or setting up your long suits. Maybe when they get in they won't find the killing switch! But if you have no hope of making your contract, it may be best to just take as many winners as you can and then let them have their tricks.

Goose when you fear a ruff

In a notrump contract, the opponents will usually lead their long suit, but in a suit contract the lead could be from length or from shortness. Before you play to the first trick, always ask yourself what the lead means. Is it a singleton? Is it fourth-best? Might one of the defenders be able to ruff the second round of this suit? If one of them bid the suit, you should have some idea how many cards in that suit each opponent has. If not, look at the lead and the number of cards you see in your hand and in the dummy to get a clue. If you think one of them may have a singleton in that suit, consider winning the first round if you can!

You should also fear a ruff if LHO leads an ace and then switches to a different suit. Experienced players usually won't lead the ace if they don't have the king, so if you see the king in your hand or in dummy, or if RHO signaled encouragement implying that she has the king (you're allowed to ask the defenders what kind of signals they're using), you should suspect that LHO's ace was a singleton. He's hoping his partner can win Trick 2 so she can give him a ruff, so thwart their plan if you can by winning Trick 2 and pulling trump before the opponents can get their ruff.

Goose when you have a place to dump the loser

Before you duck the opening lead, make sure it's a trick you have to lose. Remember, overtricks rock, so try to get rid of as many losers as possible. Is there a long suit in dummy you can toss the loser

on? Can you take a finesse later to avoid a loser? There's no reason to give up a trick needlessly when you can finesse and have a 50% chance not to lose it.

Contract: 3NT	♠ 64	
Lead: ♥5	♥ 72	
	♦ AKQJ92	
	♣ 654	
♠ JT8		♠ Q972
♥ Q985		♥ JT6
♦ 76		♦ T54
♣ 8732		♣ KT9
	♠ AK53	
	♥ AK43	
	♦ 83	
	♣ AQJ	

If you don't stop to make a plan, you might find yourself ducking the first trick on this deal just because the Rule of Seven says you should. (The Rule of Seven says that if the lead is fourth best, add up the number of cards in the suit led that are in your hand and in dummy, and subtract that number from seven. The result tells you how many times to duck.) But before you do something you'll regret, look at that beautiful diamond suit in dummy! Unless you get the very unlikely 5-0 diamond split, you'll be able to run the diamonds and throw four losers away. What four losers will you dump?

You have five losers: two each in hearts and spades and one in clubs. But you can take the club finesse to avoid losing to the king of clubs. So if the finesse works, you could dump your four major suit losers on the diamonds and take all 13 tricks! But not if you duck the opening lead.

Observe: you win the heart lead and lead a diamond to dummy. When both opponents follow suit, you know that your diamonds will run. *Now lead a club towards your hand.* You must play a club before you run the diamonds, because you're probably going to have to finesse twice. When RHO plays low on the first club, you win your queen and cross back to dummy with another diamond. Run all the diamonds, then play another club to your jack. Then play the rest of the winners in your hand, scoring two spades, two hearts, three clubs and six diamonds: making seven! Partner will be sorry he didn't put you in slam.

Note that even if the finesse loses, you'll still throw all your losing hearts and spades on the diamonds, losing only one club trick. You never have to lose a heart.

Goosing on defense

In my previous column, I told you when to delay winning your honor in dummy's long suit, to prevent declarer from setting it up. But when dummy has a long suit that's ready to run and you have tricks *in a different suit*, that's when you need to act fast. Consider hopping up with your ace in second seat (contrary to the "second hand low" rule), and definitely win the trick in third or fourth seat. Then

cash any other winners your side may have! Declarer will throw his losers away on the long suit if you let him, so don't let him.

There's another rule for defenders that nearly always applies: *take the setting trick*. You may not get another chance, so if taking the trick will keep declarer from making her contract, take it. If you duck and she makes the contract, your goose will be cooked!