

This Is A Hold Up

Among the most frequent and successful plays that declarers make is the hold up play. All it means is that the declarer could take a trick with his ace, or other controlling card, but doesn't. Instead of playing his controlling card, he holds it up, planning to take it later. The logic of such a play is plain: good cards may be played at an advantageous time or at a disadvantageous time, and one should select the advantageous time. Thus the hold up play is declarer's refusal to play an advantageous card at a disadvantageous time.

The hold up play is useful both at suit contracts and at notrump contracts, but occurs most frequently at notrump play. We might even use an example of a notrump situation as the "classic example" of the hold up play.

xx

Axx

The opponent leads this suit against South's notrump contract. Once South gets in, he may have to give up the lead in one of his side suits to East. He wouldn't want E-W to run this suit that was led. Therefore, he holds up his ace until the 3rd round. If West started with 5 of this suit, then East would have started with only 3 of them. Since South has held up his ace, East will now be out of the suit and cannot continue it, and the suit cannot be run against the declarer. If it happened that East did have a 4th card of that suit and could lead it back to West, then it follows that West started with a 4-card suit only and it will yield, therefore, only a limited number of notrump tricks. It is typically the fear that the leader of the suit has length in the suit, and the partner a shorter amount, that prompts declarer to use the hold up play.

Notice in the example above that declarer's choice to use the hold up play may not necessarily be altered even if he held AKx

instead of Axx. If it was important to declarer that East be cut off from West in the suit lead, then he would hold up both the ace and the king. The important thing to declarer, in such a case, would be to exhaust East's holding in the dangerous suit.

The discussion so far has revolved around two key concepts that must be understood firmly if you want to understand the hold up play properly:

- 1. You use a hold up when you are confronted with a dangerous suit.** If the suit led poses no danger, then the hold up play isn't necessary.
- 2. The desired effect of the hold up is to sever the holder of the "short side" of a suit from the holder of the "long side" by exhausting the holding of the player with the short side.**

Such, then, are the basic principles of the hold up. If the circumstances described arise, then holding up will almost certainly be right.

But if these circumstances do not pertain, then the hold up could be wrong and prove costly. If, for instance, the opponents have not led the suit that is really the dangerous one, then you should win the lead and not hold up. If you do hold up, you give the opponents a chance to switch to the dangerous one, and then you are in the soup and one trick in the hole to boot.

Remember, too, that at notrump the game is often a race: it is a race to see who can set up their long suit first and run it. Your stoppers in their suit are obstacles that they must overcome to run their suit, and their stoppers

The Bath Coup. This coup arises when you hold AJx or AJxx and the left hand opponent leads the king of that suit:

xx
KQxx xxxxx
AJx

You may very well elect to duck this lead. If West is careless, she will continue the suit, whereupon you win a trick that you could not otherwise win, plus you still retain another stopper. East should save West from this embarrassment by playing her lowest club, the proper play to a king lead when holding neither ace nor jack. But if East fails to signal properly, or if West fails to heed the signal (!!), then you score the extra trick.

But let us say that East does signal properly and West takes heed. What is West to do? SHE MUST SHIFT. And when she does, declarer will find this, too, to her advantage, since, presumably, no other suit has as big a stopper problem as does the club suit. Although the Bath Coup does indeed have the potential of stealing a trick to which it is not truly entitled, its chief virtue resides in causing the shift. You do not need to be playing against an ignorant player nor a careless one for the Bath Coup to do its magic.