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.

 $\mathbf{x}\mathbf{x}$

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

in your suit are obstacles you must overcome Whoever can remove the opposing obstacles first is the leader in the race. If you are ahead in the race, the hold up play does not particularly recommend itself. But if you are behind in the race, then the hold up will probably be what you require.

Remember not to duck more tricks that you can afford to lose. In 3NT, for instance, you may lose 4 tricks and still make your contract. If you must lose 3 tricks in other suits, then don't duck twice in the suit led. This should go without saying, but sometimes you can easily get caught up in the excitement of a faulty line of thought.

Always try to analyze the meaning of the opponents lead and consider the placement of the cards out against you. Even when the dangerous suit is led, you still may not want to hold up. In the hand below, South is in 3NT and West has led the spade 3:

A 8 K Q 9 5 A J 7 Q 9 5 2

You may have 3NT off the top, but you probably need to play hearts to make it. Your fear is that West has started with 5 spades and can win 4 plus the heart ace, setting you 1 trick. If West does have 5 spades, then East has just 2. But note that West has not led the K, so he does not have KQJ. Therefore East has at least one spade honor. This means you should play the ace immediately. East's honor will either block West's suit, or else West will have to overtake the honore with a higher one, thereby promoting your 10. So don't hold up when the

dangerous suit will block itself.

Let us, then, state these items as times that make the hold up wrong:

- 1. Don't hold up if they can switch to a more dangerous suit.
- 2. The hold up may not be right if you are ahead in the race to establish your suit.
- 3. Don't hold up if the trick you are giving away is a trick you cannot afford.
- 4. Don't hold up if, instead, you can cause the danger suit to block itself.

Deciding to hold up or not to hold up cannot be reduced to a mechanical decision. Use the guidelines we have been discussing to help you decide, but ultimately each hand must be examined individually in order to make a final decision on the question of holding up or not.

Special Hold ups

Sometimes your left hand opponent has a holding in your suit, and against a notrump contract, they may lead it:

When the left hand opponent leads the queen,, you will want to duck. But still pay attention to the card you play! East will play the four to discourage. You should play the seven to encourage. How have you encouraged? By hiding the 3. West may take East's 4 as encouragment.

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

 $\mathbf{X}\mathbf{X}$

KQxx

XXXX

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 embarrasment 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.