

A Secret of Declarer Play

I've observed over many years that when faced with a choice of suits to attack in notrump contracts, most very bad declarers choose their own suits rather than dummy's. Most ordinary (neither expert nor very bad) declarers choose the suits in which they can *take the most tricks*, breaking ties in favor of their own suits when dummy's suits will produce the same number of tricks. Expert declarers choose the suits in which they can *establish the most tricks*, breaking ties in favor of dummy's suits.

Apparently, there were no other experts sitting South on this deal:

Matchpoints, E-W vul

NORTH (dummy)

♠AJ8
♥A965
♦J
♣108653

SOUTH

♠95
♥QJ8
♦AKQ85
♣A97

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
pass	pass	pass	1NT
pass	3NT	pass	pass
pass			

This was the auction at my table, where North was a formerly very weak but newly senile player. At other tables, the same contract was reached after a Stayman 2♣ response to 1NT and a 2♦ reply. Regardless, West made the normal standout lead, the ♥4, which rode to South's ♥8.

From that point, the play diverged. Some declarers continued with a heart honor to finesse against West's marked ♥K. Other declarers continued with a low diamond to unblock dummy's ♦J, a play that would be necessary to take more than three diamond tricks against defenders who would know to knock out declarer's ♣A. But what defenders would know to do that?

When I declared 3NT, I led the ♣7 at Trick 2. Put yourself in the position of either East or West. Which suit would you lead after winning this club trick?

The West who won the trick (perforce) at my table was a competent player, and led just what I expected: a diamond. After dummy's ♦J won, the rest was easy. I led a low club to my ♣9, losing to West's remaining club honor, and wound up with five diamond tricks, three club tricks, two heart tricks and one spade trick. Had diamonds split badly, I would have won a third heart trick instead of a fifth diamond trick.

For taking eleven tricks, I earned a top, as every other declarer took only ten. However, I now think I misplayed the hand. After winning dummy's ♦J, I should have led dummy's ♣10. That might have induced East, who had ♣J4 remaining, to cover with the ♣J, giving me *twelve* tricks.

What is the secret of declarer play?

It is simply this. The defenders see dummy but not your hand. By starting dummy's suit rather than your own, you avoid revealing the lengths of your suits and the location of your strength. For these reason, you will often see an expert declarer lose a few tricks early and run a bunch of winners at the end.