

Score those Honors!

Let's say in order to make a notrump contract you need to bring in at least two tricks in this suit combination: you hold KQ32 opposite Dummy's 654. Entries back and forth are not a problem.

In order to play bridge well, we need to develop a feel for percentage plays. At first we start with a three-level scale: no way is this thing going to work, 50-50 chance and it's a slam dunk.



With more experience, we realize there are some stopping points on our scale of success and finally we end up with a scale that looks something like this:

No way	slim	fair	50-50	very good	excellent	slam dunk
(0%)	(16%)	(33%)	(50%)	(67%)	(83%)	(100%)

As we look at examples, I'll give the English scale version of our chances of success and stick actual percentages in parenthesis for the math geek types.

Question 1: Assuming your opponents play best defense, where on the scale above do you place your chances of getting at least two tricks?

Question 2: What if I told you that you needed three tricks from this suit to make your contract? Now where on the scale do you place your chances (again your opponents play their best defense)?

Let's start with question 2, the three-trick problem. What needs to happen for you to get three tricks in this suit?

We'll need to score the king and the queen and one of the little fellas, let's say the 2. We have seven cards in the suit, so the opponents have six. We can always get the last trick if the suit splits 3-3. That's only a fair chance. (It happens 36% of the time.) In order to score the king and queen, we need to arrange for the ace to take our 3.

Now if the opponents had plopped down their ace on the opening lead, we could offer up our 3, cash the king and queen and finally the 2 stands alone and gets the cheese. But, we said the opponents were playing best defense, and plopping an unsupported ace on the table as an opening lead is rarely best defense.

Nope, the only way we can get the opponents to spend their ace on two small cards is if they play it on a trick before we have to play an honor on that trick. In proper etiquette royalty stands in place and requests the commoner to approach them. The same holds true in bridge as captured in one of my adages, "***Don't lead your honors, lead toward them.***" Following this suggestion, we force (or attempt to force) our opponents to waste their ace on our commoners, the spot cards.

The only way you can take three tricks is if the suit splits 3-3 AND your RHO (right hand opponent) has the ace. The cards will look like the hand at the right. Since it's a 50-50 chance your RHO will have the ace and a fair chance of the 3-3 suit split, when we combine those facts with correct play it ends up that our chances are only slim to get three tricks. Give yourself a pat on the back if that was your guess—er, I mean your considered answer. (See the footnote for the calculation of probabilities.)

xxx 654 Axx
KQ32

Another of my adages is to *Visualize Necessity*. In order to get three tricks, the suit must split 3-3 and RHO must have the ace. Proceed as though it is true—if it's not true, you are going down anyway.

Trick 1: Lead Dummy's 4 toward your honors. If RHO has the ace and goes up (which generally they should not), you will play the 3. If RHO ducks, you will play the king or queen and take the trick.

If RHO took the trick, as soon as you win a trick you can play your K-Q, scoring those two tricks and when (not if – you visualized this necessity, right?) the suit breaks 3-3, your 2 will take your third trick in the suit.

If RHO ducked the trick, then on Trick 2 get back to Dummy (with one of your unlimited entries).

Trick 3: Lead Dummy's 5 toward your remaining honor and follow the same procedure. If RHO ducks, win your honor; if RHO goes up with the ace, then you duck.

If RHO ducks twice, lead your 3 and drive out his ace. Then cash your 2 when you regain the lead.

If RHO takes the ace this time, then once you regain the lead, cash your honor and your 2 will be your third winning trick in the suit after your required 3-3 break.

Remember, with this card combination, even with your best visualization, the chances of scoring three tricks are only slim. But, if you lead your king or queen before you drive out the ace, your slim chance drops to no way, José.

Now let's revisit question 1 regarding the chances of scoring two tricks. Heck, at first blush

654
Axx xxx
KQ32
LHO has the Ace

they seem to be twice as good as getting three tricks. It doesn't matter who has the ace, right? Our LHO could have the Ace and as long as the suit splits 3-3 we can lose one of our honors to the ace, score our second honor and win the last trick. What was a slim chance seems to have grown to a fair chance (36%). Is that what you answered? If so, keep reading...

Rather than conceding one of our honors to drive out the ace, we substantially increase our chances by following the same procedure we used to try for three tricks. It is true that if our LHO has the ace, our chance of two tricks relies on the 3-3 split and so is only fair. (36%) However, using this technique, if RHO has the Ace, it's a slam dunk to score two tricks. By forcing RHO opponent to play before us, we guarantee scoring both our king and queen.

To summarize, in question 1 when LHO has the ace, our chances are fair; when RHO has the ace, it's a slam dunk. Combined we have a very good chance of scoring at least two tricks and you earn full credit if that's what you answered. (Again the footnote has the calculation of the probability of getting two tricks, which is 68%.)

Remember, to give yourself the best opportunity to score your honors, lead toward them.

Footnote:



Let's go to the chalk board and figure out those percentages.

Probability of scoring three tricks: We needed two things to happen to score three tricks. The opponents' holding in the suit needs to split exactly 3-3. That happens approximately 36% of the time. We also needed the ace to be in the RHO's hand. That's a 50-50 shot. Which hand has the ace is in and the 3-3 split are independent events. The probability of two independent events both happening is the multiplication of the two probabilities, in our case 50% (ace in RHO hand) times 36% (3-

3- split) equal 18%.

Probability of scoring at least two tricks: In this case it does matter who has the ace. When the left hand opponent has the ace, our chances rely on the 3-3 split, which happens 36% of the time. When our RHO has the ace, we have a slam dunk. Which opponent has the ace is a 50-50 shot. This combination of probabilities [RHO has the ace: (50% x 100%) + LHO has the ace: (50% x 36%)] means we can score two tricks 68% of the time when we lead toward our honors.

Sidebar:

Suit splits

Having a good feel for how the opponents' cards will split in a suit is very helpful. The chart illustrates suit splits and their probabilities:

Suit Split	Scale Description	Percent
Two Cards		
1-1	50-50	52%
2-0	50-50	48%
Three Cards		
2-1	Excellent	78%
3-0	Slim	22%
Four Cards		
2-2	50-50	40%
3-1	50-50	50%
4-0	Slim	10%
Five Cards		
3-2	Very Good	68%
4-1	Fair	28%
5-0	No Way	4%
Six Cards		
3-3	Fair	36%
4-2	50-50	48%
5-1	Slim	15%
6-0	No Way	1%