

A Spot 4 the Advancing Player

by Jay Apfelbaum

This is a continuing series of articles written for the advancing player. I welcome any questions or suggestions about future articles. Please send them to the publisher. Who knows? You may be mentioned in a future article! Since beginning this series, I have been asked about several conventions. Keep asking! Your questions give me direction about what the next article should be about.

This month we will discuss a topic rarely seen in matchpoint events: the safety play. The concept of a safety play is simple: lose a potentially unnecessary trick in exchange for certainty of making the contract. Here is an example:

North
♣ A K Q 10 5 2

South
♣ 4 3

The clubs suit is in the dummy, and there is no possibility of any entry. We only need five club tricks to guarantee our contract. The safety play here is to lead a club and play low even if the next player produces the Jack. This guards against the suit dividing 5-0. Leading to the ♣10 will lead to five tricks against any 3-2 (68%) or 4-1 (28%) break. That leaves a 4% chance of the suit breaking 5-0, meaning there is a 2% chance that West will have five clubs.

Why do we need this information at matchpoints? We understand the value for IMPs or total points, but matchpoints? The reason is that we will sometimes have a great score just by making a contract. An overtrick will not matter. An obvious example is when we are declaring a part score that is doubled into game.

Perhaps we stole the bidding. We are in a 3♣ contract (vulnerable) on fifteen high card points. The opposition has a strong heart fit and will surely make game. In this situation, going down one is a great score. Most of the opposition will find their contract, whether in a part score or a game. Going down one in our contract will be a better result than just about every other table. Going down two will lose to any pair that does not bid the heart game.

It is up to the declarer to decide whether a safety play is in order. Here are some positions and how to play them. In every one of these positions we will assume there are no other considerations and we have plenty of entries to both hands.

North
♠ A 9 5 3

South
♠ K J 4 2

North
♥ A 10 6 5 3

South
♥ Q 8 7 4 2

North
♦ A J 9 3

South
♦ K 6 4

North
♣ J 5 2

South
♣ A K 9 6 4

The safety play for three spade tricks:

Start by cashing the ♠K. Next, lead a spade from the North hand towards your ♠J. If East plays any spade, play the ♠J unless that spade is the ♠Q. If East shows out, play the ♠J. Later, lead a spade towards the ♠A and finesse West for the ♠10.

The safety play for four heart tricks:

Start with leading a heart towards the ♥A. If West plays the ♥9, play the ♥10. If West shows out, play the ♥A and then lead towards your ♥Q. If West plays either the ♥K or ♥J, win with the ♥A.

The safety play for three diamond tricks:

Leading the ♦K and then to the ♦J wins three tricks whenever the diamonds divide 3-3, the ♦Q is onside or East has a singleton ♦Q (69%). Leading the ♦A, then the ♦K and then to the ♦J will win in the same cases plus when East has two diamonds to the ♦Q (77%).

The safety play for four club tricks:

Lead the ♣A and then to the ♣J. If West started with four clubs, the ♣J will be a winner. If East started with four clubs, the ♣J will lose but we can get to the North hand to finesse East out of his ♣10.