

**Better than Percentage
By Roger Lord**

**Dealer: East
Vul: None**

North

♠ A9832
♥ KQ8
♦ K108
♣ AK

West

♠ Q1064
♥ 74
♦ A732
♣ 1076

East

♠ 75
♥ J1095
♦ Q65
♣ QJ98

South

♠ KJ
♥ A632
♦ J94
♣ 5432

East	South	West	North
Pass	Pass	Pass	1 Spade
Pass	1 Notrump	Pass	3 Notrump
Pass	Pass	Pass	

Contract: 3 Notrump **Opening Lead:** Diamond Deuce

You are South. Cover the West and East cards.

After three passes, North opens one spade. South responds one notrump, not forcing by a passed hand (although some play it forcing or semi-forcing). With a maximum for a one-bid, North jumps to game, closing the auction at three notrump.

This hand is from a Swiss teams match. Since the scoring is in IMPs, you should choose the safest line to make nine tricks. West leads the deuce of diamonds. Considering the situation, you see seven top tricks—two spades, three hearts, and two clubs, with multiple chances for an eighth and ninth.

If the queen of diamonds is with West, you could take two diamond tricks and go home. Let's say you play the eight from dummy, and East produces the queen. Now, East switches to a club with the intent of setting up long cards in that suit, knocking out one of your club stoppers.

What about combining a possible fourth heart trick with a diamond trick? You could try hearts first, and if they fail to break, you could fall back on the spade suit.

Not so fast! Visualize the holding after you play three rounds of hearts. You would take the third heart on the table and work on spades, but some of your suit combinations would be limited by lack of entries. For example, you might want to finesse spades, low to the jack, but if this loses, back comes a club, knocking out the second stopper, after which spades would be blocked, and you couldn't afford to lose the lead again.

The best play seems to be to save the hearts for later, and to first try to take four spade tricks. But how? Obviously, any play works with a 3-3 split. To handle 4-2 (and one 5-1) splits, there are at least three orders of play. One, begin with a spade to the king, then the spade jack, overtaking with dummy's ace and continuing the suit.

Two, theoretically better, is to lead a spade toward the KJ and finesse the jack. Whether it wins or loses, unblock the king and use an outside entry to get to the A98.

Three is to lead to the king and continue with the jack, intending to let it ride if it is not covered, then get to the dummy and play high spades. Three is mathematically best by a small margin.

However, practicality guides declarer to overtake the jack with the ace whether LHO covers or not. The pivotal play occurs when West holds S) Q10xx. West would have to duck the jack—and duck smoothly—to keep from giving away the position, physically or communicatively. Many defenders will cover reflexively, and many more will telegraph the holding. Thus, if the jack is not covered, declarer may assume that West does not have S) Q10xx, and he need not finesse. Note that West may more easily refrain from covering if he holds S) Qxxx (no 10), but then the 10 would drop from the East hand and four spade tricks would come in.

The described play does not affect any other layout of defenders' cards or plays; it just adds a winning result when it happens.

Suit Combinations

No outside information. Entries are available in both hands

Dummy Take all five tricks
AQ1054

Declarer
763

Dummy 1. Take all five tricks
AQ1054 2. Take four tricks (you can afford one loser)

Declarer
7632

Answers: To take five tricks on the first holding, where you have eight cards in the suit, lead from declarer toward dummy and finesse the 10 (or cover an honor). If that works, return to declarer and finesse the queen. You will succeed when LHO has KJ doubleton or KJx tripleton.

To take five tricks on the second holding, where you have nine cards in the suit, lead toward dummy and finesse the queen. If that wins, play the ace and hope for a 2-2 split, but don't forget to watch the cards—if the jack drops on the first play, whether on your left or your right, go back to your hand and lead again toward dummy and finesse the ten.

To ensure taking at least four tricks, you should play the ace first, to guard against a singleton king with RHO. Subsequently, you can lead up to the remaining honors. Note, instead, that if you start by finessing the queen and it loses, you will have to lead up to dummy and, if LHO follows, guess whether to finesse for the Jack.