Bridge Theory for the Practitioners

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8.   Safely Tracking Down Missing Royalty

In my last column, I presented a safety play when both K and J are missing. Keen readers would note that that play was designed when the declaring side has 8 cards in the pertinent suit. The safety play with more cards in the suit is somewhat different and I will present those here.

Safety Play when K and J are missing – Part 2
   a) Declaring side has 9 cards

A situation will show up in a 6S contract after a Jacoby 2NT response to 1S opening. Here are some possibilities:

AQTxx   AQxxx   AQxxx   AT9xx   AT9xx
xxxx   Txxx   xxxx   Q8xx   Qxxx

In all of these situations the safety play starts with playing the **Ace first.** This can catch the stiff K or the stiff J and thus extremely effective as a safety play. This particular safety play showed up twice in the Denver Regional this year (2012).

   b) Declaring side has 10 cards

In this case if the situation looks like this:

AQxxx
xxxxx

then, of course, finessing the Q is the best possible line. However, a *safety play* is needed if the A and Q are split like this:

AT9xx
Qxxxx

Then leading small toward the Ace and playing the T if West follows is the safest line. This play **perfectly** protects against KJx in either hand.

Safety Play when K and T are missing

This showed up in a Swiss team game in the Lincoln sectional some time ago.

     A Q 9 x x (North)
      J x x   (South)

We are defending a contract of 6S and if the declarer does not lose 2 trump tricks, 6S will make. The declarer in our table (North) runs the Jack from board! This play will provide 5 tricks if West (my partner, Steve Stewart) holds KTx, Kxx, or Kx but the chance of success is small. The correct percentage play is to play the Ace and then lead to the J which never provides 5 tricks but does provide the *required* 4 tricks about 88% of the time. (Finessing the Q and then the 9 also have the same chance). At the other table, our teammate Don McCarthy (who played with Curt Soloff) was the declarer in 6S. Don played the trump suit correctly. But in this particular hand it did not matter as East was holding KTxx and got 2 tricks in both tables. However, when the declarer played the J from board in our table, I (East) was shaking my head in disbelief. Today this declarer is not going to pay for such a poor, anti-percentage play. Life was never promised to be fair!

I will end this column with another safety play --- this time related to the Queen missing.

Safety Play when Q and T are missing

   (a)   A J x x (North)
              K 9 x x   (South)

Finesse the J if you want to win all 4 tricks (success rate 37%). But if you can afford to lose one trick, there is a safety play whose success rate is 100%. **I like to use my skill so that I end up with a 100% chance of being lucky.** The right safety play is to play the top honor *with* the J first (in this example the A) and then lead small planning to finesse the 9.

   (b)   A J x x x (North)
              K 9 x x   (South)

This is very similar to case (a). If you want all 5 tricks, play A and K and hope for the drop. But if you can afford to lose a trick, repeat the safety play as in (a).

(c) But if only QTx are missing (i.e., declarer + dummy have 10 cards together) first play the honor *opposite* the J.

          A J x x x x   (North)
          K 9 x x   (South)
In the above example, play the K first and then plan to finesse the J.