

Improve your bridge with me

By Migry Zur Campanile



How many times have you been confronted with declaring a hand with so many possible lines to choose from that it resembled like a multiple choice test to get your own declarer license?

Well, you can rest assured that if you had a basic grasp of percentages you would have a much easier time selecting the line which offers the best chances of success. What is it that I hear you say?

“Percentages? But if at school I never even managed to understand fractions, what hope have I got to learn percentages now?”

Well, you do not need a PhD in Mathematics to know a few basic facts about percentages, and even a little knowledge can be a huge boon when deciding between seemingly equivalent lines of play.

Let us look at this hand for instance:

♠ 75	
♥ 92	
♦ AK8654	
♣ 973	
♠ AKQJ	
♥ J1082	
♦ 73	
♣ AJ10	

The contract is 3NT, reached without opposition bidding, on the lead of the ♥K. West continues with a small heart to East's ♥A and another heart comes back to West's ♥Q. The defense continues with a fourth heart to your ♥J, East pitching a spade.

Where do you plan to look for your ninth trick?

This is where percentages can really help a player: ducking a diamond to set up the suit will work whenever the diamonds

split no worse than 3-2, while using the diamond entries to take twice a club finesse will work whenever there is at least one club honor onside.

What is the best percentage play?

Easy: diamonds splitting 3-2 have a chance of 68%, while a double finesse in clubs has a chance of 75%, since one finesse has a 50% chance and if that fails the second finesse will offer another 50% chance of success from the remaining 50%, that is an additional 25% to make up our 75%. That means that in the long run the double finesse in clubs will succeed more often than ducking a diamond.

We must remember however, that we should never compute percentages in a vacuum, that is without taking into account the opponents bidding: if for instance East failed to open and then proceeded to cash ♥AKQ then it would be foolish not to take that into consideration. The logical deduction would then be that the chances of him having also a club honor have sensibly diminished and therefore ducking the diamond has now become the better option.

Let us look at another hand:

♠ A83	
♥ 64	
♦ A853	
♣ K842	
♠ KQ52	
♥ A2	
♦ KJ4	
♣ AJ63	

You are declaring 3NT after the ♥Q lead.

How do you plan the play?

It seems easy enough, there are eight easy tricks for the taking and we only need to develop a ninth which can come

from the spades 3-3 or one of the minor suit finesses.

What is the best percentage play to maximize our chances of success?

Again, you do not need to be a mathematician to work out that the optimal sequence of play is first to see if spades split 3-3, then to cash the two top clubs honors to check for a doubleton ♣Q and if none of the above works, to fall back on the diamond finesse. Knowing some basic odds, we can actually compute the chances of success of each step and then combine them to see the overall chances of the line of play we selected: we succeed if spades are 3-3 (36%), or if the ♣Q drops doubleton (40% of the remaining 64%) and finally also if the diamond finesse works (50% of around 38%). All in all our line of play has an excellent 81 % chance to succeed.

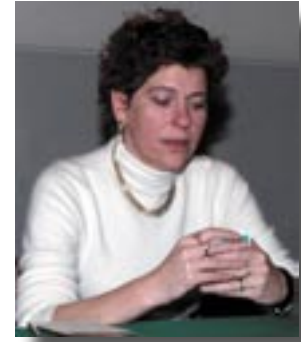
Such a way to combine several plays to generate the optimum result can be very useful to remember:

When you are declaring and there is a choice of finesses for a missing queen, the success of either of which is needed to make the contract, the best way to combine your chances is to cash the top honors of the longest suit to check if the Queen drops doubleton and afterwards to finesse in the shorter suit.

Let us recap some basic percentages that we need for our everyday bridge:

	Probability
Finesse	50%
Double Finesse	75%
3-3 split in a suit	36%
4-2 split in a suit	48%
3-2 split in a suit	68%
4-1 split in a suit	28%
2-2 split in a suit	40%
3-1 split in a suit	50%

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Last month's article dealt with percentages and how they can affect the selection of a line of play when declaring. To answer all those of you who shared with me their strongly held convictions on how "percentages never work for them", it is important to remember that probability is only significant in a large number of hands. If the odds favor a 3-2 trump break by about 2 to 1, this doesn't mean that you'll get that trump break in two of the next three hands you play. You might get three hands in a row in which trumps split 4-1 or 5-0 and afterwards go through a run of ten or more hands where trumps break 3-2. What you can rely on is that if you kept a record of your next 300 hands played with an eight card trump fit on the line, you would notice that trumps will have broken 3-2 in roughly 200 of those hands.

In any single hand you may run into some frightful break. It's only in the long run that you can depend on probability. The point is that if you play with rather than against the odds you will be a winner in the long run.

Remember, probability is not some obscure occult science but simply a way to guide us in making an often difficult decision when faced with multiple options. Likewise probability should not become an excuse for failing to notice the obvious: for instance if you are unsure as to the location of an ace and you have neither knowledge nor suspicion of the makeup of the unseen hands, you would be right to think that each opponent has an equal 50% chance to hold that specific card. However, if one opponent has bid vigorously while the other passed

throughout, you have a strong inference that the bidder is odds-on to have the missing ace and you would be quite wrong to discount such evidence when selecting your line of play. Finally if one of them conveniently drops the ace face up on the table, then you don't need probability any longer since you have reached absolute certainty as to who holds the card you were trying to place.

Let us have a look at an example:

♠	KJ4
♥	K875
♦	AJ3
♣	864
N W E S	
♠	AQ5
♥	A62
♦	KQ92
♣	AKJ

This time you are in 6NT and West leads the ♠10.

Which line offers the best chances of success?

The club finesse is a 50% play, while hearts will split 3-3 around 36% of the time, but by now I expect that most of you will confidently reply that we should combine the two plays by checking first on hearts 3-3 and, if that fails, falling back on the club finesse.

What would you do next?

It is vital to duck a heart first, retaining control of the suit. Even if your right hand opponent wins the heart and plays a club across, you have all the time to rise with the ace, test the hearts by cashing the ♥A

and the ♥K and, if they don't behave, to try the club finesse as a last resort.

Let us look at another example:

♠	KQ72
♥	A83
♦	KQJ94
♣	3
N W E S	
♠	J10985
♥	K72
♦	102
♣	K82

You declare 4♠ on the lead of the ♥Q.

How many losers do you have?

Four, one in each suit.

Is there any way to avoid losing all four of them?

It looks like we have only one loser that we can hope to get rid of: the one in hearts. We can either discard it on a diamond once we set up the suit or we can throw it on the ♣K if the ♣A is favorably placed.

What is the best plan to secure our contract?

Playing on diamonds will work whenever the suit splits 3-3, a 36% shot, (since if the diamonds split 4-2 one of the opponents will be able to ruff the third round) while the ♣A will be onside 50% of the time.

The best line is therefore to win the ♥Q in dummy and to lead immediately a club down to the ♣K hoping in the favorable position of the ♣A. If that fails and diamonds split 3-3, you will be comforted by the thought of having chosen the correct line and that such a play will be the best in the long run.

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This month we continue looking into the handling of hands where declarer can be usefully assisted by percentages in selecting the best line.

North Dealer - Both sides vulnerable; IMP scoring

Holding:

♠ AKQJ104
♥ K4
♦ 53
♣ AQ6

You hear your partner open 1♥ and after you reply 1♠ (unless you are one of those few who are still able to use a 2♣ reply as strong jump shift as opposed to the weak meaning now in fashion), he rebids 2♦.

How do you plan the bidding?

We are obviously thinking about slam but we need to be careful as to how to go about it: jumping to 4NT is a possibility but in this sequence partner might take it as a general Blackwood and not specifically for diamonds. Much better to bide time using the forcing step of bidding 3♣, which does not necessarily promise four and allows partner plenty of space to describe his hand further.

Partner bids 3♦ over 3♣.

West	North	East	South
	1♥	Pass	1♠
Pass	2♦	Pass	3♣
Pass	3♦	Pass	

What do you bid now?

The 3♦ reply is a very welcome development, not only because it means that there is a good chance partner might cover our diamond losers, although it is far from a sure thing since he might have ♦QJxxx, but it also means that we can safely ask 4NT and that should be

immediately understood as RKCB for diamonds. Thus we shall know more about the cards we are looking for on the way to slam: the ♥A and the top diamonds.

Partner replies 5♣, showing 0 or 3 keycards out of 5 with diamonds as trumps.

What next?

Clearly the problem we have is what happens if partner does indeed have 0 keycards. First of all we should relax in the knowledge that in such an unlikely event any 5 level contract is doomed and since we did not do anything unusual in the bidding, we will have plenty of company on the minus column.

However, is it really possible for partner to have no keycards?

We hold 19 points and that would leave out 21 points of which 11 are the ♥A and the ♦AK which partner allegedly could miss. That means that there is only one hand he could possibly have opened without those keycards:

♠ -
♥ QJ109x
♦ QJ10xx
♣ KJx

Anything less distributional than that could not be an opening with an aceless 10 count and even the hand above would probably not be opened 1♥ by the large majority of players.

Anyway to be on the safe side it is best to bid 5♣, clarifying our hand as a one-suiter in spades which does not need support, and wait for partner to go on if he has three keycards as we strongly suspect (5♦ could also be an option but I am always wary of making a bid which could cause a misunderstanding when I have a much safer alternative).

Partner goes on to 6♥, showing three keycards and extras in hearts, and we can now happily bid 7♠ which rates to be an excellent contract.

The complete bidding:

West	North	East	South
	1♥	Pass	1♠
Pass	2♦	Pass	3♣
Pass	3♦	Pass	4NT
Pass	5♣	Pass	5♠
Pass	6♥	Pass	7♠
Pass	Pass	Pass	

Opening lead : ♠9

This is what we can see:

♠ 5
♥ AQ752
♦ AK762
♣ 74

N
W E
S

♠ AKQJ104
♥ K4
♦ 53
♣ AQ6

What is your plan?

We have 12 immediate tricks and therefore we must develop one other trick for our grand slam. First we must draw trumps and discard a red card or two from the dummy (only one red card if the trumps conveniently break 3-3).

We discard a club from dummy on the second round of trumps and can afford to discard a diamond on the next trump. But when East discards a club, we must lead a fourth trump and must therefore decide which red suit we are going to try for, and thus from which other red suit we will discard.

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for Robson, Drumev elected to go for the second option and played back a small club, a switch that allowed declarer to shine by taking his ♣Q, cashing his red suit winners, thus setting up a show-up squeeze on the Bulgarian who was forced to jettison a top club honor. Finally declarer took a spade finesse and finished with 11 tricks for +460 and a top that cost the Englishman the first place and the 4000 USD difference between the first and second place cash award!!

It is worth adding that Drumev, feeling desperately sorry for his partner's plight, made a point of apologizing publicly to him during the prize giving ceremony for making the play that cost him the victory.

The final ranking of the Men:

1. Norberto Bocchi Italy 56.68%
2. Andrew Robson England 56.23%
3. Jens Auken Denmark 55.28%
4. Antonio Sementa Italy 53.82%
5. Herve Mouiel France 53.44%

The Ladies event saw the well deserved victory of Tobi Sokolow who had led

throughout the tournament.

The final ranking of the Ladies:

1. Tobi Sokolow USA 59.67%
2. Benedicte Cronier France 58.13%
3. Nicola Smith England 56.58%
4. Gloria Ho Taipei 54.84%
5. B. A. Kennedy USA 54.22%.

As for our representatives, all three of them managed to finish in the prizes: David Birman placed 13th in the Men, while Migry Zur Campanile and Matilda Popilov respectively 12th and 18th in the Ladies.



Norberto Bocchi (Italy) gets the coveted Generali trophy: the Golden Lion.



A radiant Tobi Sokolow after the prizegiving

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Which suit offers the best chances?

Going after diamonds and discarding dummy's ♥2 seems an attractive possibility: the idea is to take the top diamonds and ruff a diamond. If the diamonds break 3-3 (36%) we make the grand slam. If the diamonds break worse than 3-3, we take the three top hearts, throwing a club, and make the grand slam if the hearts break 3-3. This is not an additional 36% but merely 36% of the cases in which the diamonds did not break favorably, exactly an additional 23% (36% x 64%). Finally, if neither suit breaks well, we can try the club finesse. Let us work out our chances of success: one red suit or the other breaks well about 60% of the time, and both suits therefore break badly 40%. The finesse will succeed in 20% of

the cases (half of the 40%). Add that to 60% and you get 80% for this line of play (actually we would get only 79.2% if we used more accurate figures, but 80% is close enough for our purposes).

Is there a better line?

We can get significantly better odds if we plan to go after the hearts: we discard two diamonds from the dummy on the third and fourth trumps, saving all of dummy's hearts, then we cash three top hearts, pitching a club, and ruff a heart if we need to. We will develop an additional heart trick if the missing six hearts divide either 3-3 or 4-2. This time it is proper to add the chances together. The chance of getting either a 3-3 or a 4-2 break is the sum of 36% and 48% - or 84%. In the remaining 16% of the cases,

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we are not yet done for. We can still try the club finesse and thus win half of the time or an additional 8%. Our full chance is thus about 92%: a magnificent figure, and far better than 80%.

The complete hand;

♠ 9873	♠ 5	♠ 62
♥ 103	♥ AQ752	♥ J986
♦ Q1094	♦ AK762	♦ J8
♣ K53	♣ 74	♣ J10982
	♠ AKQJ104	
	♥ K4	
	♦ 53	
	♣ AQ6	