Hold-up plays - commentary

Note that this is just one aspect of 'planning the play'.
It applies particularly to declarer play in no trumps but is not restricted to this situation.
The rule of thumb which is excellent in itself but does not overrule all other considerations is 'the rule of seven'.
That is, hold up once with a combined holding of 6 cards and hold up twice with a combined holding of 5 cards.

Most of these deals feature either a no trump final contract or no trumps in the bidding – by no means do they all require a hold-up play or a finesse into the safe hand.

Many of the suggested auctions involve either Stayman or transfers. If you haven't done these yet then typically a limit raise to 2NT or 3NT or a forcing bid at the three-level on a five-card suit will fit the bill.

Hand 1
1NT, 2♦, 2♥, 3NT.
East will lead either ♦K or ♦6 depending on the partnership view on KQ9 as a broken sequence – it makes little difference which in this case.
Declarer can count 3 spades, 2 Hearts, 1 Club and 1 Diamond for 7 top tricks, with prospects of further tricks in Hearts or Clubs, but he must be wary of losing 4 Diamond tricks together with a Club or a Heart.
The secret must be to duck Diamonds twice thereby severing the defences communications and then lose a trick to West – the safe hand. It's not easy to find, but the safest play is to get on table and then lead towards either ♥7,8 or ♣8,9.

Hand 2
1NT, 2♣, 2♦, 2NT.
East will find it difficult to resist raising to game.
South has a natural lead of ♠K.
Declarer will duck once to sever communications when North gets in with ♦A or ♣Q and will then probably lead Clubs from hand and Diamonds from table, but with the critical cards lying wrong he can be held to no more than 8 tricks.

Hand 3
1NT, 2♣, 2♠, 3NT - or 1NT, 3NT
West will lead the ♣J which declarer must duck in dummy, and East will do best to overtake with the Q, and return the 5 to the 10 which declarer must take with the King.
The defence's best hope is to set up a third Heart as an entry to the West hand, but with the Spades splitting, the ♠K lying right, and a fairly unlikely correct guess in Diamonds (finessing into the danger hand) declarer can come to 9 tricks.

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Hand 4

1♠, 2♦, 2♥, 3♣, 3NT

3♣ is fourth suit looking for help in no trumps. A bit ahead of the course, but just think of it as Direction Asking Bid – DAB – where do I go next?

Declarer will have to take an early finesse of spades towards dummy.

I f the defence started with a club lead taken by declarer then he must avoid the diamond finesse – 5 spades, 2hearts a club and a diamond will be sufficient for the contract.

If the club stop remains in place then he can afford the diamond finesse to establish the ninth trick.

Hand 5

1NT, 2NT, 3NT

Ten tricks are available.

Note that declarer should duck the first round of clubs to establish the suit and maintain an entry.

Hand 6

1♠, 2♣, 2NT (forcing), 3♠ (forcing), 3NT.

The lead of the ♥Q will set up a defensive trick in Hearts to go with 2 Clubs.

However, declarer can take 10 tricks provided he can time his communications correctly.

Spades also make 10 tricks.

Hand 7

2♣, 2♦, 2♠, 3♠ (provided you play this as forcing).

A control-bidding auction may well then reach a small slam in no trumps or spades.

12 tricks are there in either case.

Take out trumps if necessary, then duck a diamond to establish the suit and leave an entry.

Hand 8

-, 2NT, 3♣, 3♥, 3NT

There are always 10 tricks off the top.

On the unlikely lead of a club it is not necessary to duck as neither North nor South can hold an early entry.

11 tricks can be made if you can find the play of ♠2 to the 10 followed by ♠A and another towards the 8.

Hand 9

1♠, 1NT

Note that I do not raise 1NT to 2NT on 16 points.

West probably leads the DK which declarer should duck once, but it makes little difference on the 4-3 split.

When he does get in he should duck a heart – i.e. run the 8.

If he plays to the A or K he will never get back to make the long hearts.

4 hearts, 2 clubs, 1 diamond and a spade leads to a total of 8 tricks.

Hand 10

1NT by East is passed round.

As and when the defence attack spades declarer must duck once, thereby cutting access to the rest of the suit.

Hold-up plays - commentary

Hand 11
1NT, 2♣, 2♦, 3NT.
There are 10 tricks off the top – 11 if the defence start with 2 top Spades.
Hearts and diamonds also make 10.
No hold-up plays this time.

Hand 12
1NT, 2♣, 2♦, 2NT, 3NT.
On the lead of a small spade declarer should play small from dummy.
However, if the defence starts with ♠K or ♠Q then declarer should take the ace as the JT will still stop the suit.
An early Heart finesse will then set declarer up with 3 Clubs, 3 Hearts and a Diamond to go with 2 Spade tricks. Without a Spade lead the second Spade will trick will not transpire, but an attack on Diamonds will eventually create the ninth trick from the T98.

Hand 13
1NT, 2♣, 2♦, 3NT.
Declarer cannot avoid 4 losers in spades.
However, he can take the remaining 9 tricks provided that he starts the hearts with the ace and chooses the right club finesse – far from a certainty.

Hand 14
1♦ (or 1♣), 1♥, 1NT, 3NT
What an unenviable lead for South. I go with ♠7 but I'll forgive ♥6.
Declarer can make 10 tricks in Spades or no trumps (or either minor) with the help of the Spade split, but that will depend on dropping a Club honour on the second round of the suit.
Note that with A and K in a 6-card fit there is no need to duck the first round – the important principle is to win the second round.

Hand 15
1♠, 2♣, 2NT (forcing), 3NT.
If declarer locates all the right finesses in the red suits he can come to 11 tricks in either Spades or no trumps for the loss of just 1 trick in each minor.
Note that finessing the opening heart lead has the same effect as ducking the suit once.

Hand 16
1NT (borderline), (2♥), x, ?
West will probably pass the doubleton with no obvious way forward and no certainty of a game contract, although the vulnerability should certainly tempt him to bid on.
In 2♥x NS can make 6 tricks for a score of -300.
In 3NT by EW declarer must play the HQ on the opening heart lead – he will not get another opportunity. The long diamonds and a club finesse will bring him to 9 tricks for a score of +600.
Excellent intervention by North.

Hold-up plays - commentary

Hand 17

The clever move is for North to downgrade his hand initially because of the poor shape and the absence of intermediates.
South should open 1NT which North will raise to 2NT to end the auction.
In no trumps the defence can set up 2 Clubs on the lead of a low Club (unlikely) to go with a Spade and 2 Hearts, but might otherwise allow declarer to scramble his way to 9 tricks.
Spades make 9 tricks. The defence should find a club ruff to go with their spade and 2 hearts.

Hand 18

Either 1♠, 2♦, 2NT, 3NT, or
1♠, 2♦, 3NT (showing 15 or 16 points with just 4 Spades)
My preferred choice is the latter – MJBridge.info/openerspage160.html rebid1lev/

For me South is not good enough for a 2♥ overcall, particularly when vulnerable against not, but some might be tempted. In fact 2♥x makes 6 tricks for -500 – a very poor outcome.

South will probably lead a Heart, but it only serves to set up a Heart trick for declarer who can count a further 7 top tricks, and when North gets in with a Club he will not be able to get back to partner's Hearts – 9 tricks and contract made.
Note that declarer can give himself the chance of an extra trick by ducking the first round of diamonds. But there will always be 2 hearts and a club to go with this trick if the defence takes them.