Improver 4 – Hold-up plays in no trumps

Context

This is just one little trick which applies particularly in no trumps, but it is really just one consideration in the whole matter of 'planning the play'.

Note that although it is most commonly associated with declarer play in no trumps it can apply in trump contracts and it can also apply in defence as a means of cutting communication or even just as little as setting up a squeeze situation.

At its simplest

Declaring a no trump contract with a weak suit and just 1 sure stop in that suit it is often a good idea to:-

duck once with a combined 6 cards between the 2 hands in a suit;
duck twice with a combined 5 cards between the 2 hands;

- the 'rule of seven'.

As an example, if you hold a combined 6 cards then the opponents will hold 7.
If the opponents' cards split 4-3 then you will take your trick and the opponents will take the other 3, but if the opponents' cards split 5-2 then by ducking once and taking your trick on the second round of the suit the opponents will have no communication in that suit, and if the opponent with the short holding subsequently gets on lead he will not be able to get back to his partner in that suit.

Your stop is not sure

Of course, if your stop is less than sure – e.g. if the opponents lead towards your Kx - then you might have to take your trick when you can – you cannot afford to allow the lead to come back through that card.

Similarly, if your sure stop consists of just Qx facing Jxx then you must duck in the first hand, and take the trick in the second hand as and when the opportunity arises.

The safe hand

With a holding such as Kx, but also with a finessing holding such as AQ you might wish to ensure that a particular opponent does not get on lead to lead through your weak holding.
Most commonly this will apply when you have a choice of finesses, but it will also apply when you quite simply have to lose a trick to a top card. In such cases you should strive to let the opponent in the 'safe' seat win the trick.

In the present context, having ducked once or twice to cut the opponents' communications, you will try to lose the lead (if necessary) to the opponent with the presumed shortage.

Establishing an entry

A similar situation can arise when as declarer you have a potentially running suit in dummy, but no entries to it outside the suit.
Say there are 6 cards in dummy's suit to the AK and just 2 small ones in your hand. If you play out the AK the chances are that the Queen will still be out to stop the suit with no entries to the rest of the suit.
Solution – play small on the first round of the suit, then play to AK, dropping the Queen on a 3-2 split.