

Safety Plays

By James R. Klein

The words *Safety Play* used frequently in bridge means precisely what the name indicates, primarily a protection against adverse distribution. It is a precautionary measure designed to guarantee the success of your contract as declarer or in some cases as defenders to guarantee the defeat of a contract. This method may occasionally entail the loss of a trick.

This loss is negligible compared to the possible loss had the *Safety Play* not been used. In rubber bridge or team play safety plays should always be employed. The loss of overtricks at 30 points is a small price to pay to ensure a vulnerable game or slam. In both instances super safety plays should be used for the same reasons. In matchpoint play however, other factors must be considered. Some of these factors will also be discussed later in this lesson. Obviously, any safety play which can gain but never lose should be used at both rubber bridge or matchpoint duplicate. These plays will be discussed first. There is no set formula to guide the average player in the use of safety plays. Much of their use must depend on common sense. Occasions are so frequent when certain safety plays occur that their use becomes automatic. Other combinations which are less numerous often lull the optimistic player into a false sense of security resulting in the loss of contracts that should have easily been made. In order for the average player to know when to use a safety play when the occasion presents itself, the player must be able to concentrate on the following three things.

- 1. He must be able to fix in his mind especially as declarer, all the outstanding cards of a suit not held by himself and dummy.**
- 2. He must be able to visualize the worst possible way these cards could be distributed against him.**
- 3. He must assume this distribution and play to hold his loss to a minimum or to bring home the contract against the bad distribution. This is especially true in doubled contracts, slam contracts and unusual game contracts in both rubber bridge and matchpoints.**

In the case of matchpoint play, on undoubled contracts, each case will have to be decided on its own merits. If a safety play cannot lose, it should always be employed. However, if the safety play will lose a trick but still guarantee the contract, it might not be enough against a field of optimistic players and a bad matchpoint result could occur. Now let us see some of the standard safety plays which can never lose.

- 1.**

		9 8 7 6	
	J		Q 10 3 2
		A K 5 4	

The contract is 6 spades. There are no other tricks to be lost in the other suits, and there are entries in both hands. It is obvious that one trick must be lost in this trump suit in any event. If the suit breaks 3-2, only one trick will be lost no matter which hand holds the outstanding honors. The Ace is played and if no honor appears on the first trick there is no safety play. Your only hope is that neither player held Q J 10 X originally. If however, West drops the Q, J or 10 on the first play, a small trump to dummy's 9 must be played. If West originally held a doubleton Q J, nothing will be lost since declarer's King will clear the suit. On the other hand, if West shows out, East's 10 will take the trick but a finesse to capture both of East's remaining trumps may later be made when dummy is re-entered. As you can see, this safety play is a matter of common sense. It cannot lose since a trump trick must be lost no matter. The following illustrates another standard safety play.

2.

K 3 2

A 10 9 8 7

Presuming that you have no reason to believe from the bidding that West may hold all of the suit, you lead to the King in dummy. If no honor falls to this trick a small card is ducked to West on the chance that East held both the Q and J. This safety play must be made or two tricks will be lost. If West had played an honor on the first trick it would be a guess as to whether he held a doubleton Q J or a singleton. Declarer's success in picking up the entire suit would depend on the correct guess.

3.

K 4 3 2

A Q 10 9 8

This example of course is elementary. Even a novice would split his honors since no combination of 4 cards in either hand could gain a trick for the defenders as a finesse position can be gained against either defender if a void shows in either hand.

4.

K 4 3 2

A Q 9 8 7

This example presents an entirely different problem. Notice that the 10 has been replaced with a spot card. Therefore the suit must be played to the King first to guard against J 10 fourth in East's hand. If West shows out then both the J and 10 can be finessed from East. However, if East has the void defenders must make a trick by West splitting his honors on the lead to the King. Many players instinctively split their honors when attacking a suit. That is they play one of the double honors first. The following example illustrates why this is not a winning play.

5.

A 3 2
J 7 6 5 4
K Q 10 9 8

I learned my lesson many years ago from this hand and believe me, it was a costly lesson. I was playing rubber bridge at a contract of 7 Clubs, vulnerable. In those days the scoring was slightly different. The bonus for bidding and making a grand slam vulnerable was 2250 points. There were entries in both hands and after taking the first trick in my hand, I played the King of Clubs from my hand and when West showed out, I must have passed out. As you may notice, I could no longer pick up East's Jack of Clubs. It becomes apparent therefore that the proper play was to lead to the Ace first.. In this case, two finesses could have picked up the entire suit. Suppose the 5 Clubs were in the West hand? Could I have picked up the entire suit? The answer is, technically yes, only if I had led the 10 from my hand on the first trick and let it ride. But confidentially, my eyes and my ability to stretch my neck were no better then than they are now. As you may also notice, the play of splitting my honors with West holding all the outstanding trump also would have done me no good.. In that case, West now holding four Clubs to the Jack would still be assured of the setting trick. Technically speaking, the correct plays taken from the above example should not be termed safety plays but rather precautionary plays. The average player can gain much by studying these plays beforehand rather than to hope to gain the experience in actual play. The following is an example which probably looks familiar to many players. It is surprising indeed to find how tricks can be lost because of carelessness in not taking precautionary measures.

6.

K 10 3
A Q 4 2
J 9 8 7 6 5

In this example, holding 10 cards in the suit, the percentage is to finesse for the King. If East holds the King, one trick will be lost. If West holds the King no tricks should be lost whether West holds a singleton King or all three of the remaining suit. Therefore, the Jack is the proper play at the first trick. As may be noticed, when East shows out, another finesse can now be repeated to capture West's 10. If a small card is finessed to dummy's Queen, West cannot be prevented from winning a trick with his King 10 combination. These are basic fundamentals. All calculation of gain or loss is not to be considered here since there are no losses. The important thing is that a certain amount of caution must be developed in every bridge player. I am not inferring that every bridge player become overly cautious. If he did all the pleasure derived from bidding daring slams would be lost whether they were in every case makeable or not.

The second type of *safety play* is the one which involves risk against a gain. I must repeat what I stated previously that the safety play in rubber bridge or team play should be made without exception. In matchpoint play, other factors should be considered. If the probability that bad

distribution exists, then in certain cases at matchpoints, it might be considered more advantageous to be more optimistic and gain the overtrick which the safety play might lose. The following are examples which might be applied to both rubber bridge and matchpoint play.

7.

	♠ A Q 5 4	
West		East
	♠ 10 9 8 7 6	

The contract is 6 spades in both matchpoints and rubber bridge. Assuming all the other cards in the North South hands are high with entries to both hands, in rubber bridge there can be no question how this trump suit should be attacked. Declarer is not interested in guessing where the adverse trump lie, nor is he particularly interested in whether he can gain another 30 points for making 7. It should be apparent from the above that if the K J x are in the East hand, 6 spades cannot be made by any line of play. Therefore, the rubber bridge player should always play the ace from dummy first; then after entering his own hand he should lead up to the queen. This should guarantee the contract in every case where the contract is makeable. If West holds two spades to the King he will still only make 6 since he chose not to finesse. However, if East holds a singleton King the rubber bridge player will make 7 since the J x x in West hand can now be finessed. In the case of the duplicate player he must decide to gamble against the field. If he decides to make the safety play, he is risking a trick if the K x or K x x happen to be in the West hand. Against this possibility he must calculate his chances of going down and getting a minus score by misguessing the location of the King and Jack. For example, if the King, Jack, were doubleton in East's hand and the duplicate player decided to finesse the King and it lost what would he decide to do on the next play? Finesse the Jack or play for the drop? It may be wise to make a comparison. After the first play, when the King loses, the matchpoint player still must struggle to make his contract. Before the second play, the rubber bridge player already has his contract assured. Can you figure the percentage? Under these circumstances would you know what to do playing duplicate? The following example requires the knowledge technique known as the *elimination or strip and end play*, but it also involves the use of the *safety play*.

8.

	♠ Q 10 9 8 7	
	♥ K 3 2	
	♦ A Q	
	♣ A J 10	
West		East
	♠ A K 6 5 4	
	♥ A Q 4	
	♦ 3 2	
	♣ K 9 8	

In this example, against a 6 Spade contract by South, West leads the Jack of Hearts. How should this hand be played? Again, we have the same problem of duplicate versus rubber bridge. If the declarer can guess the Club finesse and the King of Diamonds is finesseable, 7 Spades will be made. However, at rubber bridge or team play there should be no such problem. To jeopardize the contract to gain another 30 points would be ridiculous. The opening Heart lead is taken in either hand, three rounds of trumps are then played, and then the two remaining Hearts are cashed. The Ace and Queen of Diamonds should now be played and it makes no difference who takes this trick as any lead by either defender will assure declarer of his contract. If either defender leads a red card, a ruff in one hand and a discard from the other will be obtained. If a Club is returned declarer will get a free finesse. In duplicate if the declarer attempts to finesse the Diamond Queen and it loses and West immediately returns a Diamond to dummy's Ace, declarer will now have to guess the location of the Queen of Clubs. If he guesses both right he will now make 7 Spades. If he guesses both wrong, he will go down one at his small slam contract.

In the following hand, I believe the safety play should be made.

9.

-----	♠ K 9 8	-----
	♠ A J 7 6 5	

The contract is 6 Spades and you can afford to lose one Spade trick. An absolute safety play is the play of the Ace first. If neither the Queen or ten appear, a small trump to dummy is played. If West plays low the 9 is played from dummy. If East can capture the trick with either the ten or the Queen no more trump tricks can be lost. If the suit were attacked in what might be considered to be the normal way, and that is a small trump to the King two tricks would be lost if West held originally the Q 10 x x. The safety play, as you can see prevents that. If East originally held Q 10 x x, the safety play works since after the Ace is played a small trump is played to dummy. If West now shows out, the King is played and the nine is now returned to East's remaining Q 10 toward declarer's J. This safety play however, does not necessarily mean declarer might be sacrificing chance for seven. If West originally held the Queen doubleton, the safety play would locate the Queen on the second play of the suit. The trump suit could now be cleared without the loss the of a trick. Whereas, the normal finesse would gain specifically only when East held the Q 10 x, Q x x or Q x x x.

Early in this article, I mentioned the use of what is popularly known as the *super safety play*. The following is an illustration.

10.

♠ Q 2
♥ A Q 10
♦ 9 5 4 3 2
♣ A Q J

♠ 3
♥ 9 8 7 6
♦ K Q J 10
♣ 7 6 5 4

♠ J 9 5 4 3
♥ 4 3 2
♦ 8 7 6
♣ 3 2

♠ A K 10 8 7
♥ K J 5
♦ A
♣ K 10 9 8

The contract is 6 Spades by South. The opening lead is the King of Diamonds. Playing rubber bridge or team play, there should be no question as to how the trump suit should be played. The Queen of Spades is played from the dummy and a small Spade is returned. When East follows suit, the 10 is played. If West holds the J the defenders will take this trick but no more since the suit will now break. Certainly if the suit happens to break 3-3 or if either defender holds specifically the J-9 doubleton, 7 will be made. Playing duplicate perhaps, that factor should be considered. Also, adverse bidding may serve as a clue in rubber or in duplicate bridge. If West had at any time contested the auction, I would presume he was doing it on distribution. For this reason, I would make the safety play at matchpoints also.

11.

----- ♠ J 5 4 3 -----
♠ K Q 8 7 6

In illustration 11, the contract is 6 Spades with entries in both hands, and no other losers. How should this trump suit be played? The answer is the J of Spades first from the dummy. This is not a safety play. It is the only play that can guarantee success of the contract. Now, let us examine the same holding with all the trumps accounted for.

11A.

----- ♠ J 5 4 3 -----
♠ K Q 8 7 6 ♠ A 10 9 2

It is obvious that if the suit breaks 2-2 or 3-1, only defenders ace of trump will make a trick. Therefore, the only thing declarer has to worry about is a 4-0 split. If West holds the four trumps there is nothing declarer can do about it, no matter how he plays the suit. West must get two trump tricks. If East holds the four trumps declarer can prevent the loss of two tricks only if the Jack is played from dummy on the first trick. If East ducks the play of the Jack the rest is easy as two successive leads through East's Ace will allow East to take only his Ace. If East covers the Jack, two finesses may be taken by the declarer holding a tenace K Q 8 over East's 10 9 2. You will note that if declarer had split his honors on the first trick East's A 10 9 combination would now have allowed him to take two trump tricks.

In conclusion, using the preceding as a perfect example I should repeat what has been stated earlier in this article. Declarer should be able to fix in his mind before playing a single card, all outstanding cards in a single suit not held by himself and dummy. In this example, West's fourth trump the 2 becomes the vital card in declarer's favor. If West's fourth card had been the 8 declarer could not have made the slam. I should also like to point out that the use of the *safety play* by the cautious, calculating player does not necessarily stamp him as timid. He is merely the type who does not take unnecessary chances if they can be avoided. As against this type, we will find the devil-may-care optimistic player who believes all suits will break favorably for him. Which of these two types do you think will win the most masterpoints?