Going with the Odds

The title of this lesson often frightens people as it may seem to be a study in mathematics. Not really; you don't need an electronic calculator to be a good bridge player. All you need to know are a few "easy numbers" and what to expect about suit breaks. The rest is mostly common sense.

Multiple Chances

A particular line of play will often have more than one chance of success. To estimate the total chances, you need to understand the method of combining percentages. No, you won't need a calculator. What you need is a logical mind.

Here is an example to illustrate how to choose the better play when multiple chances are involved.

6 ♠ by South

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              ♠4 3
              ♥K J 10 5 2
              ♦K J 5
              ♣A K 5
♠9 2                        ♠10 5
♥A Q 7 4        N           ♥9 8 6 3
♦10 9 7 2     W   E         ♦Q 8
♣J 10 9         S           ♣Q 8 7 6 3
              ♠A K Q J 8 7 6
              ♥—
              ♦A 6 4 3
Lead: ♣J      ♣4 2
```

Declarer has 11 top tricks, and the 12th must come from either hearts or diamonds. Dummy's heart honors offer a straight 75-percent play by taking two ruffing finesses — if East has either the ♥A or the ♥Q, you will succeed. The question is whether this is better than playing on diamonds.

Looking at the diamond suit in isolation, you can make an extra trick any time the finesse works (50 percent). If the finesse loses, you still succeed if diamonds are 3-3 (36 percent × 50 percent) which comes to 68 percent. This appears to fall short of the 75-percent play in hearts.

But wait! If the diamond finesse loses and diamonds do not split 3-3, you still have a chance that the person with the long diamonds also has the ♥A — he will be squeezed. Estimating this to be about 45 percent of the remaining 32 percent, adds another 14 percent, which brings the total to 82 percent. Hence, playing on diamonds is the better play.

Win the ♣ K and lead the ♥J (just in case you get a friendly cover) but *ruff it* and draw trumps. Next lead a diamond to the jack and queen. Win the club return, ruff a heart and lead all your trumps. West is squeezed in the red suits.

Enemy Information

The basic odds and percentages assume that nothing is known about the enemy hands. In many cases there will be enemy bidding to reveal suit lengths and indicate the likely location of high cards. This information takes priority over all the normal percentages. **If one opponent has doubled or bid (excluding weak bids), he is more likely to have any missing ace or king.**

The probabilities of suit breaks in one suit are affected by the layout of another suit (if known). If an opponent is shorter in one suit, he is likely to be longer in another; and vice versa. The opponent with the greater length in a suit is more likely to hold a specific card in that suit.

The normal play with nine cards missing the queen is to play for the drop, but declarer takes exception because of West's preempt. West is known to have extreme length in spades so the chance of West having short hearts is increased. The correct play in trumps is to win the ace then finesse

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                    ♠A
4 ♥ by South        ♥A 9 7 3
                    ♦J 8 7 5
                    ♣A K J 2
♠K Q 9 8 7 6 4                     ♠5 3 2
♥2                 N               ♥Q 10 4
♦Q 10 6          W   E             ♦A K 9
♣4 3               S               ♣Q 10 9 5
                    ♠J 10
                    ♥K J 8 6 5
                    ♦4 3 2
Lead: ♠K            ♣8 7 6
```

West	North	East	South
3 ♠	Dbl	Pass	4 ♥

against East. Next declarer should lead *diamonds* because if that suit breaks 3-3, he won't need the club finesse.

Restricted Choice

A principle in probability theory states that, if a card played by an opponent may have been played by choice or necessity, it is more likely to have been played by *necessity*. That is, the opponent's choice of plays is more likely to be *restricted* than a free selection.

Are you confused? Most people are, but the principle has proved to be sound and it is easy to apply at the bridge table. Here is how: **If you are missing two *touching* cards and an opponent drops one of them when you lead the suit, the odds are he does *not* have the other card.**

4♠ by South

You ruff the third round of hearts and play a spade to North's ace. You intended to lead a spade toward the queen, but the fall of West's 10 creates the option to finesse the nine. Which play is better?

You were missing touching cards (jack and 10) so when West plays one of them the rule of restricted choice suggests that he is less likely to have the other. Therefore, it is better to play *East* for the jack and finesse the nine.

This hand has another interesting point. Suppose West wins the ♠K and shifts to a club. Should you take the finesse? Or go up with the ace and hope for a 3-3 diamond break? The finesse (50%) seems better, but this overlooks an extra chance. Refusing the finesse also gains when the player with long diamonds has the ♣K — a squeeze play that works as the cards lie.

North hand:
♠A 4
♥K 8 3
♦A Q 6 3
♣A Q 7 4

West hand:
♠K 10
♥Q J 10 6 4
♦10 8
♣8 6 5 2

East hand:
♠J 5 3
♥A 9 7
♦J 9 5 4
♣K 10 3

South hand:
♠Q 9 8 7 6 2
♥5 2
♦K 7 2
♣J 9

Lead: ♥Q