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The Intra-finesse

by David Lindop



Early in our bridge playing days, the importance of playing in an 8-card or longer trump suit, especially when the suit is divided 4-4 between the two hands, is something we all come across. Sooner or later, we end up playing in a trump suit that looks something like this:

Dummy
A743

Declarer
Q652

If we can only afford to lose one trick in the suit, we apply the basic principle of the finesse: lead toward the card which we hope will win a trick -- toward the queen in this example. Usually, the ace is played first, in case there is a singleton king lurking about, but we are hoping that RHO has the king three times or doubleton. We can also duck the second round if RHO plays low, hoping LHO has king doubleton. How are we to know that this is the case? Usually, the bidding gives an indication and, perhaps, the way the opponents play their cards.

In the above layout, it does us no good to lead the queen on the first round of the suit, since we are missing the Jack, ten, nine, and eight. And however good we are at guessing, we have no hope of losing only one trick if the layout is:

	Dummy	
	A743	
LHO		RHO
KJ9		108
	Declarer	
	Q652	

If we give ourselves the eight and nine, however, the situation becomes more interesting:

	Dummy	
	A843	
LHO		RHO
KJ9		106
	Declarer	
	Q952	

It still does no good to lead the ace and then low toward the queen. Our LHO will win two tricks with the king and jack. Nor does it help to lead the queen, since LHO will cover with the king and we will eventually lose a trick to the ten and one to the jack.

Suppose, however, we lead a low card from dummy toward our hand, before taking the ace; RHO contributes the six and we play the nine from our hand. LHO wins the first trick with the jack and the layout now looks like this:

	Dummy	
	A84	
LHO		RHO
K7		10
	Declarer	
	Q52	

When we regain the lead, we are now in a position to lead the queen from our hand. If LHO does not cover, the queen will win the trick and we will take all three remaining tricks. If the queen is covered with the king, we win dummy's ace, pinning the ten and establishing the all-important eight.

It would be of no avail for RHO to rise with the ten on the first round of the suit, as we would cover with the queen to

force LHO to win with the king. The remaining cards would now look like this:

	Dummy	
	A84	
LHO		RHO
J7		6
	Declarer	
	952	

When we regain the lead, we can lead toward the dummy, planning to take a finesse against LHO's jack.

The above method of playing this suit combination is termed an **intra-finesse**. As we have seen, it is rather complex, even when we can see all the missing cards. It is even more difficult to execute at the table. You need to recognize the potential for an intra-finesse in the heat of battle and must be fairly certain of the lie of the missing cards. Otherwise, you'll be asking yourself why you didn't merely take a simple finesse!

I used to think that the intra-finesse was one of those rare text-book situations that only came up when the Hideous Hog was playing against Papa the Greek in Bridge in the Menagerie, or the Abbot encountered Brother Xavier in one of David Bird's articles. However, a couple of hands in the past year have changed my mind. The first came up when I was playing in the 1990 Master Mixed Board-a-Match final (one of my favourite forms of the game). The auction proceeded:

West	North	East	South(me)
			Pass
1 ♠	Dble	2 ♠	3 ♥
Pass	4 ♥		

The opening lead was the ace of spades and this is what I saw:

CANADIAN MASTER POINT

♠ 2
♥ A954
♦ KQJ2
♣ AK104

♠ KQ5
♥ Q862
♦ 98763
♣ 7

As usual, I had bid too much but partner certainly had her values. The opening lead had not done me any damage and I won the shift of the two of clubs with dummy's king. With sure spade and diamond losers, I could afford only one loser in the trump suit. There was that magic combination! I led the four of hearts from dummy and the seven appeared on my right. I inserted the eight and LHO won the jack. Another club was led and I trumped with the two of hearts and led the queen of hearts from my hand. Bingo! This was the complete hand:

	♠ 2				
	♥ A954				
	♦ KQJ2				
	♣ AK104				
♠ AJ963	<table style="border: none; margin: 0 auto;"> <tr><td style="padding: 2px;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	♠ 10874
N					
W E					
S					
♥ KJ3		♥ 107			
♦ 105		♦ A4			
♣ Q92		♣ J8653			
	♠ KQ5				
	♥ Q862				
	♦ 98763				
	♣ 7				

Notice how there was a lot of information to help find the right play on this hand. LHO had opened the bidding and shown up with only the ace of spades so far. LHO must hold either the king of hearts or the ace of diamonds to have an open-

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ing bid. When the four of hearts was led from dummy, RHO might have played the king, and was also unlikely to have played the seven from a holding of J73 or 1073. I had to assume the missing diamonds were divided 2-2, otherwise one of the opponents could probably get a ruff. Spades were likely divided 5-4, since they were bid and raised. With five spades and two diamonds, it was not unreasonable to assume RHO had exactly 5-3-2-3 shape. Of course, it turned out to be 5-2-2-4 ... well, that's another story.

A few months later, in the round-robin final of the Canadian National Team Championship, I was playing with Ed Bridson and the following hand came up:

♠ A874
♥ AKJ9
♦ 42
♣ 864

♠ Q952
♥ 8 4
♦ AJ3
♣ J532

West	North (Ed)	East	South (Me)
			Pass
1 ♦	Double	Pass	1 ♠
Pass	Pass	2 ♦	2 ♠

I guess if you're going to rebid a suit of Q952 it's best to know about intra-finesses. West led the king of diamonds and I let this win the trick -- the old Bath Coup. Sometimes opponents get their signals upside-down (even in a Canadian championship!) and I was hoping for a diamond continuation so that I could discard one of dummy's club losers. West carefully switched to the king of clubs,

however, and continued with the queen when East encouraged. Now West switched to the three of hearts and I was at the cross-roads. With a diamond and three clubs to lose, I had to hold the spade losers to one.

Once again, there was a lot of information. Why had West not played a third club? Presumably, because he held only the doubleton KQ and East started with four to the ace. If East held both the ace of clubs and king of spades, he might have raised to two diamonds immediately over the double. So it looked as though West held the king of spades. Here we go again. Win the heart lead with dummy's king and lead the four of spades. When the six appeared from East, I played the nine and West won the ten. Another heart was led. I won dummy's ace of hearts, led a diamond to my ace and played the queen of spades. This was the complete hand:

♠ 2							
♥ A954							
♦ KQJ2							
♣ AK104							
♠ AJ963	<table border="0" style="width: 100%; text-align: center;"> <tr><td>N</td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td>S</td></tr> </table>	N	E	W	S	♠ 10874	
N	E						
W	S						
♥ KJ3		♥ 107					
♦ 105		♦ A4					
♣ Q92		♣ J8653					
♠ KQ5							
♥ Q862							
♦ 98763							
♣ 7							

West ducked the queen of spades, but another spade drew the remaining trump and I was able to lead the last club from dummy toward the jack of clubs for my eighth trick.

So there you go. The intra-finesse actually does come up at the table. I'm certainly looking for further opportunities to try it out. How about you?