

A Two-Way Finesse

A two-way finesse is a card combination in which either defender can be finessed for a queen:

	Dummy	
	♠AJ43	
West		East
♠???		♠???
	South	
	♠KT92	

In this layout, South can cash a top spade in either hand and then finesse for the ♠Q.

Several factors may influence South's decision:

- Counting the points and distribution around the table may swing the odds of finessing in either direction.
- An endplay might force a defender on lead, thus eliminating declarer's guess.
- An avoidance play may be necessary for declarer if it's too dangerous to finesse into a particular defender.
- Table presence or "feel" may help declarer determine which way to finesse.

Counting the suit distributions or HCP during the play of the hand may help declarer, as in the following deal.

Dummy
♠AJ95
♥65
♦AQ76
♣J32
South
♠KT7
♥974
♦JT42
♣AK4

West	North	East	South
		Pass	1NT ¹
Pass	2♣ ²	Pass	2♦
Pass	2NT	All Pass	

1. Weak no trump (11-13)
2. Stayman

South passes partner's game invitation but still ends up in trouble. West's opening lead is the

♥3, won by East with the ♥K. East continues with the ♥A, ♥J and low heart to West's queen.

At trick 5, West leads a low diamond. South finesses but East wins the ♦K and plays back the ♣T.

At this point, South must either:

1. Duck and play East for the ♣Q. This is unlikely - East probably would not lead away from ♣Q-T with the ♣J in dummy.
OR
2. South must guess spades to make the contract.

South has an additional clue to inform the decision. East has already shown up with 11 HCP, yet passed in first seat. Holding either black queen as well, East would have 13 HCP and would probably have opened the bidding. Therefore, South should rise with the ♣A and play West for the queen of spades.

The complete deal:

	Dummy	
	♠AJ95	
	♥65	
West	♦AQ76	East
♠Q83	♣J32	♠642
♥QT83		♥AKJ2
♦53	South	♦K98
♣Q765	♠KT7	♣T98
	♥974	
	♦JT42	
	♣AK4	

An endplay can also remove the need for guessing a two-way finesse. For example:

Dummy

♠64

♥KT9

♦JT92

♣AKQ3

South

♠AJT2

♥AJ8

♦AKQ

♣J65

South plays in 6NT and receives a ♣T opening lead. There are 11 top tricks, and a 12th is possible if South guesses hearts correctly or takes a successful **double finesse** in spades.

However, the 12th trick is guaranteed if the minor suits split normally. South wins the opening lead and rattles off all the minor-suit winners, finding both suits 4-2. Having finished in dummy, South can now lead a low spade to the jack. If this loses, then West is endplayed in the major suits. The full deal:

Dummy

♠64

♥KT9

♦JT92

♣AKQ3

West

♠KQ98

♥Q63

♦65

♣T987

East

♠753

♥7542

♦8743

♣42

South

♠AJT2

♥AJ8

♦AKQ

♣J65

An **avoidance play** might also be necessary if declarer can't afford to let a particular defender gain the lead, as in the following deal.

	Dummy			
	♠ 87			
	♥ AK54			
West	♦ KT98		East	
♠ KQJ93	♣ 432		♠ 642	
♥ J9			♥ QT62	
♦ Q64	South		♦ 73	
♣ T85	♠ AT5		♣ J976	
	♥ 873			
	♦ AJ52			
	♣ AKQ			
West	North	East	South	
1♠	Double ¹	Pass	1♦	
Pass	3NT	All Pass	2NT	

1. [Negative double](#)

Naturally enough, West begins by leading spades, South winning the third round.

South can count 8 top tricks. A 9th trick can be created from the two-way finesse in diamonds. However, it is vital for South to finesse West for the ♦ Q, not East. If South cashes the ♦ A and runs the ♦ J, East might win with the ♦ Q, but won't have any spades left.

If South instead cashes the ♦ K in dummy and runs the ♦ T, West might win the ♦ Q and plunk down two more spades to defeat the contract.

Lastly, **table presence** may also influence a two-way finesse. Two bridge stories involve the late American expert Hal Sims:

"The legendary American Hal P Sims, a champion at many other sports besides bridge, was famed for his ability to guess which of his opponents held a crucial queen. He would rely primarily on what is called 'table presence' (he was an excellent poker player in addition to his other talents). One day, some friends rigged a deal... both opponents held a queen of spades! Sims won the opening lead and thought for some time. Finally, he exploded: 'This is impossible - you've both got the queen!'"¹

The second story involves a much more cunning approach:

"Once, when faced with a two-way finesse, Sims turned his formidable gaze on his left-hand opponent and declared: 'You look like a lady with the queen of spades.'

"'Oh, Mr Sims,' gushed his victim. 'Aren't you wonderful!'"²

A third story involves the late American expert Barry Crane. As told by Grant Baze, it's more superstition than table presence but is still worth sharing.

"Barry had several superstitious rules that he followed always, and his partners better follow them or all hell would break loose. One of these was that if you had a two way guess for a queen, you did not have to think about it — the queen was over the jack in the minors, and under the jack in the majors. So if you held Axx and dummy had the KJ109, you would lay down the ace and lead to the J if the suit was a major, and lead to the King and finesse coming back if the suit was a minor.

"Barry and I wind up in 7NT and that was our club holding, with only 12 top tricks; we each had balanced hands so I did not expect to get a count on the hand. No problem, I'm thinking to myself, I will not be able to get a count on the hand so I will just follow Barry's rule; if it does not work at least he will keep his mouth shut. I cash a few side suit winners; to my annoyance the suits split crazy and I do get an exact count on the hand. LHO has three clubs and RHO two clubs, which makes it a 50% better play to ignore Barry's rule.

"Meanwhile, at the same time, downstairs in another section, Mike Smolen is playing this hand at the same moment; he knows he and I are playing this hand simultaneously. Mike also gets a count on the hand, but decides to follow Barry's rule. Sure enough, the Queen was doubleton and Mike makes the hand. Mike knows I am going to guess the hand the technically correct way, regardless of Barry's superstitions; Mike tells his partner 'Listen closely, you are about to hear an explosion from upstairs.' How right he was. I misguessed the Queen and Barry went ballistic, screaming like a lunatic and then running out of the room....

"Parenthetically, for the rest of the day Barry and I kept track of how often his rule was right; to my shock, in the relevant situations, it was right five of six times. I am telling you, Barry was mystic; there is absolutely no reason it should not be a 50-50 proposition. Nevertheless, to this day, if I have no clues as to which way to finesse in these situations, I just follow Barry's rule."³

References

¹ Mahmoud, Zia. [How to Play Bridge](#)

² Kantar, Eddie. [Bridge Humour](#)

³ Baze, Grant. Barry Crane and the Barry Crane Top 500 "Race" .