

Safety Play

At matchpoints (pairs) scoring, there's often a big reward for a very small score difference. If you make +650 in your 4H contract and all the other pairs holding your cards are making only +620, you have a top (100%) board. This is why declarers will sometimes adopt a risky line of play to try for an overtrick.

In team events, though, the IMP scoring chart offers only a negligible benefit for these small score differences. It's much more important to play it safe and guarantee your contract. To do this, you can sometimes use what's called a safety play.

A **safety play** is where you play a suit in such a way that it will protect against an adverse distribution of the opponents' cards. With this line of play, you may give up the chance to make the maximum number of tricks when there's an average break, but you avoid the loss of extra tricks when there's a bad break.

With a little knowledge of safety plays, you can improve, and sometimes guarantee, your chances of bringing in the needed number of tricks.

To know when to use a safety play, declarer must be able to concentrate on the following three things.

1. He must be able to fix in his mind all the outstanding cards of a suit not held by himself and dummy.
2. He must be able to visualise 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 and slam contracts.

Some of the most common safety plays are in suit combinations that are missing the King and Jack. In the five layouts below, assume that you have no problems with outside entries to either hand and that you need the specified number of tricks to make your contract. How would you play each of these suits in an IMP team event?

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
North (dummy):	AQ10943	AQ984	Q6543	AQ876	A109765
South (declarer):	2	32	A102	5432	Q432
You need:	4 tricks	3 tricks	3 tricks	4 tricks	5 tricks

Here are the recommended safety plays that offer you the best chance of taking the needed number of tricks. The long suit is in dummy (North); the short suit is declarer (South).

(1) AQ10943 facing 2 ? You need 4 tricks.

Lead the 2 toward dummy. If your left-hand opponent (LHO) follows with a small card, play the Ace, then lead the Queen. This gives you an 89% chance of bringing in 4 tricks.

If you can afford only one loser -- or if you're playing matchpoints -- finesse the Queen on the first

round. This gives you a 40% chance of taking 5 tricks and a 2% chance of taking all 6 tricks (when LHO holds KJ doubleton).

(2) AQ984 facing 32 ? You need 3 tricks.

For an 82% chance of taking 3 tricks, finesse the 8, then return to your hand in another suit and finesse the 9. But if you need 4 tricks (only a 33% chance), finesse the 8 first, then finesse the Queen.

(3) Q6543 facing A102 ? You need 3 tricks.

Cash the Ace, then enter dummy in another suit and lead small toward your remaining 102. This is a 96% line for 3 tricks, failing only if the suit breaks 5-0.

If you need 4 tricks, the best play is to cash the Ace, then lead small to the Queen, hoping the King (or Jx) is on your left and the suit breaks 3-2.

(4) AQ876 facing 5432 ? You need 4 tricks.

On 78% of the deals, you'll have only one loser if you first cash the Ace, then return to your hand and lead toward the remaining Q876 in dummy. This protects against an offside singleton king.

If you must have 5 tricks from this suit, finesse the Queen first (playing for Kx onside, a 20% possibility).

(5) A109765 facing Q432 ? You need 5 tricks.

Lead the 2 and if LHO follows low, play the 10 from dummy. This is one of the few safety plays that works 100% of the time - it guarantees you won't lose two tricks to KJx in either defender's hand (if your RHO has KJx, you'll see LHO show out on the first lead and you can play Ace and low back toward your Queen).

If you're playing matchpoints or if you require 6 tricks, cash the Ace first.

Good bridge technique requires ensuring contracts rather than risking them.