



## Counting Ruffs in the Context of a Master Hand

by Bob Gruber

One concept that is often difficult for beginning bridge students is how to properly count ruffs when evaluating the number of tricks they'll win as declarer. By the time ruffing is introduced as a technique to win extra tricks, the idea of one hand being Declarer and the other being Dummy has been well established.

### Declarer's 1<sup>st</sup> Task is Making a Plan

As Declarer, before you play your 1<sup>st</sup> card from Dummy, you should be actively making a plan to take (at least) the number of tricks your contract requires. You count your Sure Tricks, and if they're insufficient, you think about developing an extra trick (or tricks) by promoting secondary honor cards, by establishing long cards in a suit, and by finessing. These techniques apply to both no-trump and trump contracts. In a trump contract, an additional extra-trick winning tactic is ruffing losers with trumps in Dummy.

### Ruffing Losers in Dummy

This new extra-trick taking technique is called "ruffing losers in Dummy." Note, it's in dummy's hand, not declarer's hand. Yet, to the beginning student it seems that sauce for the goose ought to be sauce for the gander, that is, if ruffing in Dummy is good, and I have shortness in my hand, shouldn't that be good too. Frankly, NO! Why is that, you ask. To satisfactorily answer that question the concept of the Master Hand should help.

### The Master Hand

The master hand is the one we will "set up" to win the majority of tricks for our side. In making a plan, Declarer should do so from the perspective of setting up the master hand. In a trump contract, the master hand is the one with the most trumps.

Declarer's tendency is to evaluate the hand's trick taking potential from the perspective of his/her own hand, implicitly assuming it's the master hand. (So, it's no coincidence that the beginning textbook presentation of a trump contract has declarer holding more trumps than dummy.) In making a plan, Declarer counts the tricks in his/her own hand, the assumed master hand, and then augments that count by any extra winners from dummy's hand.

Two elements of that last statement are the crux of the matter: the master hand and extra winners. As Declarer, you've implicitly assumed a master hand and counted winners in that hand. That's your "base" count of winners. Since you've already counted the winning tricks in the master hand, extra winners can only come from the "other" hand, dummy's hand.

With regard to trumps, you count the trumps in the master hand as winners in their own right, as trump winners used to draw the opponents' trumps and to stop the opponents from taking tricks in other suits. Let's say you have 5 trumps in the master hand and count them as 5 winners; you



also have shortness in a side suit. A possible illustration of this situation is shown below. In a heart contract, South is the master hand with shortness in diamonds.

NORTH (Dummy)

♠ 4  
♥ 9 8 7  
♦ 7 6 5 4  
♣ 8 7 6 5 4

SOUTH (Declarer)

♠ A 3 2  
♥ A K Q J 10  
♦ A 2  
♣ A 3 2

If you use one of South's trump winners to ruff a diamond, does that generate a 6<sup>th</sup> trump winner in South's hand? Absolutely not! You have a maximum of 5 trump winners in that hand and you've already counted every one of them.

If you say there are 5 trump winners in the South hand and an extra winner is available by ruffing a diamond, you're saying you're going to use those 5 trumps to win 6 tricks. That's an impossibility! Your logic is faulty because you're counting the same winner twice.

But if you use one of dummy's trumps to ruff a spade, a trump you haven't already counted as a winner, that will, indeed, be an extra winner. In fact, you may be able to ruff 2 spades in dummy and thereby generate 2 extra winners. We're very interested in extra winners and not at all interested in counting the same winner twice. Counting the same winner twice gives an unwarranted sense of security. Bridge players and fathers of teenage daughters try to avoid that at all times.