Declaring a Hand (Part 3)

In Part 2, we talked about making a plan when you're declaring a hand. In this part, we'll focus on that moment of dread—when you realize your plan isn't going to work! We'll focus on the two ways this can happen, since you'll need very different approaches to deal with them. These two ways are

1. when your plan won't let you achieve your goal for the hand.
2. when something unexpected happens during the play to disrupt your plan.

For the first item, let's look at a couple of 3NT hands where we know we're in trouble right out of the gate. In the first hand, East is declaring and gets a ♣ lead. Everything seems reasonable: We're in a pretty normal contract and we have plenty of tricks—if we can set up the ♦ suit.

West	**East**
♠5 3 2	♠Q J
♥7 4	♥A J 10 3
♦A K 9 7 3 2	♦8 6
♣Q J	♣A K 10 7 3

So, what's the problem? Look at that ♠ suit. If the opponents get the lead, which they will if we try to establish ♦s, they can also take at least four ♠ tricks, which will set the contract. Worse, there's nothing we can do about it. We can't get to 9 tricks without giving up the lead at least once. That means we need to be sneaky!

It starts at trick one: Overtake the ♣J with the ♣A! At trick 2, lead a ♦ and play low from West! What's going on here? We've just given up one, and possibly two, tricks! But, put yourself in the defense's shoes. What are they to make of this odd set of plays? Well, the ♣Q was winning the first trick, but you overtook with the ♣A. So, you either have very short ♣s or you wanted the lead to come from your hand. But, at the next trick, you played a low ♦ from both hands, something you could have easily done with the lead in West. By process of elimination, you must be short in ♣s, in which case the defense should lead back another one to clear that suit. As you can see, that gives you the chance to make your contract if the ♦s have a normal 3–2 split.

Will this work at the table? Probably, as long as you make the plays in tempo at trick one. If you hem and haw, then the defense won't fall for it. But, the second trick is key too. You need to lose the diamond early so the opponents can't signal each other. If you cash the ♦A K first, then one of the opponents will be out on the third trick in that suit, which will allow her to signal for a ♠ lead, which will make the switch easy to find.

West	East
♠A 3 2	♠10
♥7 4	♥A K Q J 6 3
♦A 7 3 2	♦K 10 6
♣J 10 4 2	♣Q 7 3

On this second board, our goal is a little different. We want to make 10 tricks so we can beat all the pairs that ended up in 4♥. In 4♥, we would have a pretty easy play for the contract on a ♠ lead: Win the ♠A, draw trump and then attack ♣s. On a good day, the clubs will split and we'll make 11 tricks. But, we're not in 4♥, we're in 3NT. So, what can we do to try and get a good board? We should start by winning the ♠A and playing our ♥s—all of them! As in the first hand, this will put pressure on the defense, but now it's discarding pressure. They have to come up with 3 or 4 discards, but they don't know where your extra tricks might come from. You can help increase the pressure on them by making your first two discards from dummy two low ♦s. That will make it look as though you have no interest in developing that suit. If they mistakenly discard ♦s as well, your 10th trick could come from the ♦10. This is an example of the bridge adage that it never hurts to run a long suit.

Our final example in this section goes to a "rule" I play by: When everything seems bleak, try something unexpected! On the holding below, things are looking bleak for nine NT tricks. We have eight sure tricks, but it's going to be tough to get another one, even with the ♦ lead. Plus, once you lose the lead, the obvious honors in dummy is going to direct the defenders to the right switch.

West	East
♠K 3 2	♠A 10 9 5
♥7 4 2	♥J 10 6
♦K J 5 2	♦A Q 7
♣A 10 4	♣K 9 3

So, how did the declarer make this hand when it was played in the finals of a knock-out? Naturally, he attacked ♥s! Specifically, he cleared ♦s, ending in dummy and then led a low ♥ toward his hand. South took East's ♥J, but what is she supposed to lead back? Not surprisingly, she assumed East was trying to set up an ♥AJ10 holding, so that left the black suits. She chose to return a ♣, which allowed declarer to pick up North's ♣Q and then finesse South out of her ♣J—making three and clinching a well-deserved championship!

Now let's move on to the other part of today's lesson—adjusting our plan when things go wrong. When we first make a plan, we make certain assumptions about how the suits will split and how the defenders will play the hand. While we try and base those on the most likely situation, the cards don't always cooperate. Sometimes we'll get lucky and be able to adjust our plan to try and take

more tricks. But we tend to be more concerned about the unfriendly breaks that turn our well-deserved tops into dreaded bottom boards. Consider this hand:

West	East
♠K J 4 2	♠A 5
♥Q 10 4 2	♥A K J 7 6
♦Void	♦A 9 7
♣Q J 9 5 4	♣A 7 3

You've reached an aggressive 6♥, but it looks like your aggression has paid off this time. On the ♣ lead, your plan is simple. Play the ♣Q at trick one covered by the ♣K and ♣A. Then draw trump in two rounds, ruff your two low ♦s in dummy and cash your winners. That'll get you 12 tricks—13 if things go your way. Unfortunately, when you lead the ♥A at trick 2, North shows out!

What now? First, take a deep breath. You're not down yet. You just need to reassess the situation. Since South has four trump, we're going to need to use one of West's honors plus your three honors to draw them all. That leaves us enough ♥s to ruff our two low ♦s, but it creates some transportation issues. We can't get back in ♥s (which would create a length trick for South) or ♣s. So, we have to get back with a ♠ ruff. That leaves us the following plan: Ruff a low ♦, come back to hand with the ♠A, ruff another low ♦, cash the ♥Q, cash the ♠K, and ruff a ♠ to get back to hand. If South isn't able to overruff this trick, you'll be left with these cards:

West	East
♠J	♠
♥	♥K J
♦	♦A
♣J 9 5 4	♣7 3

Now, you're home free. You've drawn two rounds of trump—one with your Ace and one with dummy's Queen. So, South only has two ♥s left, which you can draw with your King and Jack. Your ♦A and dummy's ♣J get you the last two tricks you need to make your contract. This is definitely a lot harder than the original approach, but it does get you to the desired outcome. But, it's not without its pitfalls. First, you see that we ruffed the two low ♦s before we cashed the ♦A. That's to reduce the chance that South can get a discard that will hurt us later in the hand. She's not going to help us by ruffing when West, who is sitting behind her, is also out. Second, you may be tempted to finesse the ♠J. That's a problem for two reasons: 1) You're already short on entries to your hand, and 2) South already has a large number of cards accounted for (4♥s, 2♦s and 3♠s), so it's unlikely the finesse will work. On this hand, that approach will lead to going down as North wins his ♠Q and returns a ♠, which South ruffs.