

UNBLOCKING

Unblocking is a technique that may be required before some top winners in a suit can be cashed.

Unblocking a suit is only beneficial if there is an outside entry. It's therefore generally best not to create blockages when setting up a suit.

WHAT IS A "BLOCKED" SUIT?

Sometimes we're lucky enough to have a suit that is strong enough for us take all the tricks without any preparation. For example:

North A K Q J	North has four top winners that we can take at any time. (In the play of a full hand it's often best not to cash them immediately.)
South 7 4	

Now consider the following suit combination:

North Q J 7 4	This time we still have four top winners, but only South's AK can be cashed immediately. These honours are <u>blocking</u> access to North's QJ.
South A K	It's therefore necessary to <u>unblock</u> South's AK before North's QJ can be cashed. Of course, this requires North to have an <i>entry</i> * in another suit.

* An **entry** is a high card in a suit that allows us transfer the lead from one hand to the other by winning in the other hand.

Unblocking doesn't always have to be done straightaway, but this is often the best approach if North is short of entries.

The following suit combination is similar:

North A Q 7 4	Once again South's winners are blocking access to North's winners. It's only possible to win four tricks by <u>unblocking</u> South's KJ and entering North in another suit to cash his AQ.
South K J	Here it would be possible to cash South's king and overtake the jack with the queen, but now the only remaining trick for declarer is the ace. With seven cards missing one of the opponents will always have a card to beat North's 7.

If North's doesn't have an entry in another suit this approach would be necessary to win three tricks. (In the play of a full hand it would usually be best to defer this and play on other suits first.)

Change North's 7 into the 10 and the situation becomes entirely different:

North A Q 10 4
South K J

Unblocking is no longer required because after cashing the king we can afford to overtake the jack with the queen. This would usually be the best approach in practice.

It can also be necessary to unblock a singleton. For example:

North A K J 4
South Q

Four tricks are only possible by unblocking South's queen and entering North (in another suit) to cash the AKJ. If North has no outside entry then only three tricks are available.

This unblocking play could even more productive:

North A Q J 4 2
South K

More often than not we can make five tricks by unblocking the king and entering North to cash the AQJ. If the suit splits 4-3 then North's 4 becomes a fifth trick in the suit, but even without this we've still ensured four tricks. If we overtake South's king with North's ace then only three tricks are available.

In the same way as before, if we replace North's 4 by the 10 and his 2 by the 9 then no unblocking is required for either of the above two suits.

It's occasionally necessary to unblock three cards:

North Q 9 4 3
South A K J

We start by cashing South's AK and continue with the jack. If the 10 hasn't appeared, we play low from dummy and later enter North in another suit to cash the queen. If the opponents have played the 10 at any stage we can (if we want) overtake the jack with the queen and cash the 9 immediately.

AVOIDING BLOCKAGES

Unblocking isn't a difficult manoeuvre, but it's best to avoid the need for it if possible. We can help prevent blockages by following the principle of

Playing the high card(s) from the short side first.

For example:

North A Q J 5	We start by cashing South's king, after which there no problem accessing North's AQJ. If we start with one of North's honours, we'll have to win the second trick with South's King. Now we'll need an entry in the North hand, before we can cash North's remaining honours. This sort of position is the reason for starting with the high card(s) from the short side first.
South K 3	

Here's a related suit combination that could also belong under the heading of "promoting":

North Q J 10 5	We start by leading South's king. If the opponents take their ace then we can cash North's honours at any time. If we start by leading the 3 to one of North's honours the suit will be blocked. It's true that the opponents might hold up their ace if South starts with the king, but they won't always know to do this and nothing is lost by following the principle of starting with the high card(s) from the short side first.
South K 3	

We can often avoid blocking a suit by starting with the high card(s) from the short side first.

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