



Adventures in Bridge

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This Week in Bridge

(304) Two-Way Finesse

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Level: 2

Robert S. Todd

robert@advinbridge.com

General

In most suits, we can only take a finesse one way, but when we can take a finesse by leading from our hand up towards the honors in the dummy or by leading from the dummy towards the honors in our hand, this is called a *two-way finesse*. In this situation we have the choice of finessing our left-hand opponent (LHO) or our right-hand opponent (RHO) out of the missing honor. In bridge, choices like this can be dangerous and make the play more complicated- hands where we can only think of one way to play them are much easier. Let's look at how to handle the situation and turn the choice of a two-way finesse into an advantage.

The Two-Way Finesse – “Finding the Queen”

The most common two-way finesse is when we can finesse either player out of the Queen of a suit.

Example 1

AJx

KTx

If we think that LHO has the Queen, then we can finesse against them by leading up to the Jack and if we think that RHO has the Queen then we can finesse against them by leading up to the Ten. Misguessing the Queen in this situation can be frustrating and is part of what makes two-way finesses “dangerous”. We will look at some of the options for determining who has the Queen later, but first let's look at how to execute these finesses.



Do Not Finesse into the Singleton Queen

One simple thing we can do when executing this two-way finesse (no matter which way we choose to take it) is to play a high honor in one side first. We do this so that we do not lose a trick by finessing into a singleton Queen.

In example 1, if we wish to finesse our LHO for the Queen then we “cash” our King first and then lead up towards North’s AJ – inserting the Jack to finesse LHO out of the Queen. If we wish to finesse LHO for the Queen, then we cash our Ace first and lead towards South’s KT – inserting the Ten to finesse LHO out of the Queen. No matter which way we choose to take the finesse, we want to be certain to cash one honor first so that we do not finesse into a singleton Queen.

Getting the Opponents to Help Us Find the Queen

When we have lots of good spot cards (like the Jack, Ten, and Nine) then we may be able to afford to lead one of these cards and have it covered by an opponent’s honor. In a situation like this we want the opponents to cover our Jack (or other spot card) with the Queen because it will help turn our Ten & Nine into winners.

Example 2

K9x

AJT

Here we have additional opportunities to get the opponents to help us get our two-way finesse right.

If we think our RHO has the Queen, then the lazy thing to do is lead low towards the Jack. A slightly better play is to cash the King and then lead towards to the AJ. But better than either of those plays (if we think that RHO has the Queen) is to start by leading the Jack from our hand. If our LHO has the Queen, they may well play it (“covering an honor with an honor”, hoping to promote their partner’s Ten), and if they do then we are home free. But if LHO does not cover our Jack (they play low) then we can still play the King from North and lead up towards our AT – finessing RHO out of the Queen (the play we were planning to make all along).

A play like this gives the opponents a chance to “make the mistake” of covering our honor (which they often will), while costing us nothing. This play is useful when we already have a strong idea of who we want to finesse, but it can also be useful when we are not sure who we wish to finesse. If we are not sure who to finesse, then we may simply lead an honor (like the Jack in the example above) and hope that the opponent covers. If they do not cover, we may decide (based on our table feel) that they do not have the Queen and go up with partner’s honor and finesse their partner for the Queen (leading the Jack, playing the King, and leading up towards the AT in the above example).



Deciding Which Player to Finesse

When we have a two-way finesse on the Queen, we are faced with the choice of which player to finesse. In a perfect world the opponents will lead this suit and take us off our guess, but when that does not happen, we have to use other information available to us to help determine which opponent is more likely to hold the queen.

- *Discards* – Often the opponents’ discards can help us determine which player is more likely to hold the Queen. If our RHO discards 3-4 cards in the applicable suit, they likely do not have the Queen (if they started with Qxxx or even Qxxxx they are more likely to hold on to this suit and find something else to discard). Similarly, if LHO is struggling to figure out what to discard and finally decides to discard everything else (holding on to the suit where we are trying to guess the Queen), they are more likely to have the Queen.
- *Leads & Shifts* – Another inference about who may hold the Queen can be taken on opening lead or in the middle of the hand - if it seems natural to play the suit we are focused on, a player who does not do so may hold the Queen.
- *Distribution* – Another reason that we may play one opponent for the Queen instead of the other is based on what we know about the distribution of the hand. If we know that one player has a large number of cards in one or two other suits, then that leaves few cards for them in the suit we are trying to guess. (Conversely, if their partner has few cards in one or two suits then they have lots of cards in the “important” suit.) Without any other information about the hand, the player with the most cards in the suit where we are trying to find the Queen is more likely to have the Queen. (More generally, the player with the most unknown cards in their hand is more likely to hold the missing Queen – this is called the *Principle of Empty Space*).

Conclusion

Two-way finesses can be one of the most frustrating situations in bridge because we always had the chance to get the play right and take the finesse the other way if it goes wrong the way we choose to play it. Learning to develop your table feel will help you determine which player has the missing honor but using these thought processes and tools of properly executing the play will also dramatically improve your ability to “guess the Queen”. You will not master this overnight, but you need to work to develop your technical and tactical skills as well as your feel for “guessing” the Queen.