

Ducking

Ducking is an instrumental technique in bridge in both declaring and defending.

What is ducking?

Ducking is intentionally letting the opponents win a trick when you had the option of winning yourself.

Why would you duck?

There are several reasons why you may want to duck.

1. Preserve transportation between the closed hand and dummy

Contract: 3NT by South	♠AK84 ♥xx ♦xxx ♣xxx	
♠xxx ♥Jxx ♦QJx ♣xxxx		♠QJ10 ♥Qxxx ♦xxx ♣QJx
	♠942 ♥AKx ♦AKx ♣AKx	

In this hand, you probably need to establish the 4th spade, banking on a 3-3 spade break. But on the play of two top spades and a third spade, while spades break favorably, the last spade is stranded in dummy. If one of your precious aces or kings were on the table this wouldn't be a problem but alas, it isn't so.

Fortunately not all is lost. By simply ducking the first (or even second) spade, you can lose the trick you must lose **early** and maintain an entry to enjoy your third spade winner.

Another example

Contract: 3NT by South		♠xxx	
		♥xx	
		♦xxx	
		♣AKxxxx	
♠QJ10x			♠xx
♥xxx			♥A10xxx
♦Kxx			♦Jxx
♣J10x			♣Qx
		♠AKxx	
		♥KQJ	
		♦AQxx	
		♣xx	

Like the previous hand, the dummy also lacks an outside entry. You only have 5 top tricks, so you need to turn dummy's long clubs into winners to make this contract. As before, two top clubs followed by a third club will establish the club suit but leave no entry to dummy. Declarer must duck the first club to preserve a small club in his hand to reach the dummy, cash the top two clubs felling the outstanding clubs, and bringing home the contract.

Note for both examples, ducking will not protect against an unfavorable break. Given the good break however, ducking to maintain communications between the hands is the only viable option.

2. Cut off defender's communications

Declarer can also duck and let the defenders take a trick to disrupt their communications later in the hand.

Contract: 3NT by South	♠Kxx ♥xx ♦AJ1098 ♣Axx	
♠xxx ♥KQJ10x ♦xx ♣J10x		♠QJ10 ♥xxx ♦Kxx ♣Qxxx
♥K led	♠Axxx ♥Axx ♦Qxx ♣Kxx	

South counts only 6 top winners. He must establish his diamonds to take three more tricks. If the diamond finesse is on, he takes the first 10 tricks, 5 diamonds, 2 spades, a heart and 2 clubs. But if he takes his ♥A immediately and the diamond finesse fails, the defense may very well take the ♦D and 4 heart tricks before declarer can set up his 9 tricks.

South must hold-up his ♥A on the first and second round and take the third round of hearts. Now when the diamond finesse fails, East does not have a heart to return to West. South wraps up an easy 9 tricks.

The hold-up play here guards against West holding 5 or more hearts and East holding the ♦K. If hearts are 4-4 or West held the ♦K, the defenders only have 4 tricks to take and the result is the same whether you ducked or not. But in this case, ducking guards against a very possible scenario, and it is good technique to play the hand safely this way, especially when it cannot cost.

A common theme with ducking as declarer is to identify the danger hand. In the previous example, declarer had a one way finesse in diamonds, but suppose he had a choice.

Contract: 3NT by South		
	♠Kxx	
	♥xx	
	♦AJ1098	
	♣Axx	
♠xxx		♠QJ10
♥KQJ10x		♥xxx
♦xx		♦Qxx
♣J10x		♣Qxxx
	♠Axxx	
♥K led	♥Axx	
	♦Kxx	
	♣Kxx	

West leads the ♥K as before. Declarer once again would do well to duck the first two rounds of hearts to interfere with the defenders' transportation as much as possible. This time there is a two way finesse in diamonds. West is likely to have longer hearts and more likely to be short in diamonds, so the finessing East is more likely to work. However, Declarer should consider finessing West as a safety play, *ducking* into East. Even if East wins, if he has three or less hearts, he can't return a heart and Declarer can make his contract.

Contract: 4S by South		
	♠xxx	
	♥xxx	
	♦Axx	
	♣Kxxx	
♠Axx		♠xx
♥9x		♥KQxxx
♦Qxxxx		♦KJx
♣10xx		♣QJ
	♠KQJ10x	
♥9 led	♥AJ10	
	♦x	
	♣Axxx	

North passes and East gets a 1♥ opening bid in before NS charge into 4♠. West leads the 9 of hearts and declarer must duck the first trick and let East win. If declarer takes the first heart, when he loses the spade ace eventually, he can get East in with a heart and enjoy the setting heart ruff.

Ducking to cut off communication still applies in suit contracts. If the ♠A is in the East hand, the heart ruff is always there, but ducking guards against West holding the ♠A and doubleton heart. Declarer can take the heart finesse himself later.

Bath Coup

Contract: 3NT by	♠xxxx ♥x ♦Axxx ♣Kxxx	
♠Jxx ♥KQ9xx ♦Jxxx ♣x		♠Qxx ♥10xxx ♦Qxx ♣Axx
♥K led	♠AKx ♥AJx ♦Kx ♣QJ109x	

Ducking can keep someone on lead when they desperately want lead to go to partner, because they can't attack a suit themselves or are endplayed.

This is a well-known example of ducking freezing a suit on the very first trick, called the **Bath Coup**. When West leads the ♥K in 3NT, a simple duck of the first heart leaves West with no good continuation. If he leads another heart, declarer has a double stopper in hearts and can attack clubs with leisure. West loses a tempo attacking the heart suit and still allows declarer the time he needs to knock out the ♣A.

Safety Play vs Overtricks (IMPS vs Matchpoints)

Although it is almost always good technique to duck and lose tricks you must lose early, sometimes in Matchpoints you don't want to lose that many tricks.

Contract: 3NT by South	♠K ♥xx ♦AJ1098xx ♣Ax	
♠xxx ♥KQJ10x ♦x ♣J10xx		♠QJ10x ♥xxx ♦Kx ♣xxxx
♥K led	♠Ax ♥Axx ♦Qxx ♣KQx	

This is similar to an early example, but the NS hands have more potential to take tricks. If the diamond finesse is on, Declarer can take the first 13 tricks. But if the finesse is off, the defense could take the first 5 tricks. Ducking gives the contract the best chance but may mean giving up tricks that weren't necessary. While in IMPS it is almost certainly right to duck the first two heart tricks, one could argue in matchpoints the overtricks are worth the risk. Regardless, be sure to count your winners to make the decision for yourself.

Defense

Ducking is not a technique exclusive to Declarers. Ducking is a valuable tool for defenders as well.

1. Make Declarer guess

Contract 4S by South	♠xxx ♥K10xxx ♦KQx ♣Kx	
♠Jx ♥Axx ♦xxx ♣xxxxx		♠Qxx ♥Qxx ♦Axxx ♣xxx
	♠AKxxx ♥Jx ♦Jxx ♣Axx	

Declarer has at least three tricks to lose so far, the ♦A, ♥A, and a trump. Eventually Declarer is going to lead up heart to see if he can only lose the ace and nothing more. It's instinct to go up with the ace in fear of declarer trying to pull a fast one, but West must duck the heart and give declarer a chance to guess incorrectly. If East has been giving good count, West will know he has two hearts remaining and it is safe to duck.

2. Killing dummy (not the person silly)

By holding up, a defender can often leave dummy without an entry and strand all the possible winners declarer might have had. This play is similar to the declarer ducking twice to cut off the danger hand. In this case, the danger hand is dummy.

Contract: 3NT by South		♠xx	
		♥xx	
		♦K97	
		♣KQJ10xx	
♠KQJxx			♠10x
♥10xx			♥Kxxxx
♦xxxx			♦A108
♣x			♣Axx
		♠Axxx	
		♥AQJ	
		♦QJx	
		♣xxx	
♠K led			

To make this, Declarer needs to establish some club winners. He ducks the first two spades, takes the third spade and starts on clubs. East must duck the first two rounds of clubs to stop Declarer from having easy access to the club winners. Upon winning the third round of clubs, West must exit a heart, for leading a diamond would provide Declarer the entry he needs to get to dummy. Now declarer, after having successfully finessed the heart, will try to knock out the ♦A of diamonds to establish the diamond entry to dummy. West must duck the ♦Q, and then the ♦J of diamonds as well, covering only when dummy plays high. The ♦A of diamonds must be preserved to cover the ♦K. Even if West is stripped of all other cards after winning the ♦A and forced to return a heart to allow declarer to finesse again, declarer is left with 8 tricks and a set contract.

Notice how all these examples involve aces? While you can duck with Kings or even Queens, most ducking plays involve Aces and it is clear why. There's a reason they're worth more than 4 points. Having the master control in a suit is a powerful thing.

These examples are only a few instances of the power of ducking. There are many more applications of the technique, but hopefully I have convinced you of the value of ducking.