



## **Eight Ever, Nine Never: Myth or Solid Advice?**

by Bob Gruber

Most of us have heard the old bridge adage about finessing for a missing queen: 8 ever, 9 never. Is this solid advice that will, overall, garner you extra tricks, or will it prove to be a canard that costs you more than it gains?

In the absence of bidding or play clues, “8 ever” is solid advice. But what about 9 never? Rather than deal in conjecture, let’s examine the “9 never” strategy logically.

### Information from the Bidding and Play So Far

First off, this finessing strategy is *a priori*, without taking any clues from the bidding or prior play into consideration. Using knowledge from these sources may turn a guess into a certainty. The classic example is you’ve counted out a hand and determined the opponent in front of the high honor-Jack tenace has three cards in the suit and the one sitting behind has a singleton. Now it’s a simple matter of leaving the tenace intact while cashing a high honor, and then leading toward the tenace. If the Queen hasn’t made an appearance, you finesse the Jack with confidence.

In general, if you can delay tackling a troublesome suit, the clues you gather along the way may lead you to revise your plan on how to play that suit.

### Good Technique

Our classic example in the prior section illustrated proper technique with this card combination. Assuming there are no worries about adverse ruffs or lack of entries, you should leave the tenace intact while cashing one high honor. If the stiff Queen appears, you’ve solved your problem. If not, you’ve lost nothing and proceed with leading toward the tenace when you next play the suit.

We can look at this suit as a microcosm of the whole hand. We delay the critical decision as long as possible while we gather evidence and give good things a chance to happen.

### Division of Cards

Beginning bridge texts tell us an odd number of missing cards will tend to divide as evenly as possible. An even number of missing cards will usually divide slightly unevenly. This generality can be illustrated in a table.



# Missing Cards	Most Likely Distrib.
3	2-1
4	3-1
5	3-2
6	4-2
7	4-3
8	5-3

According to our generality, four cards will split 3-1 more often than 2-2. Wow! This fact, by itself, argues for taking the finesse rather than playing for the drop. But again, specific information from the bidding and play may lead to a different conclusion.

### Changing Odds

In our situation of holding 9 cards including AKJ distributed such that there's a tenace in one hand, good technique calls for cashing one high honor while keeping the tenace intact. The next play in that suit would be leading toward the tenace. Assuming both opponents followed small the 1<sup>st</sup> round of the suit and now the opponent in front of the tenace follows with a small card, have the odds changed? Much to the chagrin of the statisticians, Marilyn vos Savant, who writes for Parade Magazine, argues that they have. It's no longer possible for the 3-1 break to occur either way. Now only the opponent in front of the tenace can hold 3 cards, the one behind cannot. Two maybe, but not three! I'm going with Marilyn and playing the Jack. Take that, you statisticians.

### Final Word

In the absence of other clues, be consistent in always finessing or always playing for the drop. Pay attention to your results. If you seem to be succeeding more often than not, you've adopted the right strategy. If it's the other way around, you probably should switch—riding a dead horse seems to leave you in the dust of your companions.

Now, if you want a specific recommendation, it should be pretty clear I favor finessing even with nine cards in the suit. If you insist on keeping the old adage rather than just tossing it out, then I'd revise it to read:

8 ever, 9 ever

Of course, old adages like this one are intended as guidelines for new players. Experienced players tend to follow a path akin to another old adage: trust but verify.