



*August Boehm*

## Matchpoint/IMP Strategy — part 15

### Card play

The card combination in the spade suit may have a familiar look, but correct handling of card combinations can vary with the setting. You declare 4♠ against the lead of the ♣5 (fourth best). Plan the play at IMPs and at matchpoints.

♠ J 5 3

♥ K 9

♦ A 6 5 4

♣ J 10 3 2

♠ A K 9 4 2

♥ 8 3

♦ K Q 7 3

♣ K 7

First, a word about the bidding. With the opponents silent, you opened 1♠, partner raised to 2♠, you tried for game with 3♦, and partner accepted with 4♠. Partner's acceptance is clear if vulnerable at IMPs where the odds favor bidding

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close games. At matchpoints, where protecting the plus score is important, 4♠ is a reasonable but aggressive course. These evaluations of your pair's bidding decisions will become pertinent.

You welcome the lead, since it reduces your club losers to one. Still, you must contend with two potential heart losers and a problem in the trump suit, not to mention a possible 4-1 diamond division. East wins with the ♣A and exits with the ♣9. How do you proceed?

The trump suit offers the classic safety play of a high honor, followed by low toward the jack if no honor has appeared on the first round, guarding against ♠Q 10 x x with either opponent. The other option is to play spades from the top, hoping for Q-x and no losers. At IMPs, where safety plays are always appealing, the problem at this stage is that you can't tell whether you can afford a trump loser. It all depends on the location of the ♥A. If that ace is offside, you must hope for no trump loser. If the ♥A is onside, you can afford one spade loser but not two. Throughout, you must assume an even diamond split.

Test the hearts at trick three. If dummy's king is a winner, resort to the trump safety play at IMPs. You are happy to invest a possible overtrick as insurance against a bad trump split. If, instead, you find two heart losers, the top trumps must be cashed, hoping to get lucky. The IMP objective is to maximize the chance to make the contract — the difference between down one or two is relatively trivial unless doubled.

At matchpoints, you should still attack hearts immediately. If the heart news is good, should you then play safe for your contract, giving up

the chance to score 11 tricks? This is when an evaluation of your pair's auction becomes relevant. You have reached a tight but makeable game. Many pairs will be content with a partial. You are booked to beat them in the matchpoint column on this deal, regardless of whether you score an overtrick. The only way to lose to these pairs is to go minus. Hence, the safety play looks appropriate — you are willing to invest a possible overtrick to secure the contract, just like the IMP player.

Suppose the heart news is bad? Should you settle for a minimum of down one, using the safety play, or risk at least down two in a low-percentage attempt to make the contract? Again, awareness of what is happening at other tables is the guideline. If you estimate that most pairs will stop in a spade partial, those pairs are booked for a plus score, or, against savage distribution, a smaller minus. Since you are in game, you are destined to lose to them unless you make game — the matchpoint cost of down one is nearly the same as down two. The only way to go plus is to bang down the top spades and hope.

On the other hand, if you think that 4♠ is a normal contract, there is something to recommend using the safety play to settle for down one when the ♥A is offside. If a defender does indeed hold ♠Q 10 x x, you have saved a trick, and down one beats the pairs who are down two. However, I think the safety play here is ill-judged. If the bad trump split exists, either the opponent with the singleton spade might have entered the bidding (the opponents have 16 high-card points), or the defender with the ♠Q 10 x x might have doubled the final contract. □