

even when East is a friend, we'd play him for the ace.) Sometimes, there are also valuable inferences that can be drawn from even lower cards played (compare with the Celebratory deal in the July 2003 issue). A full catalog would strain even the generous space allocations of the Celebration, but feel free to indulge yourself.

### Solution B

NORTH  
 ♠ J 6 4 2  
 ♥ 7 3  
 ♦ 8 7 6 4  
 ♣ J 6 5

WEST  
 ♠ A 10 8  
 ♥ 8 2  
 ♦ A K J 9  
 ♣ A Q 10 7

EAST  
 ♠ Q 9 7 5  
 ♥ 9 4  
 ♦ 10 5 3  
 ♣ 9 8 3 2

SOUTH  
 ♠ K 3  
 ♥ A K Q J 10 6 5  
 ♦ Q 2  
 ♣ K 4

Two hearts by South Lead: Diamond ace

West must have a balanced hand, so he presumably has both black aces and exactly one of the queens. East's bidding tells you that the West/East shapes are 3-2-4-4/4-2-3-4; the only missing datum is who has which queen. West has very strong diamonds, so, with no agreement on the choice of minors, presumably would have opened one diamond whichever black queen he holds.

When you run hearts, reducing the North-South hands to two black honor-doubletons, both opponents must keep two-two in the blacks. (If West throws down to a singleton ace, you will throw him in with it; keeping a diamond won't help him. When West keeps

two-two, if East bears down to at most a singleton in either black suit, you exit with the king of that suit for a sure-fire endplay.)

When both opponents are wise enough to keep two-two in the blacks, you must guess who has which queen. Perhaps you will be able to deduce this or to make a high-percentage decision from the discards. If not, you will want to go with the odds of the deal. West can have been dealt Axx/AQxx in spades/clubs in 150 ways (10 spade combinations times 15 club combinations) but AQx/Axxx in spades/clubs in only 100 ways (5 spade combinations times 20 club combinations). So, playing West for the queen of clubs (by exiting in clubs rather than in spades) is a 50-percent-better chance.

If you want to get the answer to the arithmetic problem without doing all that tacky counting—even the best declarers sometimes have trouble with numbers above 13, focus on the opponents' black cards below the queen. If West has the spade queen, those x's break 1=4 and 3=3 (which you know from experience are about 14 percent [half of 28 percent] and 36 percent [half of 28 percent] and 36 percent chances when independent); if West has the club queen, those x's break 2=3 and 2=4 (when independent, about 34 percent [half of 68 percent] and 24 percent [half of 48 percent] chances). In the current context, these familiar numbers are only rough approximations—because the standard figures assume that the opponents have 26 unknown cards, and because the presumption of one suit's split affects the chance of the other's—but they should give you enough of a clue to find the correct play.



# BRIDGEWORKS



LEARNING FROM THE DEALS

## IMPROVING AT MATCHPOINTS

BY DANNY KLEINMAN

### Tighten Up the Defense!

Most matchpoint contestants think they can do better with good cards than bad. I've often heard a pair that has finished with a fair-to-middling score, say about 54 percent in a 12-table duplicate, complain, "What bad luck! We had no chance to win. The cards were running North-South; we were on defense 17 times out of 27. Our opponents got overboard only twice."

Have you ever heard that? More pointedly, have you ever said that? I haven't said it and never will. In the same session that the complaining pair had a 54-percent game, another East-West pair may have scored 65 percent. It was not necessarily a pair that skipped a different nine boards and declared five more contracts. More likely, it was a pair that tightened up the defense.

A good defensive attitude includes not getting depressed by minus scores. How would you feel after starting an event with these six minuses: 620, 630, 450, 420, 600, and 420? When it happened to me, I felt hopeful, for, significantly and unusually, on none of those routinely biddable games had partner

or I blown a trick. Although there are flat boards, on most deals, defenders at many tables throw away tricks. Perhaps it is because weak hands bore them, so they lose interest when defending. Whatever the reason, taking the normal number of tricks as declarer is not nearly as favorable an occurrence as taking the normal number of tricks as defender.

In a way, defense is more difficult than declarer play. As many writers have noted, declarer sees his side's combined assets, but the defenders do not see theirs. Though the bidding often gives the defenders clues as to declarer's distribution, it seldom tells the defenders much about the location of the unseen high cards, so defenders must figure out (or make educated guesses about) which suits to attack or whether to attack at all. Consider that the *Official Encyclopedia of Bridge* contains many pages on declarer's play of "Suit Combinations," but there is nothing comparable for defenders.

On defense, accurate carding is essential. (In contrast, declarers can often safely ignore the defenders' carding, and usually should against

less-than-expert defenders, who card inaccurately.) I mean simple things like playing the correct card when returning partner's lead, not subtle signaling and delicate inference-drawing that puts a pair in line for a brilliancy prize. *Defenders blow far more tricks from sheer inattentiveness than any other reason.*

At matchpoints, defense is at its most challenging. At rubber bridge or IMPs, the defenders know to go all out to defeat contracts. At matchpoints, the defenders don't always know whether their goal should be defeating the contract or preventing overtricks. But declarer knows. No wonder that even a great analyst like Eddie Kantar posed matchup problems in only four of his twelve Kantar for the Defense columns in 2002—and in three of those, the defender's aim was clearly to beat the contract. Typically, the defensive target is unclear, and unsophisticated players foolishly scold their wrong-guessing partners for trying to beat a contract instead of cashing out to stop overtricks . . . or vice versa.

In local clubs, where traveling score sheets accompany each board, this is a common post-mortem: Someone bids and makes a contract, looks at the "traveler," and sees most declarers in that contract made one more trick. "What did I do wrong?" declarer asks the table. At least half the time, declarer played perfectly. The defenders at the other tables blew tricks.

Adding all this up: *There are more and surer opportunities to gain matchpoints by tightening up your defense than by improving any other aspect of your game.* And it is easy to do this. You can pick up plenty of matchpoints through merely competent

defense—if you are careful, which requires attentiveness (even down to the level of checking for revokes), which in turn requires a good attitude toward being a defender. Very few of the gains, or the plays you must make to achieve them, will be spectacular. If you hold an opposing one notrump to contract when most other defenders surrender an overtrick, you won't get your name in a newspaper column. And some of the matchpoints added to your score will be "invisible." As you improve your defense, your competitive bidding will improve. A player confident of his defense will suffer fewer disastrous 200- or 300-point sets competing against opposing part scores or beatable games.

### Tighten Up the Offense!

Most players do better as declarer than as defender, but this can lead to damaging overconfidence. Here is a deal of the kind that Mr. Smug, Simon directs most of the technical advice in *Why You Lose at Bridge*, messes up by "failing to use the skill he already possesses." See if you can outperform him (and "the field") in a club game. Don't look for squeezes or coups, because there aren't any.

South dealer

East-West vulnerable

NORTH  
 ♠ 10 9 5 3  
 ♥ 7 6 3  
 ♦ A 9 4  
 ♣ J 10 3

SOUTH  
 ♠ A J 8  
 ♥ A 8 4  
 ♦ K 10 5 2  
 ♣ A 7 6

SOUTH WEST NORTH EAST  
 INT\* Pass Pass Pass  
 • 15-17

The play actually went as follows: West led the seven of diamonds; East played the three. South won with the ten and returned the suit: jack-ace-club. Declarer led a spade to the eight and king, took the diamond continuation with the king, and played the ace of spades, catching air. Eventually, declarer took only three diamonds and the aces of the other suits. We can all see that declarer's approach was ineffective as the cards lay, but *specifically, what chances did South miss?*

*Chance #1.* Consider the seven-of-diamonds opening lead. Could it be top of nothing? Hardly. Why would West make a top-of-nothing lead in a *minor suit* against a blind-auction one notrump? Much more likely, it's a good old "fourth highest from longest and strongest." If so, dummy's nine of diamonds can take the first trick and provide a precious dummy entry. As well, by preserving ace-low in dummy and king-ten-low in the closed hand, declarer can keep West from driving out the ace and king with repeated diamond leads. Winning with the nine of diamonds allows an early spade lead from dummy, which would take advantage of finding king-queen with East.

*Chance #2.* After winning trick one with the ten of diamonds and having only one dummy entry, declarer can avoid losing more than one spade trick in any of three ways: (a) by playing West for a short king or queen, (b) by playing East for a short monarch, (c) by playing East for both missing honors. Given an opening lead from diamond length, West is more likely than East to

be short in spades. So, rather than use dummy's entry to finesse through East, a better try would have been to lead the jack of spades at trick two. If West plays an honor (which would be tempting with a doubleton honor), declarer could use dummy's diamond entry to finesse against East for the other spade honor. If West plays low, declarer can choose between trying for (a) or (c).

*Chance #3.* Full-deal strategy supersedes specific-suit tactics. Who needs finessses? Just count your tricks. You can take two spades without a finesse by playing ace, jack, and later another. That should be your basic plan. However, within that general approach you should maximize your chance of making an overtrick: Win the first trick with dummy's nine of diamonds and lead a spade to the jack in the hope of finding both honors onside or East with a doubleton honor. When West wins and continues diamonds, win in hand and play spades from the top to drive out the missing honor.

The point of this deal is that you can earn tops with nothing more than tight declarer play.

### Tighten Up the Bidding!

Some estimates of the "percentage" of bridge success attributable to bidding are outrageously high. I won't try to correct them, because there is no true figure. All depends upon context. Among top players, technical skill abounds. The world's best card players will sometimes succeed as declarer where the thousandth-best will fail, or defeat a contract that the thousandth-best player lets through, but that's a rare event. Most of the swings in world championships and late rounds of

national knockouts arise from the bidding, where technique is subordinate to judgment.

Among rank beginners, the scale tips the other way, as seemingly random card play outweighs semi-rote, semi-random bidding. In the middle lie most games at local clubs and sectionals, and even at regional "Stratified Pairs" events. To get a handle on where points are lost, I studied 500 errors made in recent years by my mix of clients, who range from near-beginner to near-ex-

pert, and developed these estimates for the distribution of errors in "mid-level": opening leads, 5 percent; declarer play, 10 percent; defense, 25 percent; bidding, 60 percent. It's probably wise for players who seek to improve to apportion their efforts accordingly. Note, however, that bidding errors are the ones that most often go unpunished. Bid a 23 percent grand slam, and you'll get a top 23 percent of the time. Take a phantom save, and your opponents will sometimes "take the push" and

the South hand as 16.00; my personal approach yields a strong 16. However, you needn't be a calculating whiz to see that *in context* South's hand is worth more than that. Look at those three aces and the good spot cards (especially the ten of hearts) behind the opening bidder. South had a fine 17-point hand (indeed, every South overcalled one no trump).

The real bidding problem belonged to West, and no other West was wise enough not to bid two clubs. All the others landed in deep trouble, minus 200 or worse. "Seven points and a strong six-card suit" is the way a textbook might describe a typical new-suit response over an intervening one-no trump overcall; with a bit more, responder would double.

However, West's hand is wrong for a two-club bid, because it is not offensively-oriented. Two clubs would be ideal with,

♠ 8 7 4 3 ♥ 6 3 ♦ 5 ♣ K Q J 10 4 2,

a hand with shape, stuffing in the long suit, and no entry to run the established clubs (thus poor defense against no-trump). Although two clubs on the actual West hand might have worked out well, passing and leading a low club against one no trump figured to do better. Look at it this way: If East is short in clubs, two clubs figures to fare badly. If East has as much as a doubleton, two clubs figures to fare well . . . but West will probably do better still by defending against one no trump.

One could study bidding systems and valuation heuristics endlessly without developing the skill needed to make effective judgments in this kind of situation. Gauging the difference

go down two in a higher contract or defend atrociously to let your no-play contract make.

Most would-be improvers of bidding go wrong by placing far too much emphasis on methods. Even assuming, probably contrary to fact, that they could easily make sensible choices from the confusion of today's system marketplace and use those selections wisely, improving hand evaluation and judgment will pay far greater dividends. That is the lesson that should be derived from this deal, which arose in a club game:

West dealer  
Both sides vulnerable

NORTH  
♠ Q J 10  
♥ Q 4  
♦ 10 9 6 2  
♣ J 8 5 3

WEST  
♠ 4 3  
♥ 6 3  
♦ 5 4 3  
♣ A K 9 6 4 2

SOUTH  
♠ A 9 8 7  
♥ A J 10 2  
♦ A 8  
♣ Q 10 7

SOUTH WEST NORTH EAST  
1 NT\* Pass Pass 1 ♥  
\*strong 15 to weak 18 HCP Pass Pass

West led the ace of clubs and shifted to the six of hearts. South, my client, made ten tricks for plus 180. When the traveling score showed that we were headed for a bottom, he questioned his own performance: "Did I bid correctly? Was this a good 15 or a bad 15?"

Let's consider the valuation question. Edgar Kaplan's "Four C's" algorithm (October 1982 issue), counts

## IMPROVE YOUR PLAY

### Problem A

Rubber bridge; South dealer; none vul.

NORTH  
♠ Q 5 4  
♥ K J 8 6  
♦ 10 6 4  
♣ A K 8  
SOUTH  
♠ A 10  
♥ A Q 10 7 5  
♦ A 5  
♣ Q J 10 4

SOUTH WEST NORTH EAST  
1 ♥ Pass 2 NT Pass  
3 ♥ Pass 4 ♣ Pass  
6 ♥ Pass Pass Pass

Diamond queen, four, seven, ace.  
Heart five, deuce, king, four.  
Heart six, nine, ace, three.  
Club four, six, ace, two.  
Club king, three, ten, nine.  
Club eight, five, queen, diamond deuce  
Club jack, spade three, diamond six, club seven.  
Heart queen, spade seven, heart eight, spade deuce.  
Diamond five, jack, ten, three.  
Spade nine, ?

Plan the play.

### Problem B

Rubber bridge  
South dealer  
Neither side vulnerable

NORTH  
♠ A K  
♥ Q 8 5 4  
♦ K 9 7 4  
♣ J 10 9

SOUTH  
♠ Q 9 6 5 3  
♥ A K 2  
♦ A 3 2  
♣ 7 6

SOUTH WEST NORTH EAST  
1 ♣ 2 ♣ Double  
2 ♦ Pass 3 ♣  
3 ♥ Pass 3 ♣  
4 ♥ Pass 4 ♣  
Pass Pass

Club king, nine, three, six.  
Club ace, ten, five, seven.  
Club queen, jack, eight, spade three.  
Spade five, seven, ace, deuce.  
Spade king, four, six, club deuce.

Plan the play.

(Solutions on page 75.)

between offensively- and defensively-oriented hands is as hard as anything in bridge for most players to grasp, and most hands are not so easy to classify as the actual and hypothetical West hands discussed here. On top of that, the refined valuation of point-count misleads inexperienced users into thinking that it serves more functions than in fact it does. The less-precise honor-trick valuation method served players better, not only in placing emphasis on controls over lower honors but also in making clear that just putting a number on a hand does not reveal enough to solve all of one's bidding problems.

Much of the difference between hands that evaluate the same in point-count resides in shape. I keep this in mind by frequently reciting my mantra, *Balanced Hands Defend*, but the remaining factors, usually based on the nature and location of the high-card strength, cannot be described so simply. Thus, it is an error to believe that picking the best shortcuts is the royal road to success; there is no substitute for the experience of playing, attempting and analyzing.

It is easier to develop good judgment

in constructive bidding, where one need be concerned only with offense. Still, there are plenty of situations where even the best textbook learning won't help. This situation arose in a Unit Championship. (I am able to recall it easily, because such events supply deal records—why don't all tournaments do that?) How would you have handled it?

With North-South vulnerable, you, South, hold:

♠ K 9 4	♥ A 10 2	♦ A Q 4 3	♣ J 6 5
SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1 ♦	Pass	1 ♠	Pass
1 NT*	Pass	2 ♣†	Pass
3 ♣#	Pass	4 ♣	Pass

\*12-14

†artificial checkback

#three spades; maximum

Did you bid four diamonds? Very good.

Oops, I erred. The board was mis-duplicated and the hand record was wrong. South actually held,

♠ K 9 4 ♥ A Q 2 ♦ A 10 4 3 ♣ J 6 5

Do you still want to bid four diamonds?

The actual South did; eventually, North, who held,

## IMPROVE YOUR DEFENSE

Rubber bridge; South dealer; N-S vul.

NORTH (dummy)

♠ 7

♥ J 10 8 7 6 5 4

♦ Q 5

♣ K Q 10

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
4 ♣	Double	Pass	Pass
Pass			

Heart ace, four, nine, three.

Plan your defense.

(Solution on page 74.)

♠ A J 8 6 2 ♥ J 9 8 ♦ K ♣ A Q 10 9,

drove to six spades, reaching a slam one would rather not bid. This is not a contract that makes one shriek in horror, but what can we learn from the deal?

Was there anything wrong with the bidding? Well, North was a bit aggressive in trying for slam, but six spades would have been fine facing the South hand that I showed in error, with the ace-queen in diamonds. When controlling towards slam, most authorities suggest showing the most-economical control. Here's what Hugh Kelsey wrote in his book *Slam Bidding*: "In the standard style, a player starts a control-bidding sequence by bidding the cheapest of his first-round controls." To his credit, Kelsey also cited Jeremy Flint's method: "the higher-ranking of touching aces, and the lower-ranking of non-touching aces, should be control-bid first."

Flint's approach is a big improvement in two ways. It states an order that is usually more efficient for subsequent control-bidding, and it refers to aces instead of first-round controls (i.e., aces or voids). Though voids are wonderful, and I love to be able to show them, control-bidding is not the way. If you control-bid a void, partner will love his king opposite, for he'll place you with the ace (which is much more common than a void) and think the hands mesh well, when actually his king-value may

be entirely wasted.

Still, Flint did not have control-bidding quite right, for he formulated a "rule" that excludes judgment. A better rule: Make the control-bid that will help the partnership most. In those cases where you are trying to help partner decide whether or not there is slam potential, control-bidding an ace-king-queen suit won't help, control-bidding an ace-empty suit will help substantially, control-bidding an ace-queen suit will help most of all.

Holding the hand with ace-queen of diamonds, South would be right to bid four diamonds, because that helps North to evaluate the king of diamonds correctly. With his actual hand, with the ace-queen of hearts, South would do better to bid four hearts, in order to help North evaluate the productive king of hearts positively. Had North held the king of hearts instead of the king of diamonds, six spades would have been excellent, requiring luck in only one of two suits, spades or clubs.

### Summing Up

Increasing your matchpoint scores requires effort, and you want that effort to be applied efficiently. Consider both where the points are available and the type of improvement that will pay off the most. Don't be distracted by occasional spectacular gains or coups, nor by shortcuts to skills that develop only with experience and learning from the deals.

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