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"Play this hand with me"; teaching points for the newer player

by Stan Dub

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Newer players tend to get hung up on bidding gadgets, because most Flight A players use a lot of them. I think that's putting the cart before the horse, and it tends to hinder their development. Sure, modern conventions have improved the bidding accuracy of today's experts over the experts of yesteryear. But those oldtimers would still score well in today's competitions, despite bidding systems that used little more than stayman and blackwood.

Those of us who learned to play in the heyday of rubber bridge were forced to get better quickly or risk losing our limited supply of "green points". For the uninitiated, those are the kind that can be taken away as well as given, and which have pictures of Presidents on them. In that environment, players came to appreciate the need to conceal their holdings from their opponents, and likewise to search for clues that their opponents let slip.

A hand I played online recently illustrates some concepts that newer players would do well to study.

In third chair you hold (in s,h,d,c order): 98, AK4, AQ863, J63.

Partner opens 1c, you bid 1d, partner bids 1s, and you jump to 3NT, which ends the auction. LHO leads the 9 of hearts. Here's what you see when dummy comes down:

Dummy: Q543, QT2, KJ9, AT9

You: 98, AK4, AQ863, J63

Before playing at trick 1, what is your plan? Does it matter if you're playing IMPs or matchpoints? If you're playing IMPs, does it matter if you're playing a knockout match or a swiss match?

You have 9 top tricks and there is some risk that you might go down if you try for an overtrick. RHO might hold something like KT76 of spades, and a quick spade shift could sink the contract (LHO could win the Ace and lead the J next).

Playing IMPs it would not be unreasonable to take your 9 tricks and go home. This would make even more sense if you were playing a long match, where winning 1 IMP would be less important than protecting your game. In a 6 or 7 board swiss team match the possible gain of 1 IMP might decide the match, and this could tempt declarer into trying for the overtrick. Playing matchpoints, every good declarer would go after the overtrick, even though he was putting his contract at risk. If you're reading this and you don't agree, I'd suggest that kind of thinking may be one of the things keeping you from getting better results in your matchpoint games.

So, assume you're playing matchpoints. How do you play to maximize your chance of securing that crucial overtrick? Before you play from dummy, decide on your plan.

The obvious place to look for a 10th trick is in clubs. Unless RHO has both club

honors (only a 25% possibility), you can finesse clubs twice and win a second club trick. So when should you lead clubs? You should win the first heart in your hand and lead a club to the Ten at trick 2. When RHO wins, he will have very little information about your hand, and will not know you have 9 or 10 tricks, and that you are vulnerable in spades. Ironically if his spades are too good (say AKJT) he will know your contract is shaky, but will not be able to put his partner on lead to lead through the Q, and if his spades are just good enough to defeat the contract (say AJ76), he will not know to try to find his partner with the magic spade holding he has (KT2).

You can help RHO go wrong at trick two, by your choice of cards to win the opening heart lead at trick one.

As a general rule, declarers should win tricks with the highest of 2 or 3 sequential cards (for example, Ace from AKQ, not the King or Queen) to conceal possession of the lower cards. (fn. 1, below) HOWEVER, there is an exception to this rule when declarer in a no-trump contract holds AK of a suit that is led at trick one. When declarer wins the Ace, it tells everyone declarer almost certainly also has the King, because otherwise he probably would have held up. On the other hand, when declarer wins the King, LHO may suspect declarer holds the Ace, because otherwise partner probably would have won the Ace at trick one. But RHO does not know whether declarer or partner has the Ace, and often he will place this card with his partner.

In practice, I won the King of hearts at trick 1 and played a club to the T, losing to the King. RHO continued hearts and I won in hand with the Ace. Now I carefully repeated the club finesse immediately. Note what happens if I run the diamonds first. I'd have to pitch 2 spades from dummy and now it would be obvious to shift to spades if the second club hook lost. If instead RHO won a second club trick at trick 4, he still wouldn't know about my diamond suit, and would still be reluctant to shift to spades. In fact, the 9 of clubs won. That gave me my 10th trick (3 hearts, 5 diamonds and 2 clubs) and I quickly cashed my winners and conceded the last two tricks. +430 was 80% of the matchpoints. +400 would have been 42%.

Think about tricks one and two again. If declarer won the first trick with the Ace, instead of the King, maybe RHO would place him with both cards and be more likely to find a spade switch when he won the club trick at trick 2. I'm not saying he would, and the presence of the QT in the dummy makes the inference less clear in this case, but its possible. Certainly the play of the King gave RHO the hope that his partner had the Ace, and that the heart continuation would let partner clear the suit. Even more important was the immediate play of a club at trick 2. A newer player as declarer might recognize the desirability of taking two club finesses to try to win a 10th trick, but might still decide to postpone this until after running the diamonds. But if you win the first heart and cash 5 diamonds, what will you discard from dummy? The likely discards are 2 small spades. Now RHO will win if you finesse a club, and he will count you for about 13-15 points, and note that you've already shown AK of hearts and AQ of diamonds. Looking at his actual KJ76 of spades, he will KNOW that his partner has Ace of spades. So if you're ever going to be taking a club hook, you need to play clubs at trick 2.

The full hand:

(please reconstruct)

LHO had:

AT2, 9876, T52, Q74

RHO had:

KJ76, J53, 74, K852

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footnote 1: Similar practices are employed by the defenders, but in this case they are generally trying to TELL their partner what they have, not disguise it from declarer. So when the defender plays a card from a sequence in the middle of a trick (not as leader), he plays the LOWEST card of his sequence. For example, if one partner leads a J to a trick and his partner has the AK, he plays the King (to say he might have the ace) instead of the Ace (which would say he does not have the king).

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