

HAND OF THE WEEK

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Here are a couple of hands from a recent team match that I played in on BBO. The first deal was played by my partner. I'll start from the beginning. With everyone vulnerable, you pick up this hand in 2nd seat. ♠AK6 ♥AJ2 ♦J2 ♣J9742. RHO passes, and you elect to open 1♣. LHO preempts with 2♥ and that is followed by two passes. What's going on here?

With a passed hand on your right and a preempt on your left, your side probably has the balance of power. That means that partner probably has at least 7-8 HCP. Why didn't he bid? He must have fewer than 4♠, and is probably relatively balanced. What's your best action now?

I think your best action is inaction. You probably can beat 2♥ if you are careful. But that's not certain, and you have a fair chance to catch enough of a club fit to push them up. So you decide to reopen with a double. In reply to this double, partner bids 3♥ asking for a heart stopper, and of course you have one so you rebid 3NT.

LHO leads the ♥K and partner tables ♠972 ♥1093 ♦KQ98 ♣AK3. Wow. What a mountain! But there's no sensible bid with that hand. Bidding 3♦ over the 2♥ preempt is asking for trouble, as is making a negative double with 3 spades to the 9. In any case, it's time for you to plan the play.

Dummy: ♠972 ♥1093 ♦KQ98 ♣AK3

Your hand: ♠AK6 ♥AJ2 ♦J2 ♣J9742

What do you know about the hand? LHO probably has at least 6 hearts. And you have 2 sure tricks in each suit. Where can you look for the 9th?

Let's not get the cart before the horse. In order to get your two diamond tricks, you need to drive out the Ace. You might as well do that now, just to do a little reconnaissance. So you win the lead in hand (RHO follows with the 4) and lead the ♦J. Reconnaissance you get. LHO discards the ♠4. Whoa! Time for another think.

LHO must have exactly 6 hearts, and thus 7 black cards. LHO would be unlikely to discard from a 4-card spade holding because of your reopening double, and if she had 5 spades she would likely have made a Michaels cue-bid. So LHO is either 2=6=0=5 or 3=6=0=4. It's clear to play a low diamond from dummy. RHO has been thinking on your time, and he allows the ♦J to hold. He is likely to be playing you for 4-4 in the black suits for the double, so he can see that you don't have a lot of tricks.

You play off the ♣AK and RHO follows once, then discards a diamond. So you know that RHO started with 4=1=7=1 and LHO 3=6=0=4. Since LHO has discarded a spade, you can now cash the ♠AK as well. This will leave LHO with nothing but hearts and clubs and RHO will have nothing but diamonds and spades. Since you have a complete count on the hand, I might as well show you the 7-card ending. You have taken 6 tricks, and need 3 more.

Dummy: ♠9 ♥109 ♦KQ9 ♣3

LHO: ♥Q8765 ♣Q10 RHO: ♠J8 ♦A10765

Your hand: ♠6 ♥J2 ♦2 ♣J97

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Take a minute and try to see how you can come to 9 tricks before the defense gets 5. The lead, in case you have forgotten, is in your hand. If you have done any work at all, you can see that leading a diamond or a spade allows RHO to cash 3 tricks and throw the lead into dummy with a diamond. You will be able to cash another diamond, but whether you have saved two hearts or a heart and a club, you will have to allow LHO to take the last two tricks with a pair of queens. And if you got that far, the next step would have been to consider what happens if you lead a club. What will happen then? LHO will cash two clubs and the ♥Q, and exit with a heart. You will be able to win this in hand and cash a club, but then you will have a spade loser and a diamond loser, and East will have the master card in both suits. Down one again.

What about leading a heart? Say you lead the ♥J. LHO wins, cashes the ♣Q, and plays back a heart. You must win this in dummy. And whatever you lead, East will now take the ♦A and his two spade tricks. So your last hope is to lead the ♥2. What happens now? If LHO wins this, cashing the ♣Q is taboo, since you will now be able to take a heart and two clubs. And if LHO ducks the heart, you can endplay RHO with a spade and he will have to give you two more diamond tricks no matter what he does. Finally, if LHO wins the heart and plays a heart back, you again endplay RHO with a spade to collect your two diamond tricks in dummy. So the ♥2 it is. Nicely played, Phil!

And for the 2nd hand, I will have to pull back the curtain a bit on the system that Phil and I play. With only the opponents vulnerable, you deal and see: ♠A1063 ♥Q953 ♦A ♣Q1098. You have more than enough to open 1♣, which is not forcing and promises 2+ clubs. LHO passes, and Phil bids 1♠, which shows a hand with no 4-card major and, if balanced, is usually <8 HCP. It also usually denies the values to force to game.

With a minimum hand, you have two choices for your rebid after RHO's pass; 1NT and 2♣. (You could also bid 2♦ here if you had a balanced hand with 5 diamonds.) 1NT seems the smaller lie, so that's what you bid. LHO and partner pass, but RHO doubles. You pass, and so does everyone else. LHO leads the ♠5 and you see:

Dummy: ♠J42 ♥872 ♦Q854 ♣754

Your Hand: ♠A1063 ♥Q953 ♦A ♣Q1098

Well! Partner decided that a bit of larceny was in order. Systemically, we allow light responses when holding fewer than 4 clubs. At this vulnerability, I would not have been too concerned about the possibility of landing in a 3-2 club fit, but on the other hand larceny at the bridge table is great fun. What's going on?

Presumably, RHO's double of 1♠ would have shown spades. And on the lead, you know that's not the case, LHO must have at least 3, and likely 4 spades, to lead the lowest outstanding spot. So RHO's double was, presumably, takeout of clubs. That aligns with LHO's pass of the double, which would be extremely weird without club length and strength. (I alerted my 1NT rebid as, "minimum, usually balanced). If that's the case, they likely can make 3NT with 3 clubs, 3 hearts, and 1 or two tricks in each pointed suit.

So my goal here is to take 4 tricks, for -500 against a vulnerable game. I play small from dummy and E's K falls to my ace. I have nothing better to do than to lead a spade, and LHO goes into a long huddle

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before playing small. The ♠J holds the trick, West playing the 9 and East the 8. What's going on in the spade suit? Nobody would play the ♠7 from Q97 when either will force dummy's Jack, and playing the ♠K from KQ on partner's spade lead is fooling only partner. Not to mention that if East has the ♠Q he would surely have taken the spade. So spades are 3-3, and I can attack them just as well by leading low from my hand later. And I am in dummy, likely for the last time. It's a forlorn hope, but I play a club here as nothing else looks more attractive. RHO plays the ♣J to my Q and LHO's Ace. That was friendly! On the other hand, it now looks like they might not be making 3NT.

LHO now plays the ♦J, to the 4, 6, and my Ace. Now I could set up my 3rd spade trick. But I will have no fast entry to it. Instead, I can play a club, threatening to set up two club winners if they win this trick. And if they duck, NOW I can play a spade. I lead the ♣9 (either opponent could have the 10, so I want to sow confusion), LHO follows small, and I play the 5 from dummy, RHO surprises me by winning the King.

RHO is feeling the pinch of an endplay, and decides to exit with a spade, although she should also know that I have 4 of them from the play of the spade spots on the 2nd round. I led the 3 to the 9, J, and her 8. LHO would not have wasted the 9 from a 4-card holding, since he would have had a lower available spot (the 6) to force dummy's Jack. But RHO is just trying to put LHO in for another diamond play. And that succeeds; LHO wins the ♠Q and plays the ♦10. I am aware of the value of the ♦8, so I cover with the Q and RHO wins the K as I discard the ♣8 (still concealing the 10). RHO now must break hearts rather than immediately giving value to the ♦8, and she shifts to the ♥J.

I am watching the intermediates in that suit, too. I cover with the Q and LHO wins the Ace. LHO plays a heart back, since he knows that partner has the ♥K10 left, since she would not lead the J at that point without the 10, and I have already shown up with the ♠A ♥Q ♦A ♣Q; if I had the ♥K as well there is nothing he could do to beat me at this point and I would have opened 1NT. RHO cashes her two heart tricks, as everyone follows. Now she's down to all diamonds, and leads one; LHO wins the 9 as I finally discard the ♣10. The 4-card ending is:

Dummy: ♦8 ♣7

LHO: ♣63 RHO: ♦72

Declarer: ♠6 ♥9

Since I have been watching the spots carefully, I claim the last 2 tricks. That makes 5 tricks for our side. At the other table, my hand was on lead against 3NT and chose to lead the ♠3. Declarer won the J with the K and led a low diamond, smiling as the Ace popped on his left. With the 1♣ opening on his left, and RHO's pass, this play revealed the location of most of the rest of the cards. So declarer was cold for his game, and made 10 tricks when the defender chose to exit with the ♠A and another by the simple expedient of setting up his long diamond to take 3 in each red suit and two in each black suit.

Keeping track of the intermediates and spots is important. But if you are watching each suit, you know which spots to look for. Going back to the original deal:

Dummy: ♠J42 ♥872 ♦Q854 ♣754

Your Hand: ♠A1063 ♥Q953 ♦A ♣Q1098

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I can see that the ♠987 ♥J10 ♦J109 and ♣J are the important cards. Yes, I want to remember who had the ♠KQ ♥AK ♦K and ♣AK, but that's usually easier, since most of those cards are going to win tricks or force out an Ace. As you can see from my thought process, I was able to place many of the intermediate cards and high spots before they were played.

The lower spots are also important, but only for watching the defenders signal; they aren't going to be a factor in the play unless someone has 5 or 6 cards in a suit. And I played a hand recently where I set up a 5 by force to win the 4th round of a suit when one opponent had started with 5 cards there.