

HAND OF THE WEEK

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This is a deal from an old book that is a great example of what we call a discovery play. One of the things you learn to do as you gain experience is to piece together the unseen hands from the auction. Last week's deal was a good example of how much information you can derive at trick 1, using the bidding and your desired result to discover hand types where you can achieve your goal.

This is an example of arranging the early play to help you to figure out where non-critical cards are so you can find a critical card. We call these discovery plays.

Your RHO deals and opens 1♠ with nobody vulnerable. You see ♠K32 ♥Q108542 ♦7 ♣K64. That's not quite enough to bid 2♥, so you pass. LHO does also, and partner reopens with a double. RHO passes, and you have to decide what to bid. You'd have to bid 2♥ with nothing, so that's obviously out. If partner had doubled directly over a 1♠ opening on your left, you might consider bidding 4♥, but here partner's shape requirements are less stringent, so it's probably right to bid only 3♥ in case partner has an unsuitable shape. Note that all jump responses to takeout doubles should show 5-card suits; with no 5-card suit you should cue-bid with at least 9 or 10 points to make sure you don't play in a silly fit. Over your 3♥ bid, partner carries on to game and LHO leads the ♠9. You see:

Dummy: ♠A7 ♥AJ76 ♦KJ842 ♣72

Your hand: ♠K32 ♥Q108542 ♦7 ♣K64

What 10 tricks do you want to take? You have two spades and a spade ruff, and on top of that you can get a club ruff and at least 5 hearts. That's 9 tricks. But you need 10. You have lots of possibilities. Either minor suit ace could be in front of the King. And the ♥K could be on side, or it could be singleton behind and you could drop it.

How are the defensive high cards split? LHO couldn't respond to a 1-bid, so he has less than 6 points. They have a total of 19, so you know RHO has at least 14 points. More than that, of the major cards you are missing (♥K ♦A ♣A), you know that LHO cannot have more than one of them. And if LHO has either the ♠Q or the ♦Q, he can't have an ace. It doesn't appear from the lead, though, that he has the ♠Q, J, or 10.

Where do you want to win the first trick? That depends on which suit you want to attack first. Let's consider the options.

We could take the heart finesse first. That's a big temptation for inexperienced players. But consider what happens if LHO has the ♣A and East the ♥K and ♦A. East will win the ♥K and shift to dummy's weakest suit, clubs. The king will lose to the ace and you will be down by trick 5. Let's think about our other options.

How about if we win in dummy and lead a club. Against the killer layout for the immediate heart finesse, you will know where the ♥K and ♦A are. Are you down here, too? Well, not always, since you will play a heart to the ace and (hopefully) find a singleton ♥K to make your game. This is the line recommended by the book, and it's clearly an improvement over the immediate heart finesse.

What about winning in hand and playing a diamond? And if we do this, do we want to play the ♦K or the ♦J from dummy? Phil and I discussed this hand for about 20 minutes on Saturday morning, and we both think that playing diamonds is best. But Phil wants to play the ♦K, while I want to play the ♦J.

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Playing the ♦K is best when West has the Ace, because he won't know you have a singleton diamond and will often duck. And if he does have the ace, you will know where the ♥K and ♣A are. Note that when he ducks and the ♦K wins, you might make six by dropping the singleton ♥K. This is clearly the best matchpoint play, and it's far from clear that it's not best at IMPs, too.

Playing the ♦J is never best, but it's usually equivalent to the other options. Consider:

- If the ♦J forces the ace, you have simultaneously located the ♣A since LHO would have bid with an ace and a queen.
- If the ♦J loses to the Q, you are no worse off than just winning in dummy and playing a club to the King. The same is true, of course, if the ♦K loses to the ace.

The difference between attacking clubs right away and going for diamonds first are small. If you thought to attack either minor first, consider that you did well. RHO's hand in the book was ♠QJ10xx ♥K ♦Qxxx ♣AQx.

Moral to the story: Even bridge writers can have blind spots caused by looking at how the cards actually were. Almost every player of my generation learned card play from *Watson's Play of the Hand*. But over time, the number of improvements over the plays recommended in that book have become large. His analysis is fine as far as it goes, but on many deals he overlooked lines of play that would succeed against bad splits or unlikely lies of the honors. I still recommend the book, but on your 3rd or 4th reading, you should be looking to do better. And this deal is from another classic by a highly respected and prolific author.