

## HAND OF THE WEEK

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Here's another idea everyone should know. It's called the Vondracek phenomenon. Sounds like a suspense move, right? Declarer, your hero, must fight incredible odds to find and disarm a nuclear weapon, right? Hardly.

It's actually named after Felix Vondracek, who noticed a deal something like this.

Dummy: ♠876 ♥642 ♦8732 ♣AK5

West: ♠KQ10 ♥873 ♦AKJ104 ♣73

East: ♠J9 ♥95 ♦965 ♣QJ9862

Declarer: ♠A5432 ♥AKQJ10 ♦Q ♣104

What game do you want to be in? 4♥, right? Well, let's look at the play. West leads the ♦A, and continues the suit when the Q falls. Declarer ruffs and draws trumps in 3 rounds. Now he starts on spades, playing ace and another. West wins and plays another high diamond. Declarer ruffs with his last trump, and gives up another spade. But West now cashes two diamonds. Down 1.

Wait a minute, you say. What if declarer only draws two rounds of trumps? OK, let's try that. Two rounds of diamonds, declarer ruffing. Two rounds of trumps, then Ace and a spade. West plays a diamond, ruffed. Declarer plays another spade. Aha!, you say. Declarer can ruff the 4<sup>th</sup> diamond. True, but now West has the ♥8 and dummy the ♥6. Down 1 again.

And the same thing happens if declarer draws only one trump, or even none, before attacking spades. So 4♥ can't be made.

"So what?", you say. "Look at those lousy spades. 4♠ can't possibly make, can it?"

Let's follow the play. Two high diamonds, ruffed by declarer. Now declarer just leads a low spade from hand, in case one opponent has ♠KQJ10. In that case if you played ace and a spade he could draw all your trumps and the defense would take 3♠ and 4♦, for down 4.

So West wins the first spade and leads another diamond. Declarer ruffs and lays down the ♠A. Everyone follows. Phew! Now what? No, DON'T LEAD THAT OTHER SPADE!!! If you do, you will be out of trumps, and West will have two more diamond winners, for a total of 3 spades and 2 diamonds. Down 2.

Instead, just leave that high trump outstanding, and take all your heart and club winners. West will win his high spade whenever he feels like taking it, but then you will have a trump in each hand and nothing can hurt you. Having the high trump in enemy hands can be nerve-wracking, but as long as you have no side losers you can be comfortable in just letting it be.

Amazing. 4♠ is cold with two trump losers and 4♥ is down one despite declarer having AKQJ10 of trumps. This is horribly counterintuitive, but the number of times it comes up is not small, probably once in every couple of thousand deals.

It can be very difficult to diagnose, though. But it's a big reason why we still open 1♠ with 5 terrible spades and 5 good hearts (or 5 good cards in any suit). This was one of many flaws with how bridge was taught in the 1950's, where suit quality was thought to be very important. It took a long time for some of the old-timers to be comfortable bidding 1♠ on the ♠5432 after partner opened one of a minor when

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I was young. But eventually they all caved in, because the people who bid their shape did better than the people who bid where their high cards were.

And there's another archetype of hands where the weaker suit makes the better trump suit.

Dummy: ♠QJ10 ♥J106 ♦8732 ♣AK5

West: ♠AK2 ♥87 ♦AKJ104 ♣763

East: ♠43 ♥953 ♦965 ♣QJ982

Declarer: ♠98765 ♥AKQ42 ♦Q ♣104

Here, 4♥ is down after the ♦A lead and a shift to ace, king and a spade for East to ruff. And really, what choice does West have? On any sensible auction for N-S, he knows that East is pretty broke. But 4♠ can't be beaten, since West has no way to put East in to give him a heart ruff. This idea also comes up in Stayman auctions after a 1NT opening. So if someone tells you that with 4-4 in the majors, Opener should bid the stronger major when holding 4-4 in the majors, they're wrong. If they don't believe you, send them to me. If you just bid your 4-card major suits up the line, you will pick the right suit half the time when this phenomenon comes up. If you bid your stronger major, you might never be right.

Don't get me wrong, there are times when playing in the stronger suit is better. Typical hand types are where you want to crossruff, or when you have a strong side suit in one hand and can pitch losers from your weak major. A couple of examples.

Dummy: ♠5432 ♥J1098 ♦Axxx ♣x

Declarer: ♠A876 ♥AKQ2 ♦x ♣AK104

Here, 4♠ will never make more than 11 tricks, and may make only 10. But 4♥ will always make 11 tricks unless one of your side winners gets ruffed. You just cash the side aces and kings, ending with the ♦A, and then ruff 3 diamonds in hand high and two clubs in dummy high. You get 11 tricks regardless of how hearts or spades break, as long as nobody is void of spades.

Dummy: ♠5432 ♥J1098 ♦Axxx ♣x

Declarer: ♠A876 ♥AKQ2 ♦x ♣AKQJ

Here, you might make 13 tricks in hearts, but you can't make more than 11 tricks in spades.

What can you learn from this? Bridge is really an amazing game. There's always something new to see.