

HAND OF THE WEEK

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Vol. 1 No. 22 Page 1

Here are a few hands where declarer has to cope with a really terrible 4-4 fit.

Dummy ♠J7 ♥7542 ♦AKQ4 ♣A73

Declarer ♠K43 ♥K863 ♦108 ♣Q842

LHO led the ♣10 (a Rusinow lead, showing either the Jack or shortness) and declarer properly ducked to give value to his Queen. RHO won the King and shifted to a low spade. How you guess this suit combination depends on the opponents to some extent, and also depends on their estimation of you as a player.

Good players are less likely than normal to lead from the Queen with the Jack showing in dummy on their right. From a good player's perspective, if the unseen hand has A10x, leading from the Queen could allow the declarer to make two tricks by force simply by playing low from hand. And declarer has a good clue that spades are 4-4; The defense has 18 HCP, so unless one of them has most of the points and the other has five of the spades, there would have been an overcall.

So declarer could have gone up with the King, which would have been the winning play on this layout. But playing low from hand here and letting the ♠Q win on your left is not the worst play any of us will ever make. And after winning the 2nd trick, LHO played a spade to partner's ace and RHO exited with a diamond. Declarer played a heart from dummy and the Q appeared on his right.

So the question is, is this situation the same as the spade guess? Of course, the answer is no, otherwise I wouldn't be asking the question. Why, then, is it wrong to play the ♥K here, when it was right to play the ♠K at trick 2? The answer is that in spades, dummy could ruff the third round of spades if the ♠K lost. Here, if the ♥A is behind the King, you give the defense a choice of how many of your trumps to draw. And good defenders will draw trumps here if it's to their advantage.

The ♥K did lose to the ace, and LHO played a spade. Now declarer has lost 4 tricks and, hoping to hold the result to down 1, he led another heart. But the ♥Q had been a singleton, and the defense proceeded to take three trump tricks and a spade for down 3. Now let's go back and see how the hand would play out if declarer had ducked the first heart. RHO would play a spade. Now declarer could go to dummy and lead another heart. If the ♥A was on side earlier, it will still be there. But RHO will show out. RHO will then duck again, and LHO will not be able to draw trumps. He'll go down 2, not 3, simply by running side suit winners. LHO will make two more heart tricks, but no more.

So if declarer had done the right thing with both kings, he would have lost 1 spade, 1 club, and 4 hearts for down 1. He would have scored 68% on the board instead of 6%.

And for luck, here are two more hands showing how to play with very weak trump suits. Both of these hands were from an IMP match played the evening after I wrote up the above deal.

Everyone vul, IMPs. You open 1♦, partner responds 1NT, you rebid 2♣, and partner prefers back to 2♦. Since partner has shown about 6-10 points and could have raised to 3♦ directly over 1♦ with 5 or more diamonds (this is called inverted minors, where the jump raise is weak and the single raise is stronger), you decide to pass.

The opening lead is a 4th best ♥3, and you see this.

HAND OF THE WEEK

© 2021 Craig Biddle

Vol. 1 No. 22 Page 2

Dummy ♠A5 ♥K94 ♦9854 ♣9742

Declarer ♠J764 ♥A ♦Q763 ♣AQ108

You win in hand and decide to just duck a spade to see what the defense wants to do. LHO wins this with the ♠8 and RHO contributes the 3. LHO plays another heart (the 6) and you pitch a club on dummy's King. Now you play a club to the 3, Q, and 6. A spade to dummy, LHO plays the 10 and RHO the 2. You play another club to the K, Ace, and 5. You ruff a spade as LHO plays the K and RHO the 9. Now a heart ruff, LHO following with the Q. You have reached the following position, and have taken 7 of the 8 tricks so far.

Dummy ♠-- ♥-- ♦985 ♣97

Declarer ♠J ♥-- ♦Q76 ♣10

RHO's play of his spade spots (3,2,9) and LHO's play of his club spots (6,5) and hearts (3,6,Q) suggest that RHO has the ♠Q, ♣J, and probably ♥Jx. If that's the case, diamonds are 4-1. So what do you do here?

Diamonds aren't certain to be 4-1, but if they're 3-2 it's surely LHO who has the longer diamond holding. If hearts are 3-2, it's likely that eventually one defender or the other will have to lead a heart, and the other will be following to it. And you will ruff it for your 8th trick. So our goal here is to succeed against 4-1 diamonds. If RHO has the singleton ♦A or K, you are just down. The defenders will both know that their only chance to beat you is if you started with ♦Qxxx, and they will play for it. But if RHO's diamond is a lower one, you can make the hand by leading your spade. LHO will have to ruff with the J or 10, but will then have to either lead a heart to let you ruff, or break diamonds from his remaining AKx and your ♦Q will eventually take a trick.

That's what happened, and we won 7 IMPs for +90 since at the other table our teammates pushed the opponents to the 3-level and doubled them with the ♦AKJ10 behind opener, collecting +200.

A few boards later, this deal came up. In 2nd seat, vul vs. not, you pick up ♠J10432 ♥J765 ♦A ♣AK5. RHO passes, and you open 1♠. LHO passes and partner raises to 2♠. You have nothing to say, and now LHO balanced with 3♦. It's usually right to try to push the opponents to the 3-level and LHO is a world champion. This gets passed around to you, and you decide to bid 3♥. Nobody has anything to say, and LHO leads the ♦4. You see this.

Dummy ♠KQ6 ♥9842 ♦QJ76 ♣72

Declarer ♠J10432 ♥J765 ♦A ♣AK5

Hmm, reopening with a double would have been better. Partner might also have doubled directly. But none of that is relevant. You need to take 9 tricks with hearts trumps. Since it seems likely that you are going to lose tricks to the ♠A and ♥AKQ, you need to make sure that the defense's low trumps don't take tricks. The best way for you to do this is to win the opening lead and just lead a low heart. Leading the ♥J could be right if someone has the singleton ♥10, but that's only one of 5 possible singletons. As it happens, LHO plays the 3 and RHO wins the trick with the 10. RHO now shifts to the ♣Q. He is hoping that I am missing the ♣A or K, and that he will be able to build a club trick for the defense.

HAND OF THE WEEK

© 2021 Craig Biddle

Vol. 1 No. 22 Page 3

You win this with the ace (let him continue to dream) and play another trump. This time LHO plays the ♥A and RHO follows with the ♥Q. LHO exits with a club and you win the King. Should you draw the last trump? There's no need to – they can only take one trick with it. And you would be left with a club loser. A far better idea is to ruff that club with dummy's last trump and knock out the ♠A. You do that, and are able to claim all but one of remaining tricks after they win their spade. So you make 9 tricks. At the other table, my teammate also made the risky balance, and was left to play there undoubled. He went down 2, for -100, and we won an IMP.