

## HAND OF THE WEEK

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Here's an instructive declarer play problem.

Your hand is ♠AK986 ♥K6 ♦103 ♣J1083. Everyone's vulnerable, and you are in 4<sup>th</sup> seat at IMPs. LHO passes, partner opens 1♥, and RHO overcalls 2♦. You have two choices here, you can bid 2♠ to show your good 5-card suit and values. Or you can make a negative double, planning to invite game in hearts if partner simply bids 2♥ to deny 4 cards in a black suit. The 2♠ call seems best, since if partner now bids 3♥ you will know that raising to 4♥ is best (at least vulnerable at IMPs; at matchpoints there would be a good case for passing).

Partner raises you to game, and LHO leads the ♦5. You see:

Dummy: ♠J107 ♥AQ987 ♦A972 ♣K

You: ♠AK986 ♥K6 ♦103 ♣J1083

What do you think about the lead? Unless RHO made a vulnerable 3-level overcall on a 4-card suit lacking an honor, this lead can only be from the ♦54 doubleton or the singleton ♦5. So ducking this trick is likely suicidal. You are going to win the ♦A. But it's a good habit, even with such an obvious play from dummy at trick 1, to think about tricks 2-13 before you play from dummy at trick 1.

There are several possible plans. Let me list a few.

- A. You could play three rounds of hearts, planning to discard your losing diamond on the third winner. This will make an extra trick if hearts are 3-3. And if hearts are 4-2 and it's RHO who has the doubleton heart, you will just overruff and move on to plan C.
- B. Before playing for your diamond discard, you can draw either 1 or 2 rounds of trumps. Drawing 1 round will gain compared to line A when someone (likely RHO) has one spade and two hearts or when the ♠Q is singleton, and will break even when RHO has two hearts and more than 1 spade. Drawing two rounds seems better, it will gain whenever trumps are 3-2 with the Queen falling or hearts are 3-3.
- C. Establish a club ruff in dummy by simply leading the ♣K at trick 2.

Let's count winners for the three lines.

Line A, when hearts are 3-3, will make the first 4 tricks. And after you lead the ♣K at trick 5, presumably RHO will win and play a high diamond. You will ruff small; if LHO overruffs and plays a trump you will win this in hand, ruff a club, ruff a red card, and ruff a club. That will get you to 8 tricks and you will still have two winning trumps in hand. On a great day, the ♣Q will be tripleton, and you will be able to ruff another red card in hand, draw the last two trumps with your last trump, and make 11 tricks. Otherwise you will make 10 when LHO has the ♠Q. Now suppose that LHO can't overruff your spade spot. You will ruff clubs in dummy, and eventually RHO will overruff one of your ruffs and play another trump. But no matter how many clubs RHO has, you will always get one club ruff in dummy and all 5 of your trumps in hand. So you will always make 10 tricks. You will make 11 when RHO started with the singleton ♠Q.

Line B has the flaw that, if hearts are not 3-3, the defense may be able to draw a second (or third) round of trumps after winning the ♣A, and since you will not then have enough entries to establish and cash the 5<sup>th</sup> heart. So you might go down by taking the early "safety" round or rounds of trumps. In fact, if

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hearts are 4-2 and spades are 3-2, you will never be able to use the 5<sup>th</sup> heart. This line is inferior to just starting hearts immediately.

Line C will likely see the defense win trick 2 with the ♣A and trick 3 with a diamond honor. Then RHO will play a third round of diamonds. You will ruff this low – if LHO overruffs and returns a trump, you will win in hand, ruff a club, play a heart to the King, ruff another club with dummy's last trump, ruff a diamond to hand, draw all the trumps, and take the last two tricks with the ♥AQ. And if LHO can't overruff the 3<sup>rd</sup> round of diamonds, you will ruff a club high in dummy, play the ♠7 to the 8, ruff another club in dummy, cross to the ♥K, and play spades from the top. If all goes well, you will make 11 tricks.

So Line C is clearly best – it will make 11 tricks more often than either of the other two lines, and will only go down when the breaks are very foul. In real life, both declarers adopted line A, and went down with hearts 5-1 and the ♠Qxx behind the AK. And line C would have made 11 tricks, since the vulnerable 2-level overcall (made at both tables) didn't have the ♣A or Q – both players had overcalled on ♠54 ♥5 ♦KQJ864 ♣9754.

There are two solid ideas to take away from this deal.

1. When you are in a trump contract, it's very important to set up a ruff in the hand with 3 or fewer trumps before you touch trumps.
2. When you are in 4 of a major with only two possible side losers and only one dangerous trump outstanding, it's best to reserve your side winners until everything else is done.