

HAND OF THE WEEK

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There is a well-known subset of bridge deals known as “five or seven hands.” These are hands where one side can make either 11 or 13 tricks depending on the lie of the cards. A typical example would be:

Dummy: ♠AQxx ♥Ax ♦x ♣KQJxxx

Declarer: ♠J109xx ♥xx ♦AJx ♣Axx

Dummy opens 1♣, declarer responds 1♠, dummy splinters with 4♦, and declarer uses RKC and bids 6♠ after finding two key cards and the trump Queen. (I know, it’s uncouth to bid Blackwood with two losers in an unbid suit. But 90% of the ACBL bids this way, I think.) A more sophisticated auction would be 1♣-1♠, 4♦-5♣, 5♥-6♠. If they lead a heart, you will make all the tricks if the spade finesse wins and be down 1 if it loses. In a club game, probably half the field would be in slam, so the matchpoint swing would be half a board. And in an IMP match, you would be either winning 11 if the finesse worked or losing 11 if it didn’t if NV, or 13 and -13 if it didn’t, if the opponents bid only game.

But let’s look at the math for bidding 7 vul at IMPs. If the opponents stop in game, bidding the grand slam wins (2210-710) 1500 and 17 IMPs, rather than 13 for stopping in 6. And if the finesse loses, you lose (-200-650) -850, or 13 IMPs in 7, and (-100-650) -750 for the same 13 IMPs if you stop in 6. So your IMP odds are heads you win an extra 4 IMPs and tails you break even. What a coup!

Phil and I ran into a similar curiosity in the Vichill league on Wednesday. We found a 2 or 6 deal. Phil dealt and saw ♠AKJx ♥x ♦x ♣AK108xxx. I held ♠Q109x ♥AJ9x ♦8xxx ♣x. The normal auction is 1♣-1♥, 1♠-2♠. This raise should guarantee 4 card support, as it does for Phil and me. Lots of tables had this start; one player chose to pass after opener’s 1♠ rebid, which in my mind is the cowardly bid of the year. Several splintered with 4♦, which was usually met with a 4♠ signoff. Phil bid 4NT, RKC for us, and when he found me with a key card he asked for the trump Q. I had it, and no king to show, so I just bid the slam.

How good is the slam? The best defense is for them to play ace and a diamond (which they did). This takes an entry out of the hand with the long clubs, which is usually best when defending against a freakish distributional hand. Now, if the black suits are both 3-2 (close to a 50% chance), Phil can just play ♣A, club ruff (high, there are enough trumps that this is safe), draw trumps ending in hand, and claim, with the ♥A taking trick 13. If spades are 3-2 and clubs are 4-1 (about an 18% chance) the play goes ♣A, club ruff high, spade to hand, club ruff high, spade to hand, draw the last trump, and claim once again. If clubs are 3-2 and spades are 4-1, there is no hope because the closed hand no longer has a 4th trump. Note that if they cashed one diamond and shifted to anything, Phil would make this hand easily against this distribution by ruffing one club and drawing trumps. This is why it’s important to force the hand with the long suit to ruff as soon as you run out of sure winners to cash.

So the slam is pretty good, likely about a 2:1 favorite. Now let’s look at the downside. If spades are 4-1, clubs are 3-2, and they tap the closed hand at trick 2 with a diamond, you will play ♣A, club ruff high, and start trumps. But when someone shows out on the 2nd club you will start running clubs. They will ruff in after you have cashed at most one high club and play another diamond. Then you will play another club, they will ruff, and now the only two tricks you will get are the 4th trump in dummy and the ♥A. You’ll get 6 trump tricks, two high clubs, and the ♥A, a total of 9. Down 3. If the long trump holding is with the doubleton club, as is more likely, you will only get one club trick and will be down 4. And if both black suits are 4-1 (as they were in real life) with the black singletons in opposite hands, the

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play will go: ♦A, ♦ ruffed, ♣A, club ruff high, spade to hand, club ruff high, spade to hand, and you will get only one more spade in hand and the ♥A. So you will make, once again, 6 trump tricks and two aces. And if someone is 4-4 in the black suits, this line will once again take 9 tricks rather than 8.

Should we have bid the slam? Emphatically yes. About 2/3 of the time, we would win 11 IMPs (we weren't vulnerable). And, since there is no layout where we can take 10 tricks against 4-1 trumps, all we will be losing is IMPs for extra undertricks. So two times out of three we get 11 IMPs and on time out of 3 we lose 2 or 3 IMPs. On average, our expectation on this deal was +6.5 IMPs or so. As it was, the opponents in our match stopped in 5, so we lost only 2 IMPs on our excellent slam adventure.