

HAND OF THE WEEK

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Vol. 1 No. 35 Page 1

It's time for a defense problem. Ewww.

Defense is relatively easy on most deals if you think about the right things, but impossible if you think about the wrong ones. What's the solution? Review the auction and look for clues. Try to estimate the shapes around the table from the bidding. Try to locate the high cards. Watch partner's signals. Try to figure out what declarer is trying to do, and stop him if you can. Count, count, and count some more.

You're playing IMPs, your side only is vul, and partner deals and passes. RHO opens 1♣ and you are looking at:

♠10942 ♥J105 ♦AQJ76 ♣10

When you have a good suit like your diamond suit, it's important to get it into the bidding. You may help partner find the right lead. With all your major suit cards, it seems that the opponents may be heading for 3NT and you would like to discourage that. So you overcall 1♦. LHO bids 1♠ and partner raises you to 2♦. Perfect! You can't get hurt too badly in an 8-card fit at the 2-level, and you have disrupted the enemy auction a bit.

RHO passes, you do too, and now LHO bids 3♦. What's that? Some sort of game force, I imagine. Perhaps it's asking partner to bid 3NT with a diamond stopper. Some would play that it could also show a big hand with club support. You can have this both ways – if partner shows you a diamond stopper, by bidding 3NT, you can now bid 4♣ and partner will know you have clubs and slam interest in addition to your spades.

But back to the real auction. Partner passes, RHO bids 3♥, you pass, and LHO ends the auction with 4♥. Here's the auction in graphical form.

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
	Pass	1♣	1♦
1♠	2♦	Pass	Pass
3♦	Pass	3♥	Pass
4♥	All Pass		

What clues can you get from the auction?

- LHO likely has the best hand at the table, with at least 5 spades and 4 hearts. They could have doubled 2♦ for takeout if they had any doubts about game, since there's almost no hand where you would want to defend a bid and raised suit at the 2-level.
- If RHO has an opening bid and LHO has the best hand at the table, partner doesn't have much.
- How many spades does RHO have? Probably fewer than 3; many play that a double of partner's 2♦ would have been a support double.
- How many hearts does RHO have? Four, and you can take that to the bank.

What do you lead here? Singleton leads are always attractive against suit contracts, and here, where you're leading into RHO's first suit partner will have no problem at all figuring out why you led a club. Declarer will know it too, but when you're defending you'd usually prefer that BOTH partner and declarer know something than that neither one does.

HAND OF THE WEEK

© 2021 Craig Biddle

Vol. 1 No. 35 Page 2

You lead the ♣10. Dummy comes down, and you see:

♠AQ875 ♥A762 ♦109 ♣K9

♠10942 ♥J105 ♦AQJ76 ♣--

♣10 (opening lead)

Declarer plays the ♣K, 7 (encouraging) from partner, and the 5 from declarer. Who has the ♣8? Declarer does, partner would never encourage with the 7 if he had the 8 as well. So partner started with QJ7x(x)(x), Q7xx(x)(x) or J7xx(x)(x) and Declarer A8xx(x)(x), AJ8x(x)(x) or AQ8x(x)(x). Pretty good! We already know most of the club layout down through the 7.

Now declarer plays the ♥2, 9, K, 5 and then the ♥3, 10, Ace, Queen. Now declarer plays the ♣9, 2, Ace, and you ruff (do you?).

It's often wrong to ruff so early when you hold the master trump. Just like it's usually wrong for declarer to drive out the last trump when both of his hands still have trumps and the last outstanding trump is the master. Keeping an extra trump in each hand often means that declarer gets one or more extra tricks from ruffs by doing so.

But I'm just talking about hypothetical situations here. There's a really good reason why you should ruff this. Look at declarer's possible original club holdings above. Which of those club holdings is still possible? We know now that declarer started with AQ8 or AJ8, if partner had started with the ♣QJ he would have played one of them to this trick to make sure the ♣9 didn't hold the trick.

What if declarer started with the AQ? Now you're thinking about the right thing! Declarer has suspected all along that you led a singleton, and he would play the Ace from that holding to try to catch you napping. If you don't ruff this, he will now play the ♣Q and pitch a losing diamond from dummy before tackling spades.

So you had better ruff this to prevent declarer from getting his sneaky diamond pitch. What are you going to play now? The position as you see it is:

♠AQ875 ♥76 ♦109 ♣--

♠10942 ♥-- ♦AQJ76 ♣--

Have I conned you into trying to cash our diamond tricks before they run away? Two of the best defenders I know went wrong on this deal by doing just that, one at the table and one when I called him on the phone to show him the problem the next day. It's a powerful incentive to see what declarer just tried to do and stop him from doing that. But now, let's think about the right thing, instead of the obvious thing.

What do we know about declarer's hand?

- He opened the bidding. So far, we can account for the ♥K and ♣A. We know he had no more points in hearts, and we're pretty sure that he started with the ♣Q or J. Is that enough for an opening bid in 2nd seat? Nope!

HAND OF THE WEEK

© 2021 Craig Biddle

Vol. 1 No. 35 Page 3

- What other cards might declarer have? We can see everything else but the ♠KJ and ♦K. If declarer had both kings and the ♣Q, we're not beating this hand (and he would have opened 1NT with 2=4=2=5 or 2=4=3=4 shape). And if declarer has all that, then partner raised to 2♦ on ♠J, ♥Q, and ♣J, with no void or singleton. Nope, that didn't happen. So partner has a King!
- Can we beat this hand if partner has the ♦K? Nope! All we will get is two diamond tricks to go with the club you just ruffed.
- Can we beat this hand with a spade shift if declarer started with ♠63 ♥K843 ♦Kxx ♣AQ85, leaving partner with the ♠KJ doubleton? Yes! Declarer's best play in that layout is to rise with the ♠A, come to hand with a heart, pitch a diamond on the ♣Q, and play a low spade ducking in dummy. Partner will be on lead in this ending, with the defense having scored the ♥J and ♠K:

♠Q87 ♥7 ♦10 ♣--

♠109 ♥-- ♦AQJ ♣--

♠-- ♥-- ♦xxx ♣Jx

♠-- ♥4 ♦Kxx ♣8

If partner plays a diamond here, declarer just lets you win the Jack and you are endplayed, forced to either help declarer set up dummy's 5th spade or allow the ♦K to score the 10th trick. But partner will just play the ♣J, tapping the last trump out of dummy as you pitch the ♦J, and you will score the ♦A and either the ♦Q or ♠10.

Well defended. But it really wasn't necessary for you to see all this at trick 5. All you had to do was realize that there would be no defense if declarer had the ♠K.

Once you realized that, the spade shift became clear. And if you shift to a spade at trick 5, declarer is about a 90% favorite to just take a spade finesse; he doesn't know that partner has the ♠K instead of the ♦Q or QJ. Declarer knows that you would surely switch to a spade from any holding when you could see that there were only two diamond tricks available.

The full deal:

♠AQ875 ♥A763 ♦109 ♣K9

♠10942 ♥J105 ♦AQJ76 ♣10

♠KJ ♥Q9 ♦852 ♣J76432

♠63 ♥K843 ♦K43 ♣AQ85