

HAND OF THE WEEK

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As dealer in an IMP pairs game, with only their side vul, we face a very aggressive Precision pair. I hold ♠98 ♥QJ5 ♦J1042 ♣KQ83. I pass, and my LHO opens 1♠, promising 11-15 and 5+♠. Partner passes and RHO bids 2♣, alerted as an artificial game forcing relay. I'm not even going to think of bidding with this hand, so I just pass, saving my questions for the opening lead. This also protects me from ethics issues, given my club holding. If I ask questions only when I have good clubs, then unless I double to direct a lead every single time, I am in violation of the laws. I could ask every time, but that gets tedious and it's easy to forget to ask when you have no plans to enter the auction.

LHO bids 2♦, artificial, promising a side (exactly) 4-card suit somewhere. Partner passes and RHO asks with 2♥. I pass, and LHO bids 3♥, showing 5 spades, 4 clubs, and no short suit. RHO closes the auction with 3NT with our side continuing in non-aggression mode.

Now is the time for questions. I find out that LHO had the option to open 1NT with this shape and 13-15 HCP, and RHO can have a very unbalanced hand. Well, I must lead from this. What do I know about the deal?

- RHO has at most two spades.
- RHO does not have as many as four clubs unless he is very minimum.
- RHO does not have 6 hearts, he would have decided that hearts should be trumps.
- LHO could have opened 1NT with this shape and 13-15 HCP since he is vul.
- RHO does not have slam interest. So I'm going to put him on about 13-16. 16 and 12 is 28, and trying for slam when you know the opponents have at least 12 points requires a lot of shape. RHO might have that shape, LHO doesn't.
- Partner, therefore, is likely to have at least 3 points, and may well have 8 points if both of the opponents are minimum. And vulnerable opponents tend to push at IMPs.
- RHO likely has some length in both red suits. I am going to put him on 2=4=4=3 for now, which leaves partner with 4=4=3=2.

If I were sure that RHO had only 4 hearts, I would lead the ♥Q. But I'm not. The one thing I am VERY sure of is that partner has (at least) 4♠. And my spade holding is ideal for leading through dummy's long suit; declarer is very unlikely to have a two-way finesse in spades. Plus, I have likely stoppers in all the other three suits, so I will have time to shift if it becomes necessary. It may take TWO leads to establish a couple of spade tricks for partner, but it will likely take only 1 to get any other suit going.

Let me digress for a moment about the possible heart lead from 3 here. If I had 3 spades, so that partner was not guaranteed to have 4, I would lead a heart from any 3, hoping to get partner's hypothetical 5-card heart suit established before declarer could establish dummy's spades. And if I had a very weak hand with the same shape, say the ♥QJ and ♣Q, I would lead a heart since it might be my only chance to put a heart through dummy's King.

OK, now let's defend this hand after a spade lead.

Dummy is: ♠QJ543 ♥92 ♦AK ♣J752

My hand is: ♠98 ♥QJ5 ♦J1042 ♣KQ83

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The ♠9 goes to the 3, 7, and King. The 6 and the two are both missing, and declarer can have only one of them. So I have led well, a second spade from me will ensure that we get two spades if partner has the Ace and 10, as seems likely from his encouraging 7. Things are looking up here.

The high cards that I can't see are the ♠A, ♥AK, ♦Q, and ♣A. That's 17 points, declarer has already shown up with the ♠K, and as I have assumed, I don't think declarer has more than 16 points from his failure to continue to ask after finding partner's shape. I am fairly sure that partner has the ♠A, and he could well have another of the high cards. But even if declarer has all the rest of the cards, he can take only 3♠, 2♥, 3♦, and one club. Of course, that's 9 tricks, but if partner has another card I think we are beating this.

Declarer plays the ♠2 to my 8, and the Jack and Ace. Partner shifts to the ♥6, either 4th best from interest or second from a 9-high suit as we play. He could have the ♥A, A10, K, K10, or perhaps just the 10 for this switch if he has interest, if he has none of the honors then he will have 86x(x) or 76x(x), it seems obvious for him to lead through declarer and up to dummy's worst suit so I can't be sure. I think partner has a good inference that I am 4432 on this deal. He knows that I have some cards, and if I had a 5-card suit I would have led my own suit. Declarer plays the ♥K here, and I play the 5 quickly.

Too quickly, I should have considered unblocking one of my honors here. If declarer had the ♥AK10x he would surely have ducked to put dummy's 9 into the fray, gaining a trick whenever the heart honors were split. So partner is marked with the 10, and I doubt that declarer would have flown with the king so easily without the Ace as well. So for the play to make sense, declarer has the ♥AK and partner the 10. If that's the case, I should have played the ♥Q to preserve an entry to partner's hand in the heart suit. Declarer could prevent that, of course, by ducking the second heart, but it could be a tactical advantage for us to get a heart trick in early. Note that if partner has 4 hearts, he has exactly 10876, and my Q and J are no better for trick-taking purposes than his 8 and 7 with the doubleton 9 sitting there forlornly in dummy awaiting execution.

Declarer plays a diamond to the K as partner follows with the 9, and tests spades with the Q, pitching the ♣4 as I pitch the ♣8. Now, if declarer has all the unseen high cards he will give up a spade to ensure 9 tricks, preserving the ♦A as an entry to the long spade. But he cashes the ♦A as partner completes his diamond echo with the 7, showing an even number. Then declarer comes to hand with a heart as the trick collects the 9, 10, Ace, and Jack. So I know declarer is going down now. He started with ♠Kx ♥AKxx ♦Q8xxx and two small clubs. He takes his only hope here, cashing the ♦Q, since he is still making if diamonds are 3-3. But partner's club discard tells him his fate, and we take the last 4 tricks for down 2.

So dummy had the worst possible hand, a poor 11 points, and declarer had HIS minimum of 12. But the 23 point game would still have made if either pointed (spades or diamonds) suit had split 3-3. This despite the fact that one of the 5-2 fits was Kx opposite QJxxx and the other AK opposite Q8xxx. 5-card suits are worth extra in notrump.