

HAND OF THE WEEK

For this deal, I have a special treat for you. Both partner and your RHO have won world championships, and both have also won NABC events as well. In fact, they won an NABC event together. So, you're going to have to be at your best, and you are going to have a LOT of decisions to make.

You are in 3rd seat, with all vul at IMPs. You are late in the 2nd half of a 28 board match where you had a 22 IMP lead at the half, but the opponents have found a good but non-obvious 300 save over your potential 620 and you have misdefended a part score. You have another partial that looks like it might be OK, since you managed to stop in 1NT on a misfit and they led your side's best suit, which you had never bid. So you think you still may be in the lead if your teammates have been on their game. You sort your hand and see ♠AQ1043 ♥10652 ♦72 ♣62. Partner opens 1♣, RHO overcalls 1♦, and you have your first decision.

You can obviously bid 1♠ here, but a negative double to show both suits is also a possibility. Let's consider the ramifications.

For 1♠

- You have a good 5-card suit to bid, and it's always good to lay claim to the spade suit. Even if partner is minimum, you have close to half the deck and it may be your hand for 2♠. If he has more, you may have a game.
- If partner rebids 1NT, you will have an easy 2♥ rebid, not forcing since you would use a cue-bid of 2♦ to investigate if you have game interest, in much the same manner as using a 2♦ rebid as new minor forcing in an uncontested auction.

For double

- You get to "bid" both majors at once by doubling. Remember that after 1♣ and a 1♦ overcall, your double shows both majors and if you bid a major it necessarily shows only 4, while after a 1♥ overcall the double shows 4 spades and a 1♠ bid shows 5.
- Also remember that if you had this shape and game invitational or better values, you would bid 1♠ here and then bid as you would to invite or force to game in an uncontested auction. So you can sensibly double here, and then if partner rebids 1NT or 2♣ to deny a biddable major, you can bid 2♠ to show a decidedly non-invitational hand and at least 5 spades.

In real life, the player with your hand bid 1♠. I think that's best, but if my spades were weaker (say, AJ9xx) I would prefer double. Six of one, half a dozen of the other. The difference is small. The auction continues 3♦ (preemptive) on your left, 3♠ from partner, and 4♣ on your right. You ask, and RHO tells you, "naturalish." (I love some of the made-up words we use in bridge.)

Should you bid 4♠ here? You have close to a minimum here for your auction. Your only plus values are your 5th spade and maybe an extra high card point. Still, you're vulnerable at IMPs, all your high cards are in spades, and they do pay a nice bonus when you bid and make a vulnerable game. Partner wasn't required to bid here; with a minimum he could have passed and relied on you reopening with a double or a bid if you had invitational or near-invitational values. I think the decision is close, but you do decide to bid, and LHO doubles, ending the auction. Here's a summary of the auction, for reference.

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Pard	RHO	You	LHO
1♣	1♦	1♠	3♦
3♠	4♣	4♠	Dbf (All Pass)

LHO leads the ♦10 and partner puts down:

Dummy ♠K652 ♥KQ7 ♦84 ♣AQ53

You ♠AQ1043 ♥10652 ♦72 ♣62

Here you are in a doubled vulnerable game. You are off two cashing diamonds, an ace, and you have a finesse to take that rates to lose. Then you must consider that your LHO, who made a preemptive raise of an overcall, has doubled for penalties when his partner has shown a minor two-suiter by bidding at the 4-level. Your prospects are bleak.

That doesn't mean you have nothing to think about in the play. At IMPs, when you are in trouble you need to expend a lot of time and energy to minimize the potential loss. Going through the motions just doesn't cut it. After you look at the high cards (we have 20 points in our two hands, and so do they), your next job is to make some estimate of their shapes.

- Diamonds – RHO overcalled 1♦ and then chose to take a bid at the 4-level in a suit the opponents had already bid. Meanwhile, LHO made a preemptive raise of the overcall when vulnerable. Let's tentatively give LHO 4 and RHO 5.
- Clubs – it wouldn't surprise me to find RHO with six clubs on this auction, but that would give LHO a singleton club and he would likely have led that. So let's tentatively give RHO 5 and LHO 2.
- Spades – I would be shocked to find LHO with less than 4 spades on this auction when we have AKQ10 between us and he likely has very little in the way of high cards. That, of course, leaves RHO with none.
- Hearts – if all of these assumptions are correct, then hearts are 3-3. That seems plausible, and it has the advantage that we won't have to worry about heart ruffs for the defenders.

Now we can play to the first trick. We had nothing to think about for the play to the first trick. But that doesn't mean that we should just rush into the play, it's necessary to think about the hand before forming a plan. I know, you've seen me play deals at warp speed many times. But I do go through the process of projecting their shapes, I just do it a lot faster than you can read it here. The ♦10 wins the first trick and LHO shifts to the ♣9. What do you think of that?

This is very unexpected. Time for another think. When the defense does something unexpected, it's always necessary to consider whether you should revise your plan. It seems that you were right about 5-2 clubs. But where are the high cards?

The ♣9 looks like high from a doubleton. As noted above, I doubt that clubs are 6-1 on this deal. So RHO has the ♣KJ10. And RHO's duck of the ♦10 marks him with the ♦KQJ, he wouldn't dare play small if missing one of them for fear of giving you a cheap trick. What about the ♦A? RHO could conceivably make this play if missing the ace, but would LHO really underlead the ♦A when his partner had given him another option by bidding 4♣ in the middle of the auction? Indeed, when I discussed this hand with

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Phil, his first impulse was that the 4♣ bid was simply directing a lead, which your LHO chose to ignore. Leading away from the ♦A would be almost as bad as RHO playing small to this trick with ♦KQxxx.

What, then, has LHO doubled on? It sure looks to me like he has all the missing spades and the ♥A. So the only card I cannot place is the ♥J, and I don't care who has that. Armed with this information, what do you play to trick 2?

It's clear to put up the ace. It's at least 20:1 that the World Champion on your right has the ♣K – you don't win world championships by bidding randomly. You do so, and play a spade, RHO pitches the ♦J. So trumps are 4-0 and you're going down at least 2. What's your best plan for getting to 8 tricks?

It's best to lead a diamond here. First of all, the red aces could conceivably be switched – not everyone is as wimpy about underleading aces as I am. If they are, LHO will be sorely tempted to go up with the ♦A on this trick to play another club through. But secondarily, if RHO does indeed have all the diamond pictures, what do you propose he leads to trick 5?

Spades? He has none. Hearts? That's just helping you to clear up the heart suit. Diamonds? That gives you a ruff-sluff, you will ditch your club loser and ruff in dummy with a worthless spot. Clubs? He can cash the ♣K, but if he leads another I can just pitch a heart, forcing LHO to ruff while I simply play dummy's last small club. My guess is that he will decide that the least of evils is to play a heart to get a club through. In any case, you are well within sight of 8 tricks, losing two diamonds and one of each. Minus 500 isn't a joyous result on a part score deal, but at least you have avoided a nuclear winter. Suppose you had lost a club finesse at trick 2, won the ♣A at trick 3, and drawn 3 rounds of trumps ending in hand before leading a heart up. LHO wins the ace, cashes the ♠J, and plays diamonds, forcing out your last trump. You will make 4♠, 2♥, and a club. That's -800, clearly worse than -500. And once you have eliminated diamonds from both hands, if LHO gets a club ruff you will be left in command of the field, able to win whatever LHO leads, draw his last two trumps, and claim.

In real life, declarer got rattled, mistimed the drawing of trumps, and went down 1100. At the other table, the players with your cards played 3♠ undoubled, down only one. So your -500 loses 9 IMPs, -800 would have been 12, and the actual -1100 was a loss of 14. With the 14 IMP loss, the match was lost by 1 IMP. So even carelessly going for only 800 wins the match by an IMP, and playing correctly wins by 4.