

An interesting hand?

This month's hand is taken from an Eve Harrison Salver event in January 2008. As West and with your side vulnerable you hold:

S Q97
H Q10743
D Q5
C AQ7

North opens 1S as dealer and after two passes you compete with 2H; not an ideal suit but with 12 hcp you are not going to allow the opponents to play in 1S. North passes and, somewhat surprisingly, your partner raises straight to 4H, which is passed out. North leads C3 and the following dummy goes down:

S A54
H A865
D A76
C J85

Your partner is short of intermediates and it is difficult to see immediately where your ten tricks will come from. You run the club lead round to your queen and decide to play North for HK and, with the possibility of pinning a singleton jack in the South hand, you lead HQ. North covers with HK and you win with HA, South following low. In the hope that South has one of the minor suit kings, you next lead towards DQ but this loses to DK in the North hand and he exits with a trump to south's jack. South now switches back to a club and your second minor suit finesse also loses to the king with North. You now have 3 losers and your only hope is that SK is with South. However, as North has only shown 9hcp thus far, the chances of him not having SK seem remote. Your fears are realised and you are down. The score sheet shows a couple of Wests have made the contract. Were you just unlucky to be faced with accurate defence or might you have done better?

Perhaps the key to the hand lies in the fact that North has opened the bidding as dealer. This suggests that he will have at least 12 of the missing 15 hcp and is quite likely to have all four kings. In the circumstances, declarer's plan should have been to try to force North to lead away from those kings at every opportunity to generate the extra tricks needed for his contract. The full hand is shown below.

	North	
	S KJ863	
	H K9	
	D KJ8	
	C K43	
West		East
S Q97		S A54
H Q10743		H A865
D Q5		D A76
C AQ7		C J85
	South	
	S 102	
	H J2	
	D 109432	
	C 10962	

Having won the opening lead in hand with CQ and played the first round of hearts as before, a second round of hearts should be played to establish whether there are one or two heart losers. This loses to South's jack and, fortunately, they split 2-2. South now returns a club and you rise with CA and exit with a third round. North now has to lead away from either SKJ or DKJ and whichever he chooses gives you a ninth trick. In addition, having won with either SQ or DQ, you can play ace and another in that suit to put North back in the unenviable position. This time he must either lead away from his remaining king or continue with a fourth round of spades, giving you a ruff and discard. Either way that gives you your 10th trick and the game!

But hold on a minute, are you saying to yourself that the defence might still have prevailed if South had switched to S10 when in with HJ rather than the somewhat uninspiring return of the opening club lead? Certainly that makes life a little more difficult for declarer, but having played SQ, what if he ducks North's SK? North must then lead away from either the minor suit Ks or SJ8. Either way, declarer can engineer the 9th and 10th tricks by successive throw-ins.

One last thought: what about opening the North hand with 1NT? This would surely be passed out and although declarer would struggle to make many tricks, EW would miss a makeable vulnerable game! Not a textbook opening but perfectly legitimate and 'going against the room' sometimes pays off.

Dick Wheeler
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