

An interesting hand?

This month's hand is taken from a Basil Marks Cup session in 2007. As North you hold:

S AK74
H Q852
D K2
C 752

and, with both sides vulnerable, you are poised to open a weak no-trump when the dealer, West, beats you to it. You are too light to double both in terms of points and intermediates and, reluctantly, you pass as do East and South. Although you feel slightly cheated, you reflect that your strength is well positioned behind declarer. Assuming West has, say 13 pts, with your 12 that leaves 15 shared between East and your partner. If your partner has his fair share of those points you might well beat 1NT with careful defence. So what to lead? East did not use Stayman which suggests he may not have length in the majors, so you decide to lead your strongest major and select S4. Declarer plays small from dummy (see below),

East
S 105
H K3
D J9876
C KQ86

and beats your partner's S8 with his SQ. Irritatingly, dummy has more than his fair share of the remaining points and you can count on your partner for only 5 or 6. Declarer next leads a small club to CK in dummy, won by your partner's CA which immediately exposes all of his points bar a jack or queen. He returns S3 and you cash three more rounds of spades, declarer discarding a club and dummy two diamonds. What next? At this stage, you are reluctant to lead a heart away from the HQ for fear that declarer has HAJx and decide to exit safely with a club. Declarer takes this in dummy with the CQ and leads and runs D8 to your DK. The defence has five tricks but declarer takes the rest via HA and K and the remaining clubs and diamonds. Your initial thought is that the board should be fairly flat but when you open the score sheet you find that you have an equal bottom. Could you have done better?

Let's go back to the lead analysis which, as with last month's hand, was correct as far as it went but did not go far enough. North was right to conclude in favour of a major suit lead but was he right to choose a spade? Even if the defence can take as many as four spade tricks at the outset, you will still need something from hearts or clubs to go with what you hope is a well-placed DK, if you are to get the contract off. On that basis, your attention might switch to a low heart, particularly as your SAK are 'quick' tricks and can be taken at any time in addition to others you have developed more slowly. On the actual layout (see below) the heart lead works well and puts you a tempo ahead. When you get in with DK or your partner gets in with CA, the hearts can be cleared and the other entry remains to give the defence three hearts, two spades, a diamond and a club, ie one-off. The full hand is shown on the next page.

	North	
	S AK74	
	H Q852	
	D K2	
	C 752	
West		East
S Q62		S 105
H AJ		H K3
D AQ105		D J9876
C J1043		C KQ86
	South	
	S J983	
	H 109764	
	D 43	
	C A9	

Would you be feeling pleased with that defence (which would have given you a top on the actual board) or might you have done even better? What about an initial lead of SA or K? This allows you to look at dummy before finally deciding that a heart switch is what is required. As indicated above, in hearts there is a risk of a lead into AJx, but, arguably, the risk of giving a crucial (7th?) trick by leading away from the remaining spade honour is even greater. After your heart switch, if, as before, declarer now plays on clubs first, you can restrict him to five tricks (3 clubs and two hearts, assuming he doesn't cash DA before leading a club) because, North having taken SA and DK (on the first round following an unsuccessful finesse) and South CA and 3 hearts, South can switch back to spades leading SJ and pinning S10 in dummy, taking the contract two off. Of course, a wise declarer, seeing the switch to hearts, would take the first round with HK and play on diamonds first to give him at least six tricks. However, as we know, not all declarers are always wise!

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