

An interesting hand?

This month's hand is taken from a Basil Marks Cup event in 2006. As South you are the dealer and hold:

S Q103
H 987543
D K
C AQ9

with both sides vulnerable. Your first problem revolves around whether you open with 1H or not. On the one hand, you have a six card suit, a hand that passes the rule of 19, a singleton and 11 points at equal vulnerability; on the other, three of your points are in the singleton and may not punch their weight and your main suit is pretty ropey if you have to rebid it. In addition, if you finish up defending against a suit contract, a heart lead from partner is unlikely to get the defence off to a good start. It's a difficult choice but as it is a pairs' event, let's say you decide to follow your judgement of what the 'room' will do and pass. West and North pass and East opens 1D. Do you now intervene with 1H or are you still concerned about how the defence might start? With East opening the bidding you are perhaps more likely to be the opening leader and the lead of H9 is unlikely to give too much away, so you decide to overcall anyway, particularly as this may be one of those times when the bid might deter the opposition from a no trump contract. On this occasion, however, West jumps to 2NT, your partner passes, and East, after some reflection, raises to 3NT, passed out.

Now it is your partner on lead and he thinks for quite a while before selecting HJ, eventually deciding to follow the maxim 'trust your partner'! Two minutes later, declarer has garnered twelve tricks via six diamonds, four hearts and two spades. The full hand is shown below,

	North	
	S J86542	
	H J	
	D 108	
	C KJ74	
West		East
S K97		S A
H K10		H AQ62
D AJ95		D Q76432
C 10632		C 85
	South	
	S Q103	
	H 987543	
	D K	
	C AQ9	

You are probably thinking, if only I hadn't overcalled, partner might have found a better, perhaps 'killing', lead. But, as you can see, North's probable alternative lead (a spade) would not have affected the outcome, albeit West has to cash SK (obviously?) and HK (far less obviously) and, when HJ falls, H10 before re-entering dummy via the diamond suit to come to the same trick count. The contract could have been held to nine tricks on the far less attractive club lead but it still can't be beaten. So, I expect you are now wondering what the point of this hand is and whether it is indeed "interesting".

If so, let's go back to South's decision not to **open** the bidding as dealer and assume that he now belongs to the (minority?) cavaliers rather than the (majority?) roundheads. His 1H opening as dealer is passed by West, and North has an easy, if somewhat tremulous, 1S response, bearing in mind the likely 2H rebid. Having heard 1H Pass 1S, what does East do now? His first suit is distinctly moth-eaten and his second has been bid by the opposition. He can hardly double with nothing in clubs and a 2D overcall might be walking into a large penalty given that both opener and responder are unlimited at this stage. In the circumstances now described, I would expect most Easts to grit their teeth and pass at this point. Now, South can apply further pressure by raising to 2S. This would come round to East again and the arguments against any action appear now to be even greater. NS have 'subsided' in 2S but may be near to a thin but makeable game and if you re-open, you may push them into it. Assuming East passes, NS will gather eight or nine tricks in 2S depending on whether dummy can get a diamond ruff before three rounds of trumps are played, turning a likely shared bottom (-690) into a likely outright top (+110 or 140). And what is the moral of this hand? Perhaps it is that, if you feel you should be bidding something on the South cards at some stage, it is better to get your strike in early rather than leave the opponents a clear field in the first instance. What do you think?

A postscript to this hand occurs to me concerning those that follow pseudo cavalier Albert Benjamin and use weak two bids. Some of them might have sought to resolve the opening bid problem by down-grading the value of DK and opening 2H with the South hand, despite the absence of heart honours. Oddly, despite the pre-emptive intentions, this probably makes it easier for EW to get involved (given the declared weakness and the fact that North would be bound to pass such an opening) allowing EW a reasonable opportunity to reach 3NT or 5D. On this occasion, the (unlimited) one-level major suit bids (used by the **real** cavaliers?) actually have greater pre-emptive value. Curious, indeed!