

Daydream Believer

Gloria Tsoi and I have established a recent tradition during our weeks at Bridge Nationals for the last day of the tournament. Because we usually leave for home during the day on Sunday, we refrain from entering the two day national Swiss events and instead play in the “Daylight” pair game that ends by 7 PM (start times at 10 and 3) so we can then later enjoy a nice meal and a glass of red wine at one of the city’s finer dining establishments. Three years ago, this daily event at Nationals was restricted to “seniors” (in the ACBL that means 55 and over which is somewhat ironic to say the least) but at some point they dropped that designation and made the game open.

Despite the new designation, there is an unwritten rule that the game is really intended for a more casual bridge atmosphere than the open pairs that take place at 1 and 7:30. For two relatively young players looking to make hay in national events during the week, it’s really not an appropriate game to enter. Gloria suggested that we skip the event earlier in the morning as she had understandably had enough after 8 straight days of two sessions. Unfortunately for her, I spent the night writhing about my opening lead on the penultimate board of the Red Ribbon pairs that felt reasonable but nevertheless cost Dana Berkowitz and I our chance to finish as the winners. Gloria acquiesced to my need to get back in the saddle and off we went to what she endearingly calls “The Daydream Pairs.”

The level of play was up to its usual tepid standard despite the presence of Bridge Bulletin star and consummate gentleman Jerry Helms, whom we got to play in the second round. My mind started to wander a bit and I then completely butchered two out of three hands as declarer at the other seeded table (For some reason, the ACBL likes to put its pairs with the highest total of masterpoints at tables 3 and 9. I have no idea why they do this but it is always a good plan to keep on your toes when pairs 3 and 9 are your competition). All of a sudden, this remarkable deal popped up on the next hand that had all sorts of wonderful stuff going on.

I’ll put you in the North seat to start (Board 25, E/W vulnerable, South deals):

♠ A

♥ KQ83

♦ JT85

♣ A642

Your partner (South) starts by opening 1♥. West passes and it is your turn. Holding four of the six keycards and four card trump support opposite, this hand is easily worth a game force and you want to start investigating whether slam is in the picture. Your options seem to be 2♣ planning to support hearts later, 2NT (which is Jacoby and ostensibly a balanced four card raise of at least game forcing strength), or a 3♠ splinter raise which shows four hearts, a singleton or void in spades and game forcing values. All three options have flaws; your clubs are awfully weak for 2♣, your hand is not classically balanced for 2NT, and although there is division in the bridge community on this topic, most experts do not recommend making a splinter raise with a singleton ace. The main reason for this opinion is that Kxx(x) is a bad holding opposite a small singleton but quite a nice holding opposite a singleton ace as that side suit should play for no losers, ruffs and provide a pitch from dummy.

Given these options, our North chose 2NT, which I think is the correct one on this deal. The auction continued in a surprising manner.

S	W	N	E
1 ♥	pass	2NT(1)	pass
3♠ (2)	pass	??	

- (1) Balanced four card raise in hearts, game forcing
- (2) Singleton or void in spades

We all have moments in bridge where we think to ourselves “Did partner really mean to bid that?” Even though they are vulnerable, it’s quite unusual for the opponents to have 11 spades between them without making a chirp in the auction. Nevertheless, it is always best to trust your partner and now it is time to reevaluate your hand. The spade singleton across from your singleton has devalued your hand quite a bit as your distribution must be quite mirrored. If partner had bid 3♣, you’d be very excited as some mundane collection like ♠Kxxx ♥Axxxx ♦AQx ♣x would offer a near lay down twelve tricks with 13 in the picture if diamonds and trumps behave. However, the 3♠ bid means partner needs a lot of stuffing in the minors to make a slam as there is no suit readily available for pitching losers or crossruffing. South’s values have to be somewhere outside spades so we’re not done searching for slam yet; this North now cuebid 4♣ to show the ace and further interest. South retreated to 4♥ which suggested the opposition held the diamond ace, so North now had an easy pass. West leads the ♥7 and now it is time to shift into the South seat for the play of the hand.

♠ A
♥ KQ83
♦ JT85
♣ A642

♥T led

♠ K
♥ AJ964
♦ K632
♣ Q75

We are in a healthy game in terms of high card points with 27 between us, but game is by no means cold. We will lose one diamond and one club at a minimum and the lack of spots in those suits really restricts our options on how we might choose to play those suits. At any rate, for now it seems to make sense to draw trumps ending in dummy (they break 2-2) and cash the spade ace to start, and that is when the fun begins:

Trick 1: ♥T, ♥3, ♥5, ♥J

Trick 2: ♥4, ♥2, ♥K, ♥7

We next cash the ♠A and get a rather cacophonous response from the opponents as they follow.

Trick 3: ♠A, ♠J, ♠K, ♠Q (!)

While it is possible that the East/West pair is doing this for its own amusement holding fistfuls of useless spades, it is more likely that these are garish suit preference cards indicating they both are interested in a diamond shift. This is not good news as we would most like to see East asking for a club shift holding the king behind the ace in dummy, which would make our ♣Q an eventual winner. Now we have to decide why they both like diamonds and how we should play the suit. Let's look at the diamond suit in isolation.

♦ JT85

♦ K632

If the suit preference signals from trick three are to be believed, the honors have to be split between West and East. Unfortunately, it is likely that one of them has ♦Qxx and one has ♦Ax and that they will get two tricks in the suit. If *East* is being honest, he also has the ♦9 when he has the ♦Q. With nothing better to do, South ran the ♦J from dummy which was covered by the queen. Here are the last two tricks – notice a pattern?

Trick 3: ♠A, ♠J, ♠K, ♠Q

Trick 4: ♦J, ♦Q, ♦K, ♦A (!!)

West exited a small diamond at this point and South decided to hop up with the ♦T and clear the suit.

Trick 5: ♦4, ♦T, ♦7, ♦2

Trick 6: ♦8, ♦9, ♦3, ♠2

Now East is on lead entirely with black cards, and.....you guessed it!

Trick 7: ♣J, ♣Q, ♣K, ♣A (!!!)

Three times in one hand the top four honors crashed on the same trick. I note with amusement that South could have unblocked the two secondary trump honors at tricks one and two without cost if he had known they would split, which would have left us all holding six cards with none higher than a ten.

Things are now bleak for our declarer, as we have lost two tricks and are in dummy looking at the following:

♠

♥ Q8

♦ 5

♣ 642

♠

♥ A96

♦ 6

♣ 75

Two club losers appear inevitable in addition to the diamonds we have lost, and it looks like you are slated for an unlucky down one after all that excitement. However, the excitement has just begun! Would you believe me if I told you your 4♥ contract was still cold? Though it is extremely unlikely, there is exactly one situation where you can still make your contract and that is if one of the opponents is now holding the singleton ♣T and 5 spades. If that is the case, your opponent will have to win the trick perforce and concede a ruff/sluff in spades allowing you to ditch the losing club from your hand.

Gloria and I were actually the defenders, and the declarer now fell from grace by playing the fourth diamond to his hand rather than a club. As East, I was now on the spot and chose to jettison my ♣T on the diamond from dummy. This play is completely clear at IMP scoring but could be a matchpoint disaster if South started with exactly ♣Q98 of clubs. With so many bizarre things happening already on the hand, I almost wouldn't have been surprised. However, it is the percentage play and merely trades a trick if declarer has ♣9x left and Gloria started with ♣8xxx. In this case, Gloria had both the ♣9 and ♣8 so declarer ended up down one.

+50 vs. -420 was worth about 6 matchpoints in an event that we eventually won by just 3.

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