

For my Christmas offering this year, here is a hand featuring the Scottish international John MacLaren. When I was a student I played against John on a few occasions in league matches and in competitions, usually without much success. As I recall, his preferred system was Acol with a weak no-trump, Stayman and Blackwood and that was about it. I also remember his occasionally irritating habit when, as dummy, he would move his chair back a few inches and proceed to read the paper while his partner went about declaring the hand. Accurate bidding and excellent card play meant that he his partner, Tom Culbertson, were automatic selections for the Scottish team for many years.

	A5	
	AQJ	
	AK83	
	Q865	
1096		Q72
1054		K3
Q10952		74
93		KJ10742
	KJ843	
	98762	
	J6	
	A	

South is declarer in a contract of Six Hearts and West leads the nine of clubs, won by South's Ace. South leads a low heart and takes the finesse, losing to East's King. Declarer wins whatever East returns and cashes a top trump. When the ten does not fall, declarer has no choice but to draw the last trump and hope to play the spades for no loser. He cashes the Ace of spades, leads low to his Jack and then the King, and is delighted when the suit splits 3-3. Slam made.

Note : had the ten of hearts appeared on the second round of the suit, declarer had a better line of play available : Ace of spades, spade to the King, spade ruff. This would produce 12 tricks whenever the spades were 3-3 and also when West held a doubleton Queen.

You might not think there is much to the play but MacLaren, sitting East, managed to find a way to defeat the contract. When declarer took the heart finesse at trick 2, MacLaren ducked the trick ! Declarer returned to his hand by ruffing a club and repeated the heart finesse, losing to East's now singleton King. When East led a third club, declarer ruffed but West was able to overruff with his ten of hearts for one down. How's that for a Christmas cracker ?

Enjoy your bridge !