

An opponent's failure to make a bid gives you some information about his hand, both in terms of distribution and high-card points. When you combine this with the early play, it's surprising what you can deduce. Sometimes the best line of play can become quite clear even after just one trick has been played. Take a look at this hand from yesterday's game at Shoreham :

QJ742  
10  
A765  
Q43

AK108  
963  
KQ10  
A86

North dealt and Passed, as did East. South opened One Spade, North jumped to Three Spades and South bid Four Spades. West led the four of hearts and East won the first trick with the Queen. At trick 2, East switched to the seven of clubs. Should South win with the Ace or let it run round to dummy's Queen ? Decide on your play before reading on.

You might have thought along these lines : "If East has led away from the King of clubs, dummy's Queen will win the trick. Then, after drawing trumps, if the opposing diamonds are split 3-3, I will be able to discard my club loser on dummy's long diamond and make twelve tricks."

To see if you were right, it's necessary to consider all the information available so far. Specifically :

- who has the King of hearts ?
- who has the Ace of hearts ?

East would not have played the Queen at trick 1 if he also held the Jack, so West has the Jack of hearts. East's play of the Queen is consistent with him having both the King and Queen (third hand playing the lower of equals) but West is most unlikely to have underled the Ace, so it looks as if East has the Ace. Could West have led from a suit headed KJ ? It's possible ... but not here. If East's hearts were headed AQ, and with a singleton visible in dummy, he would surely have played the Ace at trick 1 to guarantee winning the trick.

Conclusions : West's hearts are headed by the Jack. East started with a heart suit headed AKQ.

Once you establish this, it's clear that East cannot also hold the King of clubs. If he did have that card, he would have opened the bidding second in hand ... but he didn't – he Passed.

So the correct line of play is now obvious. You must win trick 2 with the Ace of clubs, draw trumps and later lead towards dummy's Queen of clubs. The full hand shows why this is necessary :

QJ742  
10  
A765  
Q43

96  
J754  
98  
KJ10952

53  
AKQ82  
J432  
7

AK108  
963  
KQ10  
A86

If you were tempted at trick 2 to let East's seven of clubs lead run round to dummy's Queen, you will soon regret it. West's King wins trick 2 and he returns another club at trick 3 for East to ruff ! You make your contract but only ten tricks. If you win the Ace of clubs at trick 2 and draw trumps, you make eleven tricks.

Enjoy your bridge !