

When you first start playing duplicate pairs, you soon realise that making your contract does not guarantee that you will earn a good score on the board. If every other declarer manages to make an overtrick or two, you will score zero. Duplicate pairs is a game of comparison : *all that matters is how your score compares to the other pairs sitting your way*. On some boards you might have to take a risky line of play in search of an overtrick, even if it means endangering your contract. On other boards, simply making your contract should be enough to score well. How do you judge which approach to take ?

If you bid to an ‘obvious’ contract, that is to say a contract that you expect all of the other pairs sitting your way to reach, you should be on the lookout for any chance, however small, to improve your score by trying for an overtrick. But if you find yourself in a decent looking contract that you don’t think will be so popular you should take every precaution to make sure of your contract and forget about overtricks.

Take a look at this recent hand from Shoreham :

♠9652

♥984

♦K106

♣AKJ

♠AK1073

♥73

♦AJ2

♣1074

You, South, open One Spade and North raises to Three Spades. With a minimum opening hand and a fairly flat distribution you should really Pass partner’s invitational raise, but you are feeling lucky today and decide to go on to Four Spades.

West wins the first two tricks with the King and Queen of hearts and then leads a low heart to East’s Jack, which you ruff. When you lay down the Ace of spades, both opponents follow suit with low cards. On the King of spades, the Queen and Jack fall together. So far so good, but what should you do next ?

Before you play another card you should sit back in your chair and ask yourself whether Four Spades is likely to be a contract that most other N/S pairs will reach.

Here, the answer to that question is no. With a combined 23 high-card points, not every N/S pair will bid to Four Spades. It’s likely that One Spade – Three Spades will be a common start to the auction around the room but some South players will surely Pass their partner’s bid of Three Spades. You can expect to get a good score if you make your contract, so forget about looking for an overtrick.

At the table, South led a club to the Jack but East won with the Queen and led another club, won in dummy. With three tricks lost, declarer needed to find the Queen of diamonds to make his contract. Declarer led a low diamond from dummy and played the Jack from his hand ... but this finesse also lost and declarer finished one down, feeling a bit unlucky that both of his finesses had failed.

South reckoned that if West held the Queen of clubs (so the finesse would work), and if he could guess which defender held the Queen of diamonds, he would make 11 tricks. South’s analysis was correct but this was not the right time to play for an overtrick. Making 10 tricks was sure to score above average. Making just 9 tricks was sure to score badly.

Let's rewind back to the start of trick 6. You have lost the first two heart tricks, ruffed the third heart and drawn trumps in two rounds. With a potential loser in both clubs and diamonds, can you find a line of play that will guarantee making your contract ?

Yes. In fact you can put the mortgage on it, irrespective of who holds the missing minor suit Queens. Forget about taking the club finesse and instead play Ace, King, Jack of clubs. Whichever defender wins the last of these tricks has a choice of poisons. A club or a heart lead will give you a ruff and discard – you will ruff in one hand and discard a diamond from the other hand – whereas a diamond lead will effectively 'find' the missing diamond Queen for you. Whatever happens, you are certain to make 10 tricks (and you will make 11 tricks if the Queen of clubs happens to fall under the Ace, King). And partner will, of course, congratulate you on your excellent declarer play.

One final point. Returning to the bidding, some players allow the vulnerability to influence their decision in an uncontested auction such as this one. They are more inclined to Pass their partner's bid of Three Spades if their side is vulnerable but to bid on to Four Spades if they are non-vulnerable ("well, we weren't vulnerable partner so I thought I'd take a chance and bid game.") This outlook plays no part whatsoever in duplicate pairs. If every other declarer records a plus score on the board, your score of -50 might as well be -5000.