

CAUTIOUS BIDDER [36]

Last weekend saw the first round of matches in the Premier League, which serves as the trial to aid selection for the teams to represent Wales in this season's home internationals for the Camrose Trophy. Eight teams were due to take part, but one withdrew because of illness. That still left 84 boards to be played over the weekend – a demanding schedule for those teams playing four-handed. The event was superbly directed by our own Sarah Amos.

I found the following hand of interest, in a masochistic sort of way. We played it against the Pottage team. At one table Sue and I sat North/South against Julian Pottage and Tony Ratcliff; at the other table in our match Simon Gottschalk and Chris Rochelle sat East/West against Simon and Jonny Richards..

Match 7; Board 1; Dealer North; neither vulnerable

	♠AJ96	
	♥K84	
	♦K75	
	♣AK5	
♠Q53		♠K10742
♥A97		♥J652
♦J863		♦9
♣QJ4		♣863
	♠8	
	♥Q103	
	♦AQ1042	
	♣10972	

North declared Three No Trumps at all six tables. Two declarers received a heart lead and made their contract, securing nine tricks. At the other four tables, including the two in our match, East led a low spade. At three of those tables declarer was defeated by two tricks; at the other table declarer made his contract. The successful declarer was Simon Richards, playing against Chris and Simon. I was one of the melancholy threesome who went two down. So we lost 11 IMPs.

Intrigued, I enquired of the others as to what had happened at the other table in our match. I'll start with that.

Chris, East, led a spade and declarer took Simon's Queen with his Ace. He played a diamond to dummy, and then a heart towards his hand. Simon G., West, hopped up with the Ace of hearts and played a second spade, declarer inserting the 9 and Chris winning with the 10. Chris then cashed his King of spades and exited with a fourth round of the suit. And that was nine tricks for declarer: two spades; two hearts; three diamonds; and two clubs.

Simon's decision to rise with the Ace of hearts was not best – it cleared up the heart position for declarer – but it wasn't fatal. But then Chris cashed the King of spades. And that was fatal. I should probably give Simon Richards credit for his heart play at trick 3. That was perhaps a good psychological move, inviting West's play of the Ace in order to push a spade through, and perhaps also encouraging Chris's spade continuation.

At our table I likewise took the first spade with my Ace. I then played two rounds of diamonds, discovering the 4/1 break. I can succeed from here (Deep Finesse manages it), but it's not easy to find the right line. At least, I didn't find it easy. I realised that I could cope with West gaining the lead in order to push a second spade through, but I couldn't cope with West gaining the lead *twice*. Accordingly I abandoned diamonds in favour of seeking to establish a third club winner.

I was on the right lines, but the execution fell short of what was required. Guarding against West holding the Ace of hearts, I needed to lead a club twice from dummy, both times covering West's card. If West plays low on the first club, I insert the 5, which East will win. If West contributes an honour, I cover. That is to say, I cover both times. East will win the third round of clubs with the 8, but I will have denied West a critical entry. I will still need a second heart trick, but with the Jack of hearts well placed I might manage that.

I wasn't up to that club play. I cashed the two top clubs and played a third round, hoping that Tony, East, would win. This was in itself playing for a misdefence. But Julian, West, had the winning club and he duly played a spade through. Tony won with the 10 of spades and returned a heart. The inevitable third spade from Julian followed, giving the defence four spade winners in addition to a heart and a club.

Where did I (and I presume the other declarers) go wrong? Well, consider trick one. That apparently robust spade holding in the North hand proved to be an illusion. It created the impression that North was well protected in that quarter and might even come to a second spade winner, as happened at the other table in our match. Declarer needs to consider the effect of spades being played through twice from the West hand.

So how culpable was it to take the Ace of spades at trick one? I didn't at that stage know the location of the heart honours, or for that matter who held the long diamonds, if indeed there were long diamonds. (If East held those cards it might be better to win the first spade). Having said that, I probably would have ducked (twice) had my Jack and 9 of spades been small cards. In that case the spade hold-up would have been routine.

On the actual lay-out, if I'd waited until the third round before taking my Ace, I could in the fullness of time have established a second heart by way of the finesse, and *either* a fourth diamond *or* a third club – whichever suit I decide to play on (diamonds would in fact be the obvious choice). Either would have done. West proved to have the club winner, the fourth diamond, and the Ace of hearts, but without a spade in his hand he would have been powerless to hurt me.

We go again in ten days time. I wonder what horrors await.

GD