

ACES DON'T HAVE TO TAKE KINGS

An old whist saying is that "Aces were made to take Kings", as bashing down an unsupported ace is all too likely just to collect two small cards from the opponents. There are exceptions, of course – leading partner's suit in defence, cashing the setting trick or avoiding a later endplay all spring to mind. At pairs, though, cashing out to minimise overtricks is often crucial. Consider the following hand which is based on deal 20 from Wednesday 18th February.

♠ A Q J
♥ 9 6 3
♦ K Q J 4
♣ K 9 3
(North)

♠ K 7 3
♥ J 4
♦ 10 8 7 5
♣ A 8 4 2
(East)

South opens a weak 2♥, 5-9 points with a 6 card suit and North puts him straight into game, although an enquiry about range and suit quality via 2NT might have been more careful. Partner leads the ♥10 which declarer wins with the King and leads a small diamond from hand.

Partner pounces on this with the Ace and leads a small spade. Declarer gives the matter a little thought, then plays the Queen which you take with the King. Now what?

It is surprisingly easy to construct declarer's trumps and indeed his whole hand. Partner has surely led the ♥10 from a doubleton as a passive lead, so declarer has ♥AKQxxx and no other high cards, unless he has ♣Jx and has discounted the unprotected honour. Even if partner has done something weird with ♥Q10 doubleton, it doesn't matter as the queen will just drop under the Ace. So declarer has 6 heart winners, 3 diamonds and 2 spades for 11 easy tricks unless you take your club Ace now.

Perhaps partner has the ♣ QJ and could have switched to that instead of a spade, but she surely won't have ♣ QJ10 or that would have been led at Trick 1. So, if you don't take the club Ace now, you never will. It may seem that the odd dropped overtrick doesn't matter but it frequently does at pairs. Minus 450, when East played a trump instead, was only worth 1 MP out of 8, but holding the contract to 10 tricks would have been worth 4 / 8. A few such gains (or losses avoided) over a 24 board session can make a big difference, so defenders should still concentrate even when the hand seems over. Three such 3 point gains over 24 boards with (say) 5 tables improve your session score by almost 4.7%.

A similar lesson cropped up in the SCCBA Senior simultaneous pairs (Hand 7)

♠ 6
♥ A Q 8
♦ J 10 8 4 2
♣ 9 7 6 4
(North)

♠ A 10 7 5 3
♥ 9 7 6 5
♦ 6
♣ A K 10
(East)

South dealt and opened 1♥, playing 5 card majors, West bid 1♠, North raised to 2♥ and East bid 4♠. North led the Heart Ace which held, and saw the impressive dummy. Often it makes no difference what you do next but another heart will clearly be ruffed.

Hand 7 It is of course unlikely that West has (say) ♠KQJxxx ♥x ♦Kx ♣QJxx (or even ♣Qxxx) when dummy's losing diamond can be thrown on a club after drawing trumps, but that was exactly what he held at the table (with QJ82 of clubs), so a heart switch loses 680.

All Vul ♣ A K 10

To be fair, a club switch is better than a diamond if West holds ♠QJxxx ♥x ♦AQx ♣Jxxx when declarer ruffs a heart to hand, loses a spade finesse but later draws trumps and has a choice of a club to the 10 or a diamond finesse through the opening bidder to throw the ♠10 from dummy. Then the diamond switch makes life easy. A second heart, however, just isn't thinking clearly. Even though the ♦A on the actual hand only took small cards, it stopped an important second overtrick. South could have helped too; a high heart here, where it should be clear that the next card in the suit will be ruffed, isn't asking for another heart. Instead it suggests a switch to the higher ranking of the other two suits.