**European Youth Team Championships 2015 Article by Ben Norton**

The European Youth Team Championships of 2015 took place in Tromsø, Norway from 18th-25th July (although play started on Sunday 19th). A total of 52 teams took part representing 23 different countries over the 4 separate sections – Juniors (U26s), Youngsters (U21s), Girls (U26s) and Kids (U15s).

The Euros can be a very tough competition, as not only are you playing against many good players, but you also have to play a lot of boards in a fairly short space of time. If you’re playing every set in the tournament then you’ll play a total of 300 boards over 7 days, so you must have good stamina. As a player, not only do you have to contend with the enormous pressure put on you by your non-playing captain (along with not wanting to let your team-mates down!) and the expectations of your country as a whole, but also you have to deal with the pressure you put on yourself to make no mistakes and be the best that you can be… and better!

In this report I’ll outline some of the more interesting boards that I played as part of the England U21s team, along with any fascinating deals, and at the same time I’ll try to give you a feeling of the atmosphere at the table and of the morale of the team. Our team was: Nick Dean/Sam Behrens, Stephen Kennedy/Laura Covill and Freddie Illingworth/me, with Michael Byrne as NPC and Bryony Youngs as coach.

As a team we went through our opponents’ systems before the tournament to arrange our defences to their various conventions. Everyone in our event was playing 5 card majors and a strong NT, and so every hand featured in this report will have been bid using this style. The main difference between systems was the 2-level openers – some played 3 weak 2s (as all of our team did), but many elected to play a multi 2D (either with or without a strong balanced option) and muiderberg 2M bids (essentially Lucas 2s). Others used an Ekren 2D or 2H opener (to show at least 4-4 in the majors and a weak hand), and a select few played a 2D opener as showing 18-19 balanced. A few pairs were playing a strong club or a polish club (a weak NT, clubs or a big hand), and the carding was generally reverse (low=enc/even) while leads were usually 4th/2nd or 3rd/5th. We prepared some very simple defences to these systems, and then came up with blanket agreements to cover the rest – the emphasis being on not having a misunderstanding with partner instead of finding the perfect systems to play.

We played all the other 15 countries in our Youngsters section in a full round robin comprising of 15x20 board sets, starting with Italy on the Sunday and ending with Finland on the Saturday. On the first and second days we played 3 matches each, then just 1 match on the third day, followed by 2 matches each for the last 4 days. The top 6 teams (or the top 7 if Italy finish in the top 6) at the end of the round robin in the Youngsters section qualify for the World Championships due to held in Italy in 2016.

**Match 1 (vs Italy):**

Everyone in the England U21s camp was hopeful of doing well in the tournament, and of course qualification for the World Championships was our top priority; however we knew that we might find ourselves behind the pace a little after our first day, as we had 3 fairly capable teams to face. We started off against Italy, who are a team that would be hoping to finish in the top 6, however as they are hosting the Worlds next year they are guaranteed qualification – so perhaps their complacency could serve to our advantage?

Board 7 (game all):

You hold: 109 A106xx xxx Qxx

 South West (me) North East . 2H\* P P X . P ?

2H=constructive (8-11 6Hs)

What would be your call here?

At the table I decided to bid 2N (lebensohl, a puppet to 3C, and I then passed 3C from partner) which proved to be a poor decision. I decided not to pass 2HX as Dixon’s 3 laws of passing partscore t/o doubles were swirling round in my mind:

1. Have good trumps
2. Have evidence of a misfit
3. Have the balance of power

At the time, I reasoned that we didn’t necessarily have two of the above criteria, as I thought my trumps weren’t good enough (holding only two sure trump tricks) and I wasn’t sure that we had the balance of power. However, this is poor judgement as my trumps were good enough, especially if I could hit partner with good spades and an outside entry, enabling successive trump promotions or for me to ruff with my small trumps. Also, on reflection I think we’re not going to be too far away from having the balance of power, as even though partner has made a re-opening double, which classically doesn’t require a great hand (in most situations a 4144 9 count would suffice), in this situation partner won’t make a t/o double unless he has a good hand (i.e. an opening bid). This is because partner knows we’re holding long hearts (as he’s likely looking at shortage there and hearts haven’t been pre-emptively raised on his right), and he knows we haven’t overcalled 2N, so we have a maximum of about a poor 15 count. Therefore it wouldn’t be right for partner to X with a poor hand as he knows we would probably pass with a moderate hand or pull to a poor strain, which would lead to a lot of -670s and -800s, so with a non-opening hand and short hearts partner would pass out 2H – so partner’s double here means we may well have the balance of power.

It’s also wrong not to pass 2H as we have no place to run, if I had a side 4-card suit it would have been a closer decision but still right to pass. 3C was just there as partner held:

QJx 9 AKxx AKxxx

But this was no consolation as 2HX was likely 2 off (the defence would take 1 diamond, 3 clubs and 3 trumps for +500 instead of +110). Team-mates scored -500, so that was -9 IMPs.

On refection therefore, it seems a complete stand-out to pass 2HX and lead a spade in order to try and take some ruffs with your small trumps. This was the full hand:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | AKxxx7QJ98x109 |  |
| 109A106xxxxxQxx |  | QJx9AKxxAKxxx |
|  | xxxKQJ8xx10Jxx |  |

Board 15 (NS Vul):

How would you play 4H from the south seat after an uncontested auction on a small trump lead?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | JK109xK10xx97xx   |  |
|  | AQxAQJ8QJxKJ6 |  |

My team-mate (and now U21s partner) Sam Behrens did well to make this. He won the trump lead with 8, cashed AS and ruffed a spade, played a trump back to hand (both opponents following) and ruffed his last spade on dummy. Now he played a diamond to J which held and drew the last trump (west pitching a club) before playing QD which held again, and another diamond. West won this and cashed KS, but Sam pitched a club from hand and now west had to either give up a diamond to dummy or play a club into declarer’s tenace.

Do you think there’s an improvement on Sam’s line?

I think there is, as declarer would have gone off on most layouts if west had unblocked KS, as now declarer would be forced to ruff and exit a club away from KJx in hand (which would have worked here as LHO was left with AQx so declarer could just throw him by playing a club honour).

If you try and ruff 2 spades in dummy, then you won’t have an entry to cash your fourth diamond after west holds up twice, and you’ll be endplayed in hand when they exit a spade. It’s possible for you play up to the club honours twice after ruffing each spade, but this would be very dangerous as west could hold AQ(x), Qx or Qxxx (if west also held AD) and the defence could then take 2 clubs, a club ruff and a diamond.

Perhaps the best line then is to draw two rounds of trumps first, ending in dummy, and if both follow (as seems likely on the lead) then draw the last trump and give up a diamond while you still have an entry to dummy with a trump. Now if east wins AD you’ll have to make a successful guess in a black suit, but if west wins AD he’ll likely play another diamond so as to not give away a black suit trick. Now you can win the fourth diamond on dummy, pitching a club from hand to reach this position:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | J10-9xxx |  |
|  | AQxJ-KJ |  |

Now a club to J (better than K as west might have led a club holding Qxxx, but definitely not with Axxx) will combine your chances nicely - if the KC holds then you’re home, but if west wins and plays a club to RHO’s Q then you’ll have to hope KS is onside. You do have extra chances though, if west holds A10C tight, then 9 becomes high on dummy, the same if east holds Q10 tight. If after winning AC west continues with Q then you’re 100%, as either west started with AQ tight and has to play a spade into your AQ, or he holds AQx or AQxx in which case he’ll have to play another club and you can play 9 from dummy to make sure of your contract.

This line works whenever trumps are 3-2 and AD is with west (unless he also holds Q10xx clubs and KS precisely), or if you make a successful club guess when AD is with east. However this line doesn’t work so well if trumps are 4-1, as you’ll then have to play clubs up to hand twice, hoping that you can bring clubs in for 2 tricks, or play on diamonds and hope that one hand has Ax so you can bring in diamonds for 3 tricks while also being able to draw trumps and take a spade ruff.

The Italian declarer at our table went wrong by running JS, so he had to lose a spade, 2 clubs and a diamond – so 12 IMPs to England. This was the whole hand:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | JK109xK10xx97xx |  |
| K9xxxxAxxxAQx |  | 10xxxxxxxxx108x |
|  | AQxAQJ8QJxKJ6 |  |

Board 19 (EW vul):

As west I ended up as declarer in 3S after this auction:

South West (me) North East . P P 1C X .1D\* 1S X\* 2S .3C 3S 1D=4+Hs X=3Hs

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | A9xxA1086AJxQx |  |
|  | QJ8xx549xxK10x |  |

LHO leads 2H and you play 6 from dummy (the 8 can’t gain, even if LHO has H9x you won’t be able to play hearts for 2 tricks as RHO will still hold 7). RHO wins with Q and returns 3H to LHO’s K and dummy’s A. RHO has given you a chance by not putting 7H (or 9) in at trick one, so how do you continue so as to take full advantage?

The question boils down to whether you play LHO for an original heart holding of KJ2 or K92. I decided that RHO would probably play 9 from Q9xx (as this is necessary if I have Kx or xx, and can’t do much harm if I have Jx as if RHO wins with Q then I’d be able to pitch a loser later on by unblocking J and playing a heart to 10), so I called for 10H from dummy, which got J from RHO and pinned LHO’s 9 as I ruffed – making the 8 good.

At the table I now fell from grace - I ran QS, so RHO could win and play his fourth heart to ruff out my winner on dummy as LHO still had a trump left. What I failed to realise was that my contract was 100% safe if LHO held Kx(x) spades as long as I just played A and another spade, as now LHO would not be able to ruff the fourth heart. If he held Kxx trumps and after winning K played a diamond I’d rise with A, draw the last trump and pitch a losing diamond on the 8H. If RHO had held AC he wouldn’t be able to win it to ruff out the heart winner without giving up a club trick. The full hand:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | 10xK92QxxAJxxx |  |
| QJxxx549xxK10x |  | A9xxA1086AJxQx |
|  | KxQJ73K10xx9xx |  |

In the other room the Italians play in 3S-1 as well, so a flat board – but could have been +6 IMPs…

Board 20 (game all):

As dealer on the final board of the match, you pick up:

AK1098x Q10xx xx x

West (me) North East South . 1S P 1N\* P . ?

1N=SF (essentially up to 11 points, I can pass with a non-maximum weak NT)

I opened this hand 1S as I judged it to be far too good for a weak 2 opener. I’ve got all my values in my suits with good intermediates and 6-4 shape holding both majors.

What would you rebid?

At the table I rebid 2H, which got a natural and invitational 2N (10-11) from partner, so I thought that 3S would be NF now, but either way 2N can’t be the right place to play with so little in the minors and essentially needing lots of major suit cards from partner to make any tricks. 3S got 3N from partner, which I converted back to 4S knowing that partner would have a stiff spade and so wouldn’t have a real source of tricks playing in no-trumps.

4S went 1 off as partner held:

x AKx QJxxx xxxx

Trumps were 3-3 and a successful heart guess brought home 9 tricks. So where did I go wrong on this hand?

I didn’t realise that bidding 2H then 3S was forcing, showing 6-4 shape and offering partner a choice of games. What I was told by my non-playing captain Michael Byrne in the post mortem was that to reject the invitation with this hand I’d have to rebid 2S first then bid 3H over 2N, which would be NF. This error lost us 5 IMPS instead of gaining us an IMP as in the other room the Italians managed to play in 2H after the uncontested auction 1S-1N-2H. They were playing gazzilli so East knew his partner didn’t have 16+ points, and therefore judged that his side would likely be unable to make a game. This was the full hand:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | QxxxxK9xAKxxx |  |
| AK1098xQ10xxxxx |  | xAKxQJxxxxxxx |
|  | JxxJ9xxA10xQJ10 |  |

We lost this match by 10 IMPs in the end, giving us 7.47 VPS on the decimalised VP scale (which typically rewards small wins and not so much big wins). Not a bad start against a fair team, but it was certainly a match we could (and perhaps should) have won.

**Match 2 (vs Sweden):**

We continued our difficult start to the tournament by facing Sweden in our second match. The Swedes are a fairly solid unit with two experienced pairs – I.Gronkvist/M.Rimstedt and J.Safsten/O.Rimstedt. This is the team that had won the Junior White House tournament in the Netherlands in Spring this year so we knew they could handle themselves. However, we knew that we had the ability to beat them and so went into the match with confidence that we could get our first win on the board.

Board 1 (love all):

Take the South cards for this deal, and see if you agree with the action taken by our Swedish counterpart at my table and my teammate in the other room:

109 10xx AKxx KJ10x

North East South (you) West . 1S 4H ?

What would be your call here?

South decided to pass at both tables in our match, which seems strange when you have an 11 count facing a 1st in hand opener – to me a t/o double feels better (and you don’t have to worry about partner pulling to 4S if he has a weak NT, as with most poor balanced hands partner will just pass 4HX). After south has passed so does west, and the problem now comes round to north, who holds:

AQJ8xx - QJx 9xxx

The winning action on the deal is to bid 4S, but it’s not so easy for north, as for all he knows west could be sitting with a strong NT and partner with nothing much at all – making for a big minus score in 4SX. Also, as we hold a heart void it’s definitely possible that partner could have a trump trick or two against 4H, in fact he doesn’t need much to actually beat 4H, a singleton spade and a trump holding like K10x will suffice if he has an outside card, and something like xx Q10xx xxx Axxx which beats 4H on top tricks (while 4S wanders at least 3 off) is far from impossible.

At our table North passed 4H out, enabling us to comfortably score +420 as EW, but at the other table north decided to back in with a double of 4H, which shows more values than the hand has, so this unsurprisingly got a swift pass from south who must have been expecting to write up +500 on the scorecard. Unfortunately 4HX made with an overtrick and so we lost 7 IMPS on a board which could have been a 13 IMP pickup for a double game swing (although EW might bid on to 5H for only a 10 IMP gain if the defence to beat it was found). This was the full hand:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | AQJ8xx-QJx9xxx |  |
| xxA8109xxxxAxx |  | KxxKQJ9xxxx-Qx |
|  | 109107xAKxxKJ10x |  |

To hold 4H South has to lead a trump, which might seem difficult to find on the surface but he does have all the other suits wrapped up (as partner is known to have spades), so perhaps a trump lead is called for. Now North would have to play low when a spade is played off the dummy at trick 2, so as to create a spade entry for south, who would then be able to win with 9S when declarer gives up a spade at trick 3, to play a second trump.

Board 2 (NS vul):

As west I became declarer in 3N after the auction:

East South West (me) North .1C\* 1D X\* XX\* .P\* P 2N P .3N

1C=2+Cs (balanced with 12-14/18-19 or unbalanced with real clubs) X=4+Hs XX=Hx in Ds P=minimum, fewer than 3Hs

The QD lead hit the table and when dummy came down I knew I’d need a few things to go my way:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Q654AxJ632AKx |  |
|  | K10Q987xK8QJ10x |  |

I won with KD in hand as east followed with 5 (reverse attitude), I continued with a heart to A and a heart from the dummy – RHO won K (LHO following upwards to show an even number) and switched to 9S. How would you play from here?

I played KS from hand, hoping to block the spade suit as I thought the layout was likely to be AJxxx on my left and 9x on my right, LHO would have to win AS thus severing the communications between him and his partner, as he wouldn’t be able to duck without conceding a trick to QS later on. My plan was then to try and throw RHO in with a diamond if LHO continued with a non-diamond, leaving this position after eliminating the other suits:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | --J6x- |  |
| JJx- |  | --A109- |
|  | -988- |  |

As long as LHO’s diamond isn’t 9 or 10, then I’m always home by conceding 8D to RHO. Alternatively, if LHO switches to a diamond after winning AS, then he would be severing the communications between the defenders, as after winning 9D RHO would be unable to cash AD without giving me my 9th trick, and would therefore have to switch back to spades. At this point I’d be left hoping that RHO held 98 or 97 doubleton of spades, so I could then set up 6S on dummy.

Unfortunately, this wasn’t the layout of the hand – after winning AS LHO played back a LOW spade, at which point I knew I’d been done by a nice 9S switch from J9x. Now I should have played Q from dummy, hoping that RHO wouldn’t unblock J or started with the legitimate case of J98 so I could then throw him in with a spade later on to lead away from AD. I made the silly play of a low card from dummy, which didn’t even put the defenders to the test, and so I went one off in 3N. I think it’s pretty hard to make the winning play of putting in 10S after RHO switches to 9, as even if LHO held AJxxx spades he would surely still have led QD.

At the other table the first 4 tricks went in exactly the same way, my team-mate finding the same deceptive switch to 9S, but after winning AS north switched back to a diamond, and south then erred by cashing AD after winning 9. Unfortunately this board lost us 11 IMPs.

Board 5 (NS vul):

A nice position in the spade suit arose here – what card would you lead from J975 when dummy on your right held K86? The correct card is the 9, as this un-freezes the suit when partner has Qxx (what can declarer do? If he covers 9 with the 10 then partner can cover with Q and now you hold 97x over 8x in dummy with Ax on your left) , enabling him to lead the suit from his side of the table when he next gets in. This is one of the less common types of surrounding play, and it was found by my partner Freddie. Playing 9 also has the added non-technical benefit of perhaps convincing declarer to play Q from Q10x, hoping to block the suit when partner has AJxxx (as seen in hand 2).

Anyway, put yourself in my partner's seat for this hand - as east you're defending 3N after NS have a precision auction to 3N (both hands are suspected to have a weak NT, north has shown 4 hearts):

Partner leads 6H (4th/2nd):

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | K86K1097AJ94Jx |
|  | J975xQ1085K1065 |  |

The Swedish declarer wins 10H on dummy (playing 5 from hand) and plays JD to your queen and his K (partner following with 3 - standard smith). He then plays 2H from hand, partner winning with A, what do you pitch?

Throwing a diamond is suicidal, so you must choose between the black suits. Partner must have 5 hearts (or else NS would be in 4H), and from his lead of 6 you know he has 3 cards higher, and the only cards higher than 6 that aren't on view are A (which partner's already turned up with), Q, J, 8 and 7. Holding J52 declarer would surely play low at trick 1, in order to play a diamond from his hand up towards AJ9x (which seems more natural than trying to take the backwards hook as he did). Holding Q52 it would be better for declarer to play QH from hand after winning KD, so as not to block the suit. So it feels like partner has AQJ63 and declarer 852, especially as partner should have a good heart holding to lead one when he has length in dummy’s suit. As partner had an original point range of 8-10, he can only have 1-3 left. Partner therefore must have a black queen, and you want him to switch to the suit in which he has Q. If partner has QS, in order to profit from a spade switch, he also must hold 10 (if he switches to a spade from Qxx this freezes the suit, as declarer will be left with 10x and dummy K8, enabling you to be thrown in with a diamond later on). However, if partner has QC, he doesn’t need 9 in order for you to gain from a club switch (this could also be necessary to break up a throw in if declarer has AQC). All in all a club switch from partner feels best, so you decide to pitch a low spade (discouraging, intending to encourage a club switch). This could lose when declarer has 4 spades, but if he does then you’re going to be progressively squeezed on the run of dummy’s hearts anyway (if you pitch a club, declarer would cash KH, you have to pitch another club but then a club would be ducked to rectify the count, followed by A and Q clubs which would squeeze you in spades and diamonds).

You can’t afford to pitch an encouraging club though (even if you had a high pip to spare), as this would render you vulnerable to a throw in later on if declarer started with AQx of clubs. He’d duck one club, then cash AQ clubs and play a spade to 8 (ducking a round to make sure your partner couldn’t get in with a spade later on to break up the throw in), and now on the forced spade return he’d win in dummy, cash KH (forcing a spade discard from your hand), and play a spade to hand, completing the elimination, now a diamond ducked to you would see you have to lead from 10x of diamonds into A9 on the table.

Now partner obediently switches to 7C (2nd and 4th), declarer plays J from dummy and you cover with K, which wins the trick. Now due to your accurate discarding declarer can’t make his contract unless he plays perfectly from here out. This is the position after you continue with another club at trick 5:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | K86K9A94- |  |
| QxxQJ3-9x |  | J97-1085106 |
|  | A10x8762A |  |

Declarer can play a heart to K now, letting you choose the method of your own demise. If you pitch a diamond, declarer just gives up a diamond. If you pitch a club, declarer can come to hand with AS, cash AC (extracting your exit card) and play a spade to 8, you can win and return a spade to delay the misery but now a low diamond from dummy throws you in to lead up to dummy’s tenace.

The most beautiful endgame occurs when you pitch a spade – you’ve now been squeezed out of your spade guard, so the emphasis of the hand turns from a throw in/strip squeeze against you, to a strip squeeze against your partner. Declarer plays a low diamond from dummy (west pitching a heart), so you win and return a club (there’s nothing better), now declarer wins and plays a diamond to A and west feels the pressure, he can delay by discarding a club, but now you throw him in with a heart leaving this position:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | K86--- |  |
| Qxx--- |  | J9-10- |
|  | A10x--- |  |

A low spade from west and declarer can win east’s JS and pin the 9 with 10 to make his game.

 It’s worth noting that if partner had Q of clubs then 3N could never be made after partner switched to a club when in with AH – as you can now afford to pitch a diamond (because if declarer gives up a diamond you have 3 clubs, a heart and a diamond to set 3N), preventing the strip squeeze from ever developing.

However, this wasn’t the actual layout of the hand – South actually had:

A10x 852 K76 AQ9x

And so East was strip squeezed – he could pitch 2 spades on the hearts, but then declarer could cash A and K of spades and throw him in with a club. The Swedish declarer at our table didn’t read the position though, east actually pitched 6C on AH, and now declarer ducked the club switch. Declarer presumably played east for 5 clubs, and so was intending to throw him in with a diamond, when in fact the clubs were cashing after east’s club pitch. Both tables went off in 3N, so a flat board.

Board 11 (Love all):

You reach 4H after this auction:

 South West North (you) East . P P 1H P . 2H X 3C 3D . 3H P 4H

 KD lead hits the table, RHO overtakes and switches to a trump which runs to dummy’s 9. How would you plan the play from here?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Q1086Q9x107xxKx |  |
|  |  |  |
|  | A7xKJxxxxAQJ9 |  |

You have 4 club tricks, 4 trumps and a spade. Your tenth trick will also have to come from spades, as you don’t have the entries to dummy to play a dummy reversal, and if you try to pitch two spades on your clubs – hoping to ruff a spade on dummy, the 4th club will be ruffed, while if you play another trump the defence will win and clear trumps.

So you need to play Q1086 opposite A7x for two tricks, what’s the best way to tackle this suit?

You could play on trumps, and then try to guess the spades by playing one to 10 or one to Q, but RHO is likely to hold both spade honours. There is a much better line available. You can play to eliminate the minors and play a spade to 10, which will give you an extra chance of making your contract when RHO has both KS and JS. For his 3D bid, LHO must hold at least 5 diamonds, so you can eliminate the suit by ruffing two diamonds in hand, and since entries to dummy are sparse, you must start by ruffing a diamond now. You continue with a trump, LHO winning A and playing another trump. You can now ruff another diamond, cash 4 clubs and play a spade to 10, throwing RHO in to lead away from his Kx of spades.

As it happened, this was an unnecessary precaution, as on this layout RHO held only KS. This was another flat board, and was played well at both tables.

Board 15 (NS vul):

Late on in the match I picked up this collection:

AK9x Axx Qxx Q109

As per your methods, you open a strong NT (15-17), and the auction proceeds uncontested:

You Partner .1N 2D\* .2H 3N . ? 2D=transfer to hearts

What would you have done in my situation?

Holding 3 trumps you’d usually pull to 4H, but this position is a little different. You have 4333 shape, so no ruffing value, and soft values in the minors – there’s much more of a case for passing 3N now. The problem with settling in 4H is that you might not have enough tricks, for example give partner xxx Kxxxx Axx Kx and you need everything to be right in 4H, whereas in 3N your chances are much better – if the defence attacks any suit (thereby likely giving you a trick in that suit) then as long as hearts are 3-2 you can just give up a heart and a club for 9 tricks.

On the other hand, if partner holds e.g. Qxx KQxxx xx KJx then a diamond lead would likely set 3N with 4H on ice.

All things considered, I decided to pull to 4H due to my poor minor suit holdings, while my spade suit could easily act as a trick source in 4H.

Neither 3N nor 4H made on the deal, as the full hand was:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Qxx10xA98xxxxx |  |
| AK9xAxxQxxQ109 |  | 108xKQ9xxKxJxx |
|  | JxxJxxJ10xAK8x |  |

All north has to do against 3N is lead his longest suit, as long as south unblocks J or 10 underneath dummy’s K, which seems fairly routine. 4H is slightly better than 3N in this way, as you have the chance to first play a diamond to K and duck a diamond hoping for Ax in the north hand, but you can then take the double spade finesse. Unfortunately this proved to be 10 IMPs out, as in the other room the Swedes managed to make 4H.

Board 16 (EW vul):

You land in 6D after an uncontested auction, and receive 10H lead:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | AKJ10xxxJ1076Ax |  |
|  |  |  |
|  | xAKA98xxKJ8xx |  |

You win AH in hand, how would you plan the play?

You need to play trumps for one loser and the best odds come from the double hook. You also need to either take 2 club ruffs on dummy or 2 spade ruffs in hand to cope with a 5-1 split in either black suit. You decide to try and ruff 2 clubs on dummy, as you have more entries to hand. Crossing with a club to A is dangerous, risking a club ruff (or over-ruff if you pitch a club on KH) if LHO wins the first diamond, so you decide to cross to AS and play JD, RHO covering with Q, and you pause to reflect.

It feels like LHO started with Kxx trumps, so you can no longer ruff 2 clubs on the dummy, as you can’t re-enter your hand twice safely. If you ruff a club, you need the AKS to stand up in order to pitch your 5th club, but then you might as well play to bring in the spades, as you can no longer survive on a 5-1 spade break if you try and ruff 2 clubs on dummy (at least without a good guess). So with this in mind you play a club to A and ruff a spade, followed by a trump. LHO wins and does best to play another trump, but now you can just ruff another spade, ruff a club and dummy is good. You can even make 6D when spades are 5-1 with RHO on this line, as you can take a ruffing finesse against his Q when LHO shows out after you ruff the second round.

On the actual layout, both clubs and spades were 3-3, but there’s no harm in trying to combine your chances. This was a flat board in 6D made.

Unfortunately we lost this match by 41 IMPs, leaving us with a measly 2.32 VPs and a lot of catching up to do in the final match of the day.

**Match 3 (vs Poland):**

Our last match of the opening day was against the Poles. Most Polish teams are known to be very good card players and madly aggressive bidders, but we knew very little about this Polish team going into the match.

Board 3 (EW vul):

You become declarer in 4H after an uncontested auction, and 10D lead hits the table, how would you plan the play?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | J85xxQ7xKQ87x |  |
|  |  |  |
|  | xxxAKJ9AJxA9x |  |

I played low from the dummy at trick one (best technique, as then RHO can’t attack the diamond suit holding Q, whereas either defender can if you play Q from dummy), winning J in hand, and gave up a spade. LHO won with Q and continued with another diamond, again I played low from dummy, RHO contributed 8 and I won with A. I now cashed AH (to cater for stiff Q offside) felling 10 from RHO, and ruffed a spade. Now when I played a trump off the dummy RHO showed out, and all I needed to do was play low (going down only when RHO has 4 clubs or LHO J10xx), but foolishly I won with A, ruffed another spade, played KC (unblocking 9 from hand), a club to A and another club. Had LHO followed I’d have been home, but he ruffed and the defence had two tricks to cash to condemn me to one down. This line only gains when LHO has 4 clubs including J and 10, as now you take 2 spade ruffs, 2 diamonds, 2 trumps, 3 clubs and a club ruff.

In fact the best line is not to take the safety play in trumps – just ruff a spade at trick 4, then play a heart to J. Now you can make your contract when both clubs and trumps are 4-1, as ducking a trump early means you don’t have to give up on ruffing two spades on dummy (as dummy still has a trump if RHO wins and plays another), and you don’t lose trump control (like I did on my line as in the end position I couldn’t duck a trump without being forced with a spade by LHO).

If LHO wins QH and plays a diamond, you should definitely cash a top heart before ruffing another spade in dummy though, as if the trump position was actually stiff Q with LHO, you need to finesse against RHO’s 10 (and you can’t both ruff a spade and knowingly pick up the trumps). If you err and ruff another spade in dummy then uncover the poor trump break, RHO will be able to set 4H by ruffing in on the 3rd club and cashing a diamond for one down. You must cash a top heart before ruffing your second spade on dummy, as you can then fall back on clubs being 4-1 or Hxxx with LHO (by playing 9C to K and a club to A, uncovering the club position), by giving up on your second spade ruff. The full hand was:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | J85xxQ7xKQ87x |  |
| AQ9xxQ76x10x10x |  | K10xx10K98xxJxx |
|  | xxxAKJ9AJxA9x |  |

This misplay only lost us 4 IMPs - in the other room NS played in 1N+1. But this was a big waste as I lost us an opportunity for a 7 IMP pickup.

Board 4 (game all):

Put yourself in my opponent’s seat here and see what you would have done in his place, you hold:

Q7xx A K87xx Q9x

West North East (you) South . 2S\* X 4S P . P 5C ?

2S=lucas style 5S+4m weak

What would be your call here?

It feels automatic to pass with only 4 card trump support (knowing your side only holds 9 trumps) and defensive values in the other suits, but our Polish opponent found the very good bid of 5S, no doubt reasoning that partner was likely to hold diamonds as his minor (giving his side a double fit) and as NS hadn’t bid hearts partner rates to have length there as well, and as a result partner may well hold a singleton or even void club. 5S worked very well, as the full hand was:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | AxQ10xx-AKJ108xx |  |
| J98xxxxxAQxxx- |  | Q7xxAKxxxxQ9x |
|  | K10KJ9xxJ109xxx |  |

With north on lead at our table we couldn’t touch 5S (at least we didn’t double it!). Do you think that either north or south should have found a bid over 5S?

I held the south cards and at the table I thought partner might hold something like x Axx Kx AKQxxxx, in which case 6C is likely 2 off and 5S may well go off as well (although it might make on a bad day with 6C a good sac), so I passed. It’s difficult for north to find another bid, as he’s already stretched his hand by doubling then bidding again to show a big hand. He has quite a lot of defence holding 2 aces and a diamond void, but equally he can’t be sure that we’re beating 5S. As it happens 6C is a very good contract, only failing if clubs are 3-0 offside or if the defence finds a heart ruff.

At the other table the Polish NS sacrificed in 6HX over 5S which went two off (I don’t know how the defence went, I suppose East led a club and gave his partner two ruffs). Interestingly 6H can be beaten by two no matter who has the lead, as on a diamond or spade lead declarer can give up a trump but the defenders can take away his elbow room by forcing the dummy with a diamond. Declarer can’t afford to draw trumps and give up a club, as East could then cash a diamond, and if declarer ruffs three diamonds in the dummy he’ll be endplayed there to exit a club (declarer will have to use two entries to hand to ruff 2 more diamonds), giving the defence AH, a club ruff and QC.

We lost 5 IMPs on this board – it’s tough but it could have been another 7 IMP gain if we’d bid to 6CX (or undoubled for 9 IMPS).

Board 17 (love all):

How would you play 4S here after 2S-4S and KH lead?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | AAJ10xxAQ9xxxK |  |
|  |  |  |
|  | KQJ108x910xxJ10x |  |

Playing diamonds for 1 loser by taking the successful double finesse will bring 4S home, but do you think there’s a better line? I think it’s best to run JH at trick 2 pitching a club from hand, now you still have only two club losers (you can pitch one on a winning heart), but you have the extra chance of ruffing the hearts good. After LHO wins QH and plays a trump (best), you can now ruff a small heart high, and if both opponents follow you’re home – draw trumps, play a diamond to A, pitch two clubs on the hearts, ruff KC back to hand and play a diamond up for a potential overtrick. If one defender shows out when you ruff a heart, you’re not in as good a position as you would have been without giving up a heart (as you have to play a diamond to A immediately to pitch a club on 10H, therefore giving up on the double diamond hook), but you can still fall back on playing up to the diamonds, only going off when RHO began with KJx(x).

At our table my partner got KH lead but elected to take the double diamond finesse instead of playing for the hearts to come in, so went one off. In the other room the Polish NS managed to make 4S on a trump lead, so we lost 11 IMPs on the board. The full hand was:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | AAJ10xxAQ9xxxK |  |
| xxxKQxx-98xxxx |  | 9xx8xxKJxxAQx |
|  | KQJ108x910xxJ10x |  |

4S can be beaten if the defence take their diamond ruff and exit a trump, as then declarer can’t give up a heart without allowing the defenders to score 2 clubs, a heart and a diamond ruff. Even a trump lead will suffice if as soon as declarer gives up KC east gives his partner a diamond ruff (if he doesn’t then declarer can still run JH pitching a diamond, then pitch another diamond from hand using AD as an entry.

Sadly this was our biggest defeat of the tournament, in a match which we could have done so much better in, against a team that we should have beaten (this Polish team was nowhere near as good as Polish U21 teams of old).

We ended day 1 on just 10.62 VPs from 3 matches, placed 15th/16. Team morale was pretty low, but we knew there was a long way to go yet and a big win against Hungary (one of the weaker sides in the event) in the morning would put us back into contention and give us a much needed boost.

**Match 4 (vs Hungary):**

We hadn’t played against these Hungarians before, so we didn’t know what to expect, but they were less than 4 VPs ahead of us going into the match so we fancied our chances.

Board 5 (NS vul):

Take my partner’s seat for this hand, as north you hold:

Qxx Q8xx A8x xxx

Partner opens 1N (15-17) and RHO passes. Would you invite or pass 1N?

You could have 25 points between you, and being vulnerable it feels like the right time to try for a thin game, but still I don’t think it’s right to invite on this hand. You have 3433 shape (which often doesn’t play very well as you only have one 4-card suit to try and establish long winners in) and Qxx doesn’t feel like a great value. You also don’t have very good intermediate values, so overall I think it’s a stand out to pass 1N. My partner Freddie judged this well at our table and passed, which was best as the full hand was:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | QxxQ8xxA8xxxx |  |
| A10x9xx10xxxA8x |  | xxxxKJ10QxK10xx |
|  | KJ9AxxKJ9xQJ9 |  |

1N was the limit of the hand, although at our table 8 tricks were made on a misdefence. In the other room the Hungarian NS bid to 3N and went 3 off, so 9 IMPs to the good guys.

Board 6 (EW vul):

I became declarer in 4S after this auction, with RHO passing first in:

South (me) North . 1S 2N\* . 3C\* 4S

2N=jacoby, 4+S GF 3C=minimum, any shape

How would you plan the play on QH lead?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | A98xxxKJxxKJx |  |
|  |  |  |
|  | KJxxxAK109xxxx |  |

You can see you’re going to have your work cut out to make this one, if trumps don’t come in for no losers you’ll have to either find AQ diamonds onside or make the right guess in clubs followed by the right guess in diamonds. At least LHO has helped you out by giving you a marked ruffing finesse position in the heart suit, but this has only really gained you a tempo as you could have ruffed two hearts on the dummy anyway.

I decided it was best to try and take a diamond pitch immediately, as if I played on trumps now and lost the lead a diamond switch from either side of the table could spell defeat. After winning AH I played a club up at trick 2, LHO following with 10 – I decided that LHO was more likely to have A than Q, as he might well have led a club from Q109x in preference to a heart from QJx(x), so I called for K from dummy. After winning with A RHO played another club, you ruff and LHO drops Q! How would you continue now?

It’s now been revealed that RHO started with 7 clubs and failed to open the bidding, so there’s an awful lot you can infer from this. It feels likely that RHO is 2227 shape, as this is the most common reason not to open a pre-empt on a half decent suit like A98xxxx, but you can’t bank on this. What you can be sure of is that RHO is very unlikely to hold a 10 count plus, as this would surely be a 1 level opener in anyone’s book. With this in mind I continued with KS from hand, knowing that RHO would be the one with shortage if they broke badly. If RHO had followed with 10, I would have ran JS not caring if RHO held Q10, as now I’d be almost 100% for my contract – I would be able to pitch a diamond on JC and play a diamond to K knowing RHO wouldn’t hold AD (he’s already turned up with 6 points). RHO actually followed with 7, so you continue with a trump to K - RHO pitching a club, a heart to K and 10H, covered and ruffed on dummy as RHO shows out. This is the position at trick 7:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | 9-KJxxJ |  |
|  |  |  |
|  | Jx9xxx- |  |

You cash JC pitching a diamond from hand, while LHO also discards, now you give up a trump to LHO who exits a heart which you win in hand – decision time.

At this point you know LHO’s hand exactly, apart from his diamond holding:

Q10x QJxxx Hxx Q10

You could argue that with AD LHO might have made a t/o double of 1S, but this is hardly solid evidence – an 11 count with Hxx in RHO’s suit isn’t the classical definition of a t/o double. This is the logic I used at the table – so I played a diamond to J, but there is in fact a stronger inference available, however subtle it may be. RHO has shown up with:

x xx Hxx A98xxxx

In general when pre-empting it’s better not to have a wealth of aces – they are defensive values and when pre-empting the idea is to have a high offense to defence ratio, i.e. to have lots of playing strength and little defence, allowing partner to better judge what to do with his hand, especially when the opponents get involved. If you open pre-empts with too much defence partner is going to sacrifice and raise too vigorously when it’s the wrong thing to do – as he expects the opponents to be able to make their contract. This is especially true if you hold two bullets and nothing else. In this way, RHO is much more likely to have opened 3C with QD, so he rates to hold AD rather than QD.

My reasoning wasn’t the best available to me, but by playing a diamond to J I still brought my contract home - RHO did indeed hold AD. At the other table they went 1 off in 4S, so 10 more IMPs in.

Board 9 (EW vul):

What would you have led against this 3C contract in my place?

Axx Q10xx QJxx Ax

North East South (me) West . P 1C X 2C . 2S P P 3C

1C=better minor, 3+C

I chose to lead AC, thinking declarer might try to take ruffs in his short trump hand, but this is flawed logic. Leading AC just gives a tempo away (and sometimes a trick immediately), so another lead is called for. How about AS? This still isn’t great - partner doesn’t have to have a primetime spade suit for bidding 2S, so we’re down to a choice between the red suits. It feels more natural to lead from QJxx than it does from Q10xx, it’s tight but QD lead needs slightly less from partner for it to work. Here’s the full hand:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Q9xxxxxKxxJ10x |  |
| JxJ9xA10xQ8xxx |  | K10xAKxxxxxK9x |
|  | AxxQ10xxQJxxAx |  |

A diamond was the only lead to beat the contract – on AC lead declarer just gave up a heart, a spade or heart lead just gives the contract immediately. At the other table our teammates beat 2S by 1, so I had turned a 4 IMP gain into a 2 IMP loss with my poor lead.

Board 13 (game all):

You’re defending 4H on the auction:

North East South (me) West . P P P 1N . P 2D\* P 2H . P 2N P 3H . P 4H

1N=15-17 2D=hearts

Partner leads JC (standard leads):

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  | 10xxAK109xxxQ9x |  |
|  |  |  |  | Q9xxKxxxA8xxx |

Declarer plays low from the dummy, how would you plan the defence?

From the auction it sounds like partner has 4 trumps and about a 7 count. Declarer has 5 trump tricks, 2 club tricks (declarer can now pick up the suit by winning K and playing one to 9) and at least one more ace in spades or diamonds. If partner has the right cards, e.g. KS and QJD, then it looks like there’s nothing declarer can do – a passive defence will suffice, but if partner has some wasted values in hearts then we must find the killing defence now. Can it be necessary to switch to a spade? This will only work when partner has KJS, as the presence of 10 on dummy stops the run of any tricks when partner has e.g. AJx. If partner does have KJxS then he must also have QD, if he doesn’t have 10D then declarer will be able to take a double diamond hook and pitch a spade from dummy. A diamond switch can only be needed when partner has QD and AS (so declarer can pick up the spades for 3 tricks when he has KJ8x), but this is only to stop the overtrick, not to defeat the contract.

Overall it feels unlikely that you’re going to beat this contract unless you can find a helpful lie of the cards, so you can play for partner to have KJx spades and QD, or you can play for a much more likely lie – partner having a stiff JC. After all J isn’t an attractive lead from Jx, so there are only two realistic holdings partner can have in the club suit – J10x or stiff J. So you’ve decided to win AC and play to give partner a ruff at trick 2, but which suit do you want him to switch to after ruffing? I think you want partner to switch to a diamond – as if he has nothing in diamonds then no harm has come to you – let’s say declarer has AQJ10 diamonds, then as he’s already marked with 4 clubs and 3 trumps, he can only have 2 spades, either headed by K or A (as partner would cash 2 spades after a ruff if he had AKS), so the defence would only have been able to take 1 spade anyway. Plus if partner has nothing in diamonds then he’ll switch to a high one and you’ll be able to play low confidently, stopping declarer from picking up 4 diamond tricks – he can only take the finesse twice. The time when it’s compulsory for partner to switch to a diamond is when he has AD and QH – if he fails to cash AD then declarer can win the switch, cash AH, play a spade to J, take the heart hook, draw trumps and pitch both dummy’s diamonds on 4th spade and 4th club. This is a very real danger, so you play a low club back and partner obligingly switches to AD and another diamond – now you can win K and get the added bonus of giving him another club ruff for down 2.

At the table I erred by playing small on JC lead, hoping to not give declarer a tempo and reasoning that if partner held stiff JC then he’d likely need AD to beat it anyway. This was poor play as the only realistic chance of beating 4H was to find partner with a stiff club. The full layout was slightly different to what we’d expected from the bidding – West held 4 hearts and had failed to superaccept initially or raise to game after 2N:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | JxxxJxxA10xxxJ |  |
| AKxQxxxQJK10xx |  | 10xxAK109xxxQ9x |
|  | Q9xxKxxxA8xxx |  |

At the other table teammates had also brought home 4H on JC lead, so a flat board which could have been a 12 IMP gain.

After an eventful match in which 80 IMPS changed hands we ended up winning by 56, giving us 19.17 VPs. As a team we were happy to be back on track with a big win, but we couldn’t help the feeling that we’d missed out on the maximum of 20VPs.

**Match 5 (vs France):**

We’ve been face to face with the French many a time at the bridge table recently with mostly poor fortune, but we had pulled a big win over them in the first match of the Channel Trophy in December 2014, so we went into the match knowing we had the strength to hammer them. French sides generally tend to be conservative in the bidding and solid in their cardplay, but we know this team quite well and they’re much more aggressive than the standard French stereotype suggests.

Board 3 (EW vul):

What would you have done in my partner’s shoes here:

AK10xx AKJxx Ax 9

Partner opens 3C in 2nd seat and RHO passes – what would be your call?

My partner chose to bid a forcing 3S, and when I raised to 4S he passed. This seems to me to be perfectly sensible, but it’s not too hard to construct a hand for partner where 6C is good – partner should have a very good suit for a 2nd in unfavourable pre-empt (as you’re only pre-empting one unpassed opponent for the price of one unpassed partner here – so the odds of pre-empting your opponents out of a good contract are much lower than in 1st or 3rd seat). Partner must have a minimum holding of KQ10xxxx clubs (some wouldn’t open 3C even with this suit), and even in this worst case scenario slam isn’t too bad – partner will likely run 9C – the best play in this suit combination, giving odds of 34.375% (vs the inferior play of one to K followed by Q, which is only as good as 25%). Partner will have shortage in at least one of your majors, which he can to ruff that suit good. Overall it feels like slam isn’t too far away, as even the worst case scenario of partner having KQ10xxxx clubs gives reasonable play for a slam. Most pairs play 4 of the other minor as a slam try after a 3m opener, some play it as keycard blackwood while others just like it to set the suit so they can start cueing controls.

Here the auction might have gone:

Me Partner .3C 4D\* .4H\* 4N .5C 6C

4D=slam try 4H=1st or 2nd round cue

Bidding to 6C would have been a big success on the deal, as the full hand was:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | xx10xxxxK9xxAx |  |
| Q9xx10xKQJ8xxx |  | AK10xxAKJxxAx9 |
|  | JxxQxQJxxx10xx |  |

At our table we made 4S with an overtrick, losing an IMP on the board as 2 overs were made in the other room, but this was a big opportunity missed early on in the match.

Board 6 (EW vul):

As East you pick up:

xxxx AKQ6xx A Ax

East (you) South West North . 1H 1S 1N P . ?

What would be your bid now?

It’s difficult to diagnose which game will be better – 3N or 4H. If hearts are coming in for no loser then 3N feels like the better game as all you need is a trick from partner, which he’s likely to have given his 8-10 HCP range. However if hearts aren’t coming in for no loser then perversely 4H will be the better game, in 3N it’s likely that at least one suit will only be stopped once (presumably one of the minor suits), and so if the hearts aren’t running then you need to be able to ruff the defence’s established winners. If partner has for example AQS and KD with the hearts not breaking, 3N will have no more than 8 tricks while 4H will be cold.

Overall it feels to me like 3N is a good gamble, as it requires less from partner to be right – all he needs is one trick if the hearts run. My partner Freddie judged the hand well to choose 3N, however this was still 11 IMPs out as teammates lost 1100 playing in 5CX in the other room. The full hand:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | JJ10KxxxxQ109xx |  |
| A109xxQJ9xxxxx |  | xxxxAKQ6xxAAx |
|  | KQ8xx9xx10xKJx |  |

Many tables played in 4H on the EW cards, which only made because south’s natural lead is KS.

Board 7 (game all):

I was west on this hand - my RHO passed as dealer and I picked up this appealing collection:

Q1087x Q x K109876

Would you open the bidding? If so what would you open?

If you play a Lucas 2S then this feels like a hand you might open it on – even though you have a poor primary suit, you do have a lot of playing strength with 65 shape.

We don’t play these methods though – just 3 weak 2s for us, so I passed, only to find I had to make another decision when LHO’s strong NT opener was passed round to me. With Freddie I played a multi landy defence to a NT (2C=majors, 2D=a 6+major, 2M=5M+4m), and X would show 5m+4M. I thought that whatever I bid would be a distortion of my shape, but there are some advantages to bidding 2S instead of doubling here:

1. If you double this gives the opponents more room to find their red suit fit (it’s more difficult for them to bid over 2S as they’d be playing at the 3 level)
2. There’s a slight chance of game if partner has the right cards (e.g. Kxxx xxx Axxx Ax and partner might try for game knowing he has an ace to solidify my minor suit), and you’d be much more likely to reach 4S than 5C – it’s very rare that a 5m contract is the right place to play after an enemy strong NT opener
3. By bidding 2S you’re showing the right length in your primary suit, so you’ll have no worries about under-competing or missing a game as partner has a more accurate image of your hand than if you’d doubled – which promises a minimum of 5 cards in a minor, and here you have 6 clubs.
4. It’s rarely right to suppress your length in a major in these potentially competitive types of situations – by bidding 2S you’ll be able to outgun your opponents when they bid to 3 of a red suit, whereas you might have to play in 4C or even let them play their contract if you double initially.
5. If you double then partner won’t categorically know which suit you have, and it could get messy if the 1N opener decides to back in with 2H, although this is unlikely.

If you do double and then manage to show clubs before the opponents end up playing their contract though, you will feel better knowing partner will lead a club instead of a spade as he would have done if you’d bid 2S over 1N.

All things considered, you decide to bid 2S, which gets you this dummy:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Ax9xxxKxxxAxx |  |
|  |  |  |
|  | Q1087xQxK109876 |  |

LHO kicks off with AH and continues with another heart which you ruff. How would you plan the play from here?

I decided that I needed to get my side suit going, as I knew I was going to be perpetually forced so I had to counter this by setting up my own suit. I played a club to A first, so that when I played one back if RHO had shortage (LHO couldn’t have club shortage as he opened 1N), he’d either ruff thin air or would pitch and my KC would hold. RHO followed to the second club with Q, but now I couldn’t afford to play another club – as the defender with shorter trumps could ruff and force me again, leaving me a tempo behind. Therefore I now played a trump to A and a trump back – if I could get the trump guess right now and if spades were 3-3 then I could make my contract. I tried Q from hand, as this would allow me to make my contract when trumps were 4-2 with KS on my left, but this lost to LHO’s K, who forced me with another heart, leaving this position with me on lead:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | -9Kxxxx |  |
|  |  |  |
|  | 10-x10987 |  |

I’d lost trump control (this couldn’t be prevented), and so playing a club now would be pointless – the hand without JS would ruff, play a diamond to A and another diamond (or cash JS first if the hand with AD has it), and now dummy would have to play a red suit – forcing my hand before I could force the defence with another club. But there was another chance, now the defenders had forced me to lose trump control I could just play a trump! As long as trump are 3-3, hearts are 4-4 and AD is onside (all seem likely from the play so far, plus this is my only hope of making 2S), then the defence would have to give me the lead on dummy with KD and I could play a club to reach my clubs in hand.

I thus made 2S, which was a flat board as they had at the other table too. The full layout was:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | KJxAKJxA9xxJx |  |
| Q1087xQxK109876 |  | Ax9xxxKxxxAxx |
|  | 9xx10xxxQJ10xQx |  |

4S was actually makeable on the deal, as you play QS to K and A, then play one to 8 to pick up the trump suit for one loser. This line seems a bit double dummy though, and will lead to defeat playing in 2S if south can beat QS with K – leaving the trump suit blocked, so declarer wouldn’t be able to give up a trump in the endgame without first forcing himself one time too many.

Board 10 (game all):

You become declarer in 3N after an uncontested auction and get 7C lead (4th/2nd). How would you plan the play?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | QxxQJ9xK8xK106 |  |
|  |  |  |
|  | AKxAxxQ97xxA3 |  |

Before playing to trick 1 you must decide what you think the club position is. By leading 7C LHO has shown 3 cards higher than 7 in the club suit. If LHO started with both QC and JC then you must put 10 in at trick 1, but if he has only 1 honour in the suit then you must weigh up the advantage of playing small. From RHO’s perspective, holding Q5x or J5x it could be very wrong to play low at trick one after dummy contributes 6 in case partner started with AQ87x and declarer 9x, and if he plays Q you can play one to 10 later on. RHO would also have another issue if he held Qxx, as he needs to play Q when his partner has A987x, although this isn’t so much of an issue – declarer could well get the guess wrong when he has a choice of playing a club to 10 or a club to K later on, although this may require LHO to have an outside entry in order to play another club.

All in all it’s a bit of a toss-up as to whether to play 6 or 10 from dummy, but from a technical perspective playing 10 is your only legitimate chance – playing low relies on a defensive error. However it could be argued that playing 10 isn’t much of a chance, as many players would lead Q from QJ97(x) or QJ87(x). No definitive answer has arisen so far, so perhaps it’s best to examine the club suit in the context of the rest of the hand.

It feels best to play on diamonds for your extra tricks – needing only a 3-2 break to bring home 9 tricks, but if you give up 2 diamond tricks and clubs are 5-3 this will spell defeat, unless you can knock out LHO’s entry first (as LHO is the one who can hold 5 clubs), so as to keep RHO on lead when you give up the second diamond and the clubs are established. The only direct entry LHO can have is AD (KH is a slow entry as we have AH), so at trick 2 you should play on diamonds, so that when the club suit is set up for the defenders LHO won’t have an immediate entry to cash his clubs. The best way to tackle the diamond suit is by playing low towards Q for this reason, as if LHO has AD he can win it but that’s his only entry, then you’ll duck the next club and win the third one, cross to hand and take an avoidance play by covering LHO’s diamond when you play a diamond towards dummy – this only loses when LHO has AJ10D (if he has AJ10x then RHO will show out on the second round of diamonds and you can switch tack by falling back on the heart finesse, hoping to squash 10x in LHO’s hand). The reason why playing a diamond from dummy is technically best is that if RHO has AD, he can either beat air by winning it or playing low, allowing your Q to hold. If QD holds then you must now switch to hearts, taking the correct suit combination play for 1 loser of playing one to Q, then back to A and another one to J (if RHO wins QH with K then if 10 doesn’t fall when you cash AH, the best play in isolation is to play one to 9 next, but in the context of the hand this could differ if LHO shows up to have 5 clubs – by the law of empty spaces, which operates here as RHO rates to not have a 5-card suit of his own to lead). The danger of playing another diamond if QD holds is that LHO might have made a good duck holding Axx, in which case when you duck a diamond on the next trick, RHO will be able to win cheaply and clear the clubs while LHO still has AD. RHO could also hold AJ10xD, making it impossible for you to pick up 3 diamond tricks and so you’ll fail when LHO has KH. So you plan to win AC in hand (not KC on table because you couldn’t then duck the second club), play a spade to Q and a diamond towards Q.

Due to this reasoning it feels like the club position has now become much less relevant, as you have very good chances of making 9 tricks even when you pick up clubs for only 2 winners. I think there’s an extra precaution you can take though – if LHO has Hxxxxx clubs and AJ10D, then it’s best to play low from dummy, so that when LHO wins AD and plays another club RHO can win the club but doesn’t have another one to play – he couldn’t unblock the suit at trick one due to the presence of 10 on dummy.

At our table the French declarer played low from dummy, winning A in hand, but then he played a diamond to K – an error as now he couldn’t manoeuver the diamond suit to make sure LHO’s entry was gone before the clubs were cleared – in order to make the avoidance play LHO had to win his A early. He continued with a diamond from dummy, ducking when RHO produced J, but LHO underplayed with 10 and when RHO cleared the clubs LHO still had AD as an entry. The Frenchman tried his best by trying QH from dummy, but RHO was there with K108x, so he was compelled to one off.

In the other room our teammates made 3N with 2 overtricks on the same small club lead – so 13 IMPs to the good guys. This was the full deal:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | QxxQJ9xK8xK106 |  |
| JxxxxA10xQJ875 |  | 109xxK108xJx942 |
|  | AKxAxxQ97xxA3 |  |

As an interesting side point, suppose that this was the heart position:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Axx |  | QJ9x |
|  | Kx |  |

When QH is led from dummy, which card do you think it's right to play? Let me put it to you another way - if you held Kxx then you'd automatically duck, as if you cover declarer can play one to 9 on the way back, but if you don't cover the suit is frozen. It's also right to play small holding Kxx when declarer has Axxx, as now he has to guess whether to continue with J from dummy (squashing partner's 10, playing you for Kxx), or to play low from dummy (playing you for Kx), whereas if you cover declarer can't get it wrong - when declarer plays low towards dummy next partner's 10 will appear.

In the position above you're trying to make declarer misguess the suit - he can always pick it up but it's your job to convince him not to. Covering with K might well make declarer think you have K10 tight, but if his pips are good enough he may well finesse 10 on the way back to protect against a stiff K in your hand. If you don't cover QH, I think declarer will more often than not play you for Kxx, as with Kxx you'd always play low, but with Kx you might cover - making it a restricted choice situation. Also if you play low smoothly then declarer might find it hard to play you for Kx. However playing low on QH isn't conclusively right, you must be careful as if declarer has a count of your hand he could pick that you have a doubleton heart and follow up with a low heart after Q holds, whereas if you'd covered declarer wouldn't be able to tell whether you had K10 or Kx (he'll probably make the odds play of hooking partner's 10, but if you don't give your opponents the chance to go wrong they never will). I think that you should cover with K some of the time and play low a little more often, but make sure to alternate between the two, especially if you're playing against someone who you play fairly frequently.

Board 14 (love all):

What do you think a reasonable contract is on these cards? How do you think the bidding should go to reach it?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | xxKxxxxKJ8xxx |  |
|  |  |  |
|  | AKQJ10xAQxJxxA |  |

In my eyes 6S seems a good contract – it succeeds on a non-trump lead, or if a trump is led you can still succeed when hearts are 3-3, or when QC drops in two rounds. The percentage of success of this slam can’t really be accurately measured as the human factor of a trump lead is involved, but on a trump lead the slam is 54.1% (35.5% for hearts 3-3, 18.6% for QC dropping in 2).

You can combine all your chances by winning the trump lead, giving up a diamond (to rectify the count), winning the next trump and cashing all but one of your trumps, pitching 3 clubs from the dummy. When LHO has 4+ hearts and QC you can theoretically automatically squeeze him in hearts and clubs, but there is a hitch with this - now cash AQH and AC to try and clarify the position, to reach this ending:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | -Kx-KJ |  |
|  |  |  |
|  | xxJx- |  |

If on the last trump LHO pitches a heart then you know the hearts are coming in so you can discard a club from dummy, but if LHO instead pitches a minor suit card you’ll be totally at sea as to the position and will have to guess whether LHO has unguarded QC, in which case you need to pitch a heart from dummy, or whether hearts were 3-3 all along, and you’ll need to pitch JC from dummy. As a result of this issue, even though the squeeze can technically function you don’t have a full count of the hand (whereas if you’d been able to cash KC earlier pitching a diamond from hand you would have a full count, but unfortunately you can’t do that here without severing your only link to dummy), so you can’t count the squeeze as an extra material chance. However, it’s worth cashing all but one for your trumps here, with the chance that LHO errs and pitches a heart or that the table feel at the time points to the squeeze operating. If not you can always give up on the squeeze, cashing 3 hearts and then KC, hoping either hearts are 3-3 or QC drops, but make sure you don’t cash your final trump – you’ll be squeezing dummy.

I think the sequence to 6S should go something like:

North South . 2C\* . 2D\* 3S . 4C\* 4H\* . 4N 5C . 5H 6S

2C=GF/22-24bal 2D=relay

3S=suit setting 4C+4H=1st/2nd round cue

4N=keycard 5C=1/4 keycards

5H=asks for QS (not too necessary as partner has shown solid spades, but he may have AKJxxxx)

6S=QS, no outside K

At our table the French NS reached 6S but with less accuracy, as south elected to rebid 2S instead of 3S with his 6 solid, which could have left some doubt as to the trump suit for the rest of the auction. They got there in the end though, which was a flat board in +980 as our teamies had also bid the slam. The hearts were 4-2 but QC dropped in 2, so +980 at both tables.

Board 16 (EW vul):

You hold:

x AKJx K87xx K8x

The auction is uncontested:

Partner You . 1N 2C\* . 2H 3S\* . 4C\* 4D\* . 4H ?

1N=15-17 2C=stayman

3S=GF H raise 4C+4D=1st/2nd round cue

Would you take another further action over 4H?

Partner has shown AC (as you have K) by his 4C cue and a hand that is inviting slam, as no cue has been missed out – by bidding 4H partner just doesn’t know whether it’s right to go on or not – 4H is merely another step, not a definitive sign off (if he wanted to sign off he wouldn’t have cued in the first place. It wouldn't make sense for partner to cue, then hear all the good news possible when you make the only cue before 4H with 4D, only to decide that a slam is no longer an option for him). Your KC looks like a very good value opposite partner’s A, you have spade shortage and a good trump suit, plus a potential trick source in diamonds. Opposite as little as AQD, AC and QH slam is almost a certainty, and grand slam may well be on if partner has all three other keycards and QH. It’s hard to imagine a hand where the 5 level is too high if partner only has one keycard, even opposite the worst hand you could think of – KQJ xxxx Qxx AQJ, 5H still has a fair amount of play, plus this hand may well not have bothered cueing in the first place, it would probably just bid 4H over 3S.

You need very little from partner for slam – most strong NTs with 2 keycards and QH will suffice, with either a doubleton diamond or a tenace like AJx, however you can’t rule out partner having wasted values in spades, for example AKQx Qxxx Jxx Ax gives slam almost no play. To overcome this issue it’s best to cue 4S instead of bidding keycard yourself – as if partner holds AKS he will be able to re-evaluate his hand – he’ll know you have a spade shortage (the only control you can have to justify your cue), so the value of his spade honours are hugely diminished and he’ll simply sign off in 5H, thus avoiding the poisonous slam. If partner holds something like KQJx Qxxx Axx Ax then he might think we have AS (but we may well have just bid keycard over 4H holding AS) and we’d find ourselves in a bad slam, but this is a risk you have to take – the frequency of hands that partner can have which make us good for 6H far outweigh the hands which give us poor play for slam.

Unfortunately my partner passed 4H, thinking that he needed good diamond cards for slam to be a good prospect – which is true but I think that I’m likely to hold at least one of A or Q in order to justify my 15-17 range and subsequent club cue. Personally I think you’d be pretty unlucky to hit partner with a strong NT holding all outside keycards and Jxx diamonds. The full hand was:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | QJ10xxxxQxJ10xx |  |
| K8xxQ109xAJxAQ |  | xAKJxK87xxK8x |
|  | A9xxxx109x9xxx |  |

6H required either a 3-2 diamond break (you can cash AQC, draw two rounds of trumps, pitch a diamond on KC, play a diamond to A, diamond to K and a ruff, cross back to dummy with a trump, draw the last trump if necessary and enjoy the long diamonds), or AS onside (trump lead won on dummy, spade to south’s A, another trump won in hand, spade ruff, club to A, spade ruff, D to A, draw trumps and claim). 6H has some extra chances as well – on a non-trump lead the contract is extremely good – you can ruff 3 spades on dummy using a trump, 2 clubs and a diamond as entries to hand – if they lead a club you’ll have to hope either that AS comes down in 3 or you can switch tack and play for diamonds 3-2. You can also fall back on QD being onside if they lead a trump and AS is offside – give up a spade, win 2nd trump in hand, ruff a spade, club to A, spade ruff, club to Q, draw trumps and play a diamond to K, pitch your last spade on a club and take the diamond hook.

I was holding the west cards on this deal, perhaps I could have done better to bid 3N instead of 4C. Here since hearts have been agreed 3N can’t be a suggestion to play there, and because I’m already limited to a 15-17 range it can’t be a definition of strength (e.g. a non-serious slam try). I think 3N can only be a waiting bid in this situation – waiting for partner to cue first, which lets the auction tempo out a lot better here. If I bid 3N partner can cue 4C, which makes my AQC very big cards as partner rates to have K (if he has a shortage then opponents have a 10 card fit which doesn’t seem too likely here, plus AQ tight isn’t such a bad holding opposite a stiff anyway). After 4C I can then cue 4D, which allows partner to truly appreciate the value of his diamond suit – as I will have shown A the suit is now very likely to come in. After I cue 4D I think partner can now just bid keycard as he knows I have a good fitting honour, and the slam will be reached. The French EW in the other room bid to 6H, so we lost 13 IMPs on this board.

Board 17 (love all):

After an uncontested auction you end up as declarer in 3N and receive 5D lead. How would you plan the play?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | AQ987xAKQJxxx |  |
|  |  |  |
|  | xAKJ87JxxxQ87 |  |

You win on dummy and unblock KQD, RHO pitching a spade, continue with a heart to J and cash JD, dummy pitching a spade and RHO another spade. You fear this is the last time you’ll be in your hand so you cash AKH, pitching what from the dummy?

This is the position needing 4 more tricks:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | AQ98--Jxxx |  |
|  |  |  |
|  | xAK87-Q87 |  |

If the spade finesse is right you have 9 tricks, but what if it’s wrong? Do you have any extra chances? Seeing as you’re missing both JS and 10S you have no chance of developing 2 spade tricks unless KS is on your left. You’ll have the opportunity to take the spade finesse later, so for now let’s assume KS is with your RHO, if this is the case you actually have a very good idea of the count of the hand now. RHO has pitched 2 spades, and so if he has KS he must have started with at least 5 spades (otherwise he would be giving you a chance to make your contract by playing A and another spade when in fact he had a safe club discard available). When an opponent pitches from a long suit early in the hand, he’s often discarding from a 5 card suit – this is called the ‘idle fifth’, so you know RHO likely has 5 spades, 2 diamonds and heart length (RHO may well play QH under your AH on the next round, but he’d just be playing the card he’s known to hold as the heart finesse has already won, so this is no indication of him having shortage).

I think you should pitch a spade and a club from the dummy on AKH, leaving you with maximum flexibility in the end position. If RHO follows to AKH he’s now marked with a maximum of 3 clubs, still it can’t be necessary to play a spade to Q now – you can give yourself the extra chance of exiting with a heart (as long as neither defender has shown out on the run of hearts), pitching a club from dummy. If RHO has the 4th heart and LHO doesn’t have both club honours you’re home – as RHO must continue with a club now (lest he give up a spade trick immediately), when LHO wins the club and switches to a spade you just cover his card as cheaply as you can – RHO will win and cash his club honour, but now he must lead into dummy’s spade tenace. It’s no better if upon winning the heart RHO cashes a club honour first then continues with another club, as when LHO exits a spade all you need do is cover his card cheaply again and RHO is left directly endplayed this time.

You’ll go off on this line if LHO has 4 hearts though, as he’ll shift to a spade, RHO winning, cashing a club honour and playing another club for LHO to exit a spade through dummy. An alternative is to exit a club, playing low from both hands – gaining when RHO has a doubleton club including at least one honour as if RHO wins the first club and cashes a heart you can pitch a spade from dummy and on the forced club return LHO can either overtake his partner’s honour and promote dummy’s J or he can play low and leave RHO on lead to play into dummy’s spade tenace. This line does have the advantage of revealing the position before having to find a pitch on the fourth heart though, as if you play a low club and LHO rises then you can be pretty sure that he has AKC, in which case when he exits a spade to RHO and the heart is cashed you won’t have to guess what to discard from dummy anymore, you can pitch a spade knowing LHO only has one spade and HxC left.

You could also consider exiting QC from hand, but in fact this doesn’t have much advantage at all, as even when LHO has both club honours (the one thing you’re trying to protect against) you’ll still go off – LHO wins the club and plays a spade, when you cover on dummy RHO wins and cashes his heart to strip squeeze dummy – if dummy pitches a spade then RHO can just exit a spade and dummy has to lead into LHO’s club tenace. Alternatively if dummy pitches a club RHO can simply play a club and LHO will cash out. I think you’re always likely to go off when LHO has the 4th heart (unless LHO has both AKC) as now clubs are 3-3 and exiting a club will likely give the defence 3 clubs to go with a heart and a spade.

I think the line that you choose to take is based hugely on table feel, but the line that carries the best odds is to play a low club from both hands at trick 6, with the added benefit that LHO may well not appreciate your problem and could rise with a club honour when holding both AKC instead of playing low.

The full hand was:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | AQ987xAKQJxxx |  |
| Jx10xx75xxAK9x |  | K10xxxQ9xx10x10x |
|  | xAKJ87JxxxQ87 |  |

At our table I was west and the French declarer decided to exit a heart from hand, unfortunately I made the grievous error of discarding a spade, so when partner won the heart and played a club to my K I could cash my other club honour and play a spade but declarer just covered on dummy and partner was endplayed. Alternatively I could have exited a spade first, but then when partner plays a club back to my hand I would have no more spades to play and would have to give declarer the rest of the tricks in his hand. This poor error on my behalf cost us 10 IMPs as our teammates went off in 3N in the other room.

Board 18 (NS vul):

See what would you have done in my position here – you pick up:

AKxxx A Q10xx A10x

East South West (me) North . P P 1S 2H .2N\* P 3D 3H . 4S P ?

2N=4S 9-11 3D=game try+, 4+D

Would you have taken any action over 4S? If so what would you bid?

I made a game try on this hand because if partner accepted, thereby showing either a maximum or a good diamond holding, I was intending to bid a slam. As the auction went partner did accept, and I felt even more confident about partner having working values because my LHO had bid his heart suit twice at unfavourable vulnerability – surely marking him with KQH, so whatever values my partner had must be outside hearts. Knowing we had a 9 card fit, I only really needed partner to have KC+AJD for slam to be a good prospect, in fact it’s very hard to construct a hand for partner with no wastage in hearts that gives slam poor play. Worst case scenario partner would have something like Jxxx Jxx Axx KQx – giving 6S fair play – odds of around 40.7% (53.1% for QS dropping in 2 \* 76.56% for diamonds coming in). KD is marked to be on your left so you can cash AKS, then if trumps turn out to be 2-2 you can eliminate hearts by cashing A, playing a club to Dummy’s K, ruff a heart, club to Q, heart ruff, AC cash, diamond to A and a diamond to 10 – you will only fail when LHO has KJx or more diamonds, as if he doesn’t have J you’ve made it, but if he does actually have Jx then he’ll be endplayed into giving you a ruff and discard. You’d really like to be able to make sure of your contract by playing a diamond to 10 in the endgame, but unfortunately you don’t have enough entries to dummy – you must keep a trump in both hands to benefit from a ruff and discard so your last entry to table is AD. If trumps turn out to be 3-1 with Q dropping unfortunately you’ll have to give up on an elimination (a partial elimination doesn’t work as LHO can always get out with a heart and RHO’s trump will be big enough to either force you to ruff low in dummy – therefore not being able to actually have the ‘ruff’ part of ‘ruff and discard’, or if you’d cashed both top spades in hand his trump will be promoted. If partner had J10xx spades a partial elimination would be perfect – perversely you’d actually prefer a 3-1 trump break if this was the holding), and just draw trumps, play a diamond to A and a diamond to 10.

Thinking that 6S would have good play opposite any hand partner could have, I bid keycard thinking that partner must have a diamond control due to him having nothing in hearts, partner showed 0 keycards, but I persevered and enquired about QS, partner showed that and we landed in 6S. This was the full deal:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | -QJ987xAK9xQxx |  |
| AK7xxAQ10xxA10x |  | Q109xKxxJxK9xx |
|  | J8xx10xx8xxJxx |  |

I thought the important thing to ask for was Q of trumps, as I assumed partner to have a diamond control, I really didn’t expect KH to appear on dummy! But perhaps this is reading too much into north’s bidding, in general knowing you have a control in every suit is much more important than knowing if you have Q of trumps when slam bidding. 6S going one off was an 11 IMP loss, at the other table they’d made 4S with an overtrick.

This match was very disappointing – we lost by 36 IMPs in a match we could have easily won. We lost a massive total of 42 IMPs on the last 5 boards of the match – turning 11.59 VPs into 2.94 – sometimes you can appreciate why non-playing captains constantly tear their hair out!