

Board of the Week 38

By Dick Chapman

Here's a problem for the mathematicians among us:

	♠AQ96 ♥J1083 ♦9 ♣A965		
♠ ♥ ♦ ♣	V: EW D: S	♠ ♥ ♦ ♣	
	♠KJ4 ♥AK7 ♦AK765 ♣K2		
South	West	North	East
2NT	Pass	3♣	Pass
3NT*	All pass		

* No 5 or 4 card major

Casual BBO play, imps scoring. After a puppet Stayman sequence you are playing 3NT on the lead of a club. Study this hand and derive a play for the best score.

You have 10 off the top (4=2=2=2) but more is better. Study a bit longer.

The first thing is to not play off four spades. The key play(s) will come in the heart suit, so spades is the way to work back and forth. If you cash four spades then take a losing heart finesse, you may have some trouble getting to the third heart winner.

Next, you have to think about the heart suit when you play to trick 1. Normally we think about ducking to the fourth hand, but you may need the club king later. In my non-expert view, this may not be critical, but let's win the first club in dummy.

It's an easy 11 tricks if you score 3 hearts: AK then either J or 10 will get you there. So far, not much thinking is required.

But in case I haven't said it, more is better. Can you find a way to 12 tricks? And just as important, make sure any line toward 12 tricks doesn't run a risk of 10, 9, or even fewer? It's imps, so overtricks matter less than matchpoint play, but they do matter. Have you ever tied a team game, or lost by 1 imp? I certainly have.

There are (at least) two ways to attack the hearts. One is to take the finesse by leading the jack. If this loses, you still have the three tricks you started with. If East covers with the queen, you can score four tricks in the suit if it breaks 3-3 (about 36% with no other data, but you have a little bit of data in that West may have long clubs, so I don't know the math after that).

The second way to work on hearts is play AK and hope the queen drops. If it does, you have four tricks regardless of the suit division.

We aren't done. Going back to the finesse, let's say East covers the jack. Now you have to figure out who has the 9. Do you play for the suit to divide 3-3, or do you finesse the 8 on the third heart trick? Hmm. Well, if the 9 is in West 50% of the time and the suit is breaking 3-3 36% of the time, it seems that finessing is right. But won't you just be sick if the Q9x were in East and you finessed into the bare 9? Ugh, I don't even want to think about it. You just turned 12 tricks into 11.

In bridge competition, we don't have time to do the fine math, only general concepts. Seven minutes is a long time until you get to this hand, and now you have to know what to do.

I put this question to my mentor Gordon Campbell. "Taking the finesse is better than playing for the drop; but it's close." This is probably experience talking, not mathematics. Thanks, Gordon.

I next went to the ultimate authority of all things, the internet, where truth always prevails. Well, sometimes prevails. From this article on suit combinations...

https://www.bridgehands.com/S/Suit_Combination_2.htm

...we discover case #46 of the 100 most common cases:

Case	Partnership Holding	Need	%	Remarks
46	J 10 x x A K x	4	20	Play A then finesse Q

Taking the recommended action, 20% of the time you will bring in four tricks, and the remaining 80% of the time you bring in the 3 you always had. You do not play for the drop, just as Gordon opined.

The *Bridge Encyclopedia* has a long section devoted to card combinations. You will never learn them all, but you can do your own research and try to get the fundamentals in place.

Do you try to get "table feel?" Some sharps will win the first club in dummy and immediately call the jack of hearts. If East fiddles with the cards, they take the finesse, and if East plays smoothly, they win the ace and king trying for the drop. I didn't say this is good bridge. Your opponents will embarrass you with smooth play...East will duck the jack routinely (because of the 10), and you won't be able to read most Easts. If you are a "table feel" player then good for you. I would rather play more logically.

Oh, by the way, in the actual board the queen was offside so nothing mattered so long as you didn't run those spades first: you got 11 tricks (see next page):

	♠AQ96 ♥J1083 ♦9 ♣A965	
♠532 ♥Q52 ♦1042 ♣Q1094		♠1087 ♥964 ♦QJ83 ♣J73
	♠KJ4 ♥AK7 ♦AK765 ♣K2	

It would have been more interesting if the cards were like this Case 1: (East covers, you play for the drop of the 9):

	♥J1083	
♥652		♥Q94
	♥AK7	

Or this Case 2: (East covers, you finesse the 8):

	♥J1083	
♥9652		♥Q4
	♥AK7	

Which will it be on that third trick? This game will drive you crazy when you get into the weeds of the combinations. In my case, of course, it's not a drive...it's a gimmie putt.

See you at the table.