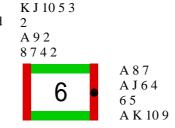
Matters Arising 60

being some thoughts prompted by hands played at Kendal Online 3 - 7 Jan 2022

Helping Partner

On this hand from Thursday East-West bid hearts and North-South diamonds. Usually hearts won the auction, but two Souths found themselves declaring 5DX.



You are East. Partner leads KH and switches to 6C. Naturally you win. Now what?

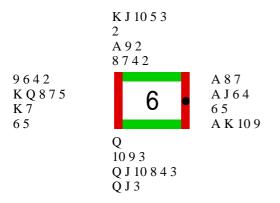
What is that 6C?

You originally couldn't see Q J 6 5 3. Consequently that 6 cannot be second from rubbish and it cannot be fourth best. Presumably therefore it is singleton, doubleton or a slightly strange lead from QJx. So declarer isn't singleton and you can safely take your other club honour.

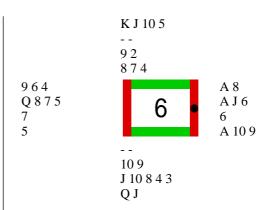
You do and partner follows with the 5. You are not at all upset about setting up declarer's Queen, for a third club ruffed takes care of that. Partner leads a spade back to your A. A fourth club enables partner to ruff with his K, so the defence comes to 2 clubs, 2 ruffs, a heart and a spade. Four off for 800.

One East perhaps worried about heart ruffs on the table switched to a trump rather than taking a second club, trapping his partner's K. Things got worse when he ducked the small spade off table, either hoping partner had the Queen or not wanting to establish dummy's suit.

Now with the help of the 2-2 trump break and a ruffing finesse in spades declerer was able to make the rest for 550. Had these two tables been in the same match that would have been a 1350 point swing for 16 IMPs.



The original position above, and below after KH, club to K, trump to table and small spade ducked to declarer.



Play continues heart ruff, KS A ruff, return to table with last trump and throw declarer's losers on the spades. Had the KS not been covered the ruffing finesse would have been taken by discarding a loser, and another spade led.

Taking the second club immediately shows an appreciation that it will not be ruffed and an understanding of how the subsequent play will go depending on who holds a doubleton.

It is not about grabbing a trick to make sure the contract goes down having been doubled. I've lost count of the nember of doubled contracts I've seen going one off through the defence's haste to prove the double correct, when the scoresheet reveals the undoubled contract regularly going 2 off for the same score.

The hand is also another illustration of the virtue of playing standard rather than random leads. If East can't be sure from the lead that his second club with stand up, defending is a lot harder.

Finally how does West know to switch to a club when partner might have been sat with AQ spades and wanting a spade switch? With a singleton heart on table East knows that West will have to switch, so ignores the usual practice of showing attitude or count according to partnership agreement and instead gives a simple suit preference signal - high for the high suit spades and low for clubs. The 4H had *please lead a club* written all over it.

Weak NT Trap

The major flaw in the weak NT is well-known - from time to time, particularly against strong players, you will concede a large penalty. Some regard this flaw as too large and play a strong NT, some are a bit choosy about what hands they open 1NT on, and some have an inevitably imperfect escape mechanism for when the opposition turn nasty.

We are all familiar with passing the ace twelve count even if we don't (always) practice it ourselves. How else might we be choosy?

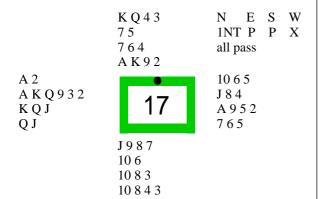
K Q 4 3	Here is North's hand 17 from Thursday's
7 5	teams event, with two suits wide open
7 6 4	without even any length to help defend
A K 9 2	attacks on the red suits.

Perhaps the hand could usefully be opened 1C with intent to rebid 1S over a red suit response. Yes, it makes it easier for the opposition to join in the auction with a red suit, but could anything go seriously wrong?

Trying to extend this approach to other suit combinations hits difficulties as your rebid may need to be at 2 level, bypassing the possible best spot of 1NT and perhaps convincing partner you have 5 cards in your first suit.

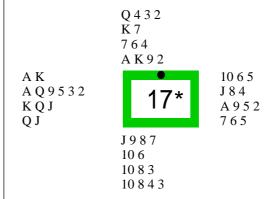
At pairs frequency counts and we can stomach the odd big penalty provided we get plenty of good scores otherwise. Things are different in teams where recovering from one terrible board can be difficult. Perhaps we need a mix and match approach depending on which version of bridge we are playing.

Here is board 17 as played at one table:



East lead a diamond, and North gained the lead at trick 12. Although East-West have game on in hearts, -1100 for NS is ugly.

Now try switching the major suit Kings whilst keeping the distribution the same so that North is only wide open in one suit:



On the diamond lead North soon gets in with KH, so can cash AK C for three tricks and -800. Not good, but an improvement. However the favourable lie of the clubs means that declarer actually gets 4 club tricks for 2 off, -300 and an for him improvement on an East-West game.

It won't always work this way of course, but it hints at a superiority for not being wide open in 2 suits.

We are all used to making remarkable numbers of tricks in a suit contract when holding less than half the points in the pack, but playing in NT with significantly less than 20 points is nearly always asking for trouble. On this deal South should not pass the double out. XX is often used as an SOS, asking partner to bid on the principal that at least with a trump suit you have a little control.

If that is not your style then bid a suit yourself. Forget Stayman and transfers, all bids must be natural in order to give yourself the best chance of a good escape. Here there would be two schools of thought:

- a) bid 2C to give the opposition as much room as possible to rescue you,
- b) bid 2S to dare the oposition to double you into game.

On this hand both work well as there are 7 tricks available in both black suits. If East-West want 100 instead of game you don't mind. But even where the bids work out less well more often that not you will have improved on the sitting duck target of 1NTX.

On the night three other North-Souths had to contend with the double. One was saved by East bidding before South had to make a decision, one South bid 2C, the other 2S. All three joined the rest of the room in witnessing a heart contract by West so didn't have to enter anything like 1100 in the minus column.

Trust Partner

I confess. Big hands make me nervous. Particularly at teams when it can be very easy to be on the wrong end of a big swing. That is why I like to play a system with 3 big bids - 2NT for balanced 20–22, 2D for balanced 23+ or game-forcing, and 2C for hands which may not be game-forcing but on which you are concerned that partner might pass a one level opening when having enough for game. Those hamds with a long suit, 8 playing tricks and not a sniff of a ninth I am often content to open at the one level, for if partner has two tricks they will surely respond.

A K 10 7 2 Thursday's hand 15 was fairly big. A
A 10 7 2 mere 20 points you may say, but 4H has
chances even opposite
A K Q xx xxxx xxxx xxxx

whilst Qxx in spades from partner may be all it takes to bring 4S home.

There is clearly ample scope for game opposite a partner who will pass 1S.

Not that this proved enough to get us to slam

9 J 9 8 6 3 A 8 6 5 J 7 2

A K 10 7 2 A 10 7 2 2 A K Q

with our bidding going

2C - strong forcing 2 in any suit

2D - negative, which usually means less than $8\ points$

2S - forcing

3H - natural and as negatives go not total rubbish

5H - please bid 6 with good trumps.

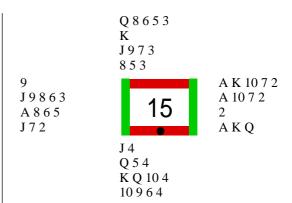
Pass - despite possession of AD reducing what would be good trumps, Jxxxx really doesn't count.

Still we gave it a go, and 480 our way was as good as it got on the night.

You may well reason that you get more mileage out of 2D as a weak bid and therefore need your 2C opener to be stronger than this. Fair enough, it's your system and you have to play it.

What amazed me though was partnerships bidding this hand 1S - 1NT - 3NT.

On a diamond lead this requires the suit 4–4 as there aren't 9 tricks without losing the lead. Fortunately that is the way the diamonds lie, so there was no game swing, but don't they trust their partners not to pass a simple game-forcing 3H rebid?



I welcome any comments or queries sent me at martyn@orpheusmail.co.uk though they may be used in future issues should I choose to produce such. Or they may not. You have been warned.

NB, I do try replying to mails raising a specific point, so if I seem to ignore you do check your spam folder after a day or three.

Martyn Harris spadeilike on BBO