

Matters Arising 78

being some thoughts prompted by hands played at Kendal BC 9 - 13 May 2022

Count

A K 5 4 While West was running out of fingers and
 A J 4 toes as they totted their points on
 A Q 7 Thursday's board 10 East as dealer opened
 A K 5 a red 3H. What now from West?

When it comes to slams I'm a believer in safety over score, and am used to settling for a safe slam in a suit over a potentially higher scoring 6NT even when the NT slam is better than 50-50. Experience shows that through accidents or timidity most slams are missed by a significant portion of the field and I'm prepared to lose a few match points to the 6NT bidders in order to safeguard my match-points against those who fail to reach slam.

6H from me then? No, this is a hand for NT. If partner holds KQxxxx in hearts we can count 7 heart tricks, two black AKs and AD. 12 tricks, with no risk of an enemy void leading to a ruff at trick 1. Only if partner is Queen high in hearts with nothing better than a Knave outside might the heart slam be better, for in that case a 3-0 heart break together with an opponent willing to hold up their King would prevent access to the long hearts. Such a hand does not represent a red pre-empt in my book.

A further bonus is that when the hand is played by West a diamond lead presents declarer with an extra trick there.

Should we be thinking Grand? Definitely worth at least a passing thought. If partner can answer "2" when questioned to how many Kings they hold then the Grand depends on partner also holding QH, or the enemy hearts being 2-1, or picking up that Q by finesse when hearts 3-0. Worth the question surely.

Indeed some would argue that since a black Queen would do the work of providing a 13th trick then if East can show KH in response say to Roman Key Card Blackwood then 7NT is far enough on the right side of 50% to be worth a try.

A K 5 4	<div style="border: 2px solid red; padding: 10px; display: inline-block;">10</div>	J 7
A J 4		K Q 10 8 5 3 2
A Q 7		10 8 5
A K 5		J

On the night 12 tricks in NT are a doddle, with a 13th coming should North lead away from an honour. On a safe lead against 7NT West sweats a bit, but with South holding KD the finesse comes to declarer's rescue.

Forced Finesse

I don't like finesses - they fail half the time. Sometimes though there is no alternative. On Monday only one of 4 declarers made 11 tricks in diamonds. (The traveller says 5 pairs were in diamonds, but I imagine that the 6DX by North was really 6CX or 6SX). I suspect an avoidance of the finesse in favour of ruffing black cards or running trumps until too late was responsible for this sorry state of affairs.

A 7	<div style="border: 2px solid red; padding: 10px; display: inline-block;">13</div>	8 5 2
A Q J		9 8 3
Q 10 9 7 5 4 2		A J 8 3
8		J 9 7

As declarer West should spot quickly that their only possible tricks are diamonds, AS and hearts. Ruffing black suits doesn't help the trick count as it simply turns natural trump tricks into ruffing ones. If the heart finesse works we will want to take it a second time, so will need two entries to dummy. Hence we mustn't use up the diamonds entering dummy to ruff black cards or simply playing them off to try to embarrass the defence.

The defence launch a black suit attack and we are soon in hand with either AS or a club ruff. A trump immediately pulls the singleton K from North, putting an end to any worries we had there. Heart finesse. It seems to work. Return to table via a second round of trumps. Repeat heart finesse. Works. 5D makes for the loss of a club and a spade.

K 10 9 4	<div style="border: 2px solid red; padding: 10px; display: inline-block;">13</div>	8 5 2
10 7 5 2		9 8 3
K		A J 8 3
A Q 10 5		J 9 7
A 7		8 5 2
A Q J		9 8 3
Q 10 9 7 5 4 2		A J 8 3
8		J 9 7
		Q J 6 3
		K 6 4
		6
		K 6 4 3 2

Ugly Slam

As South on Thursday with the 18 point hand shown you can be forgiven for having slam thoughts when partner opens 1S and rebids 2H over your 2C response. Unfortunately in this case if you pursue those thoughts and put partner in 6H they will be faced with an ugly contract to play, there being the twin problems of potentially two trump losers and not enough tricks to overcome.

Double dummy problems are artificial, but we can learn from them if they help us understand the art of the possible. Time to sit North, don your optimist's hat and set about making 6H double dummy on the lead of QD.

	J 10 8 7 6 5	
	K 6 3 2	
	A 3	
	K	
Q 9 3 J 10 8 6 5 2 10 9 6 4	<div style="border: 2px solid green; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;"> 17 </div>	4 2 A 7 Q J 10 7 4 J 8 3 2
	A K Q 9 5 4 K 9 8 A Q 7 5	

First the trump suit. With the lie of the cards we can see that leading small towards dummy's Q and then returning and ducking the suit in hand will force East to use their A on our xs and enable us to use both K and Q as winners. This situation is not particularly rare and when confronted with it declarer has to decide who to play for a doubleton A. When there is a doubleton A you may only have a guesser's chance of being right, but any other line depends on a defender refusing to play their A on your high honour.

Now the trick deficit. Two spades, two diamonds, three clubs gives us seven side suit tricks. By the time we have cleared trumps, losing just one, we have won two trump tricks and have two little trumps left that can be scored separately as ruffs. That only comes to 11.

Time for my favourite suit. Missing just 5 spades a normal 3-2 split would allow us to set up the suit with a single ruff.

Overall play goes win trick 1 in hand with AD. Small trump to table's Q and duck the return to East's now bare A. Win the club switch in hand, play off the AK S and return to hand by drawing the last trump. Ruff a spade, establishing the suit, and you now have 3 spade winners and the last trump in hand together with KD and AQ C on table to fight over the last 5 tricks.

Balancing Act

Here is the full deal of the last hand from Monday's five table session. At three tables West played in 1D, at two North played in spades, with all contracts making.

	A 10 9 3	
	Q	
	9 6 5 2	
	A Q 5 3	
J 4 A 10 8 3 A K Q 7 3 4 2	<div style="border: 2px solid green; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;"> 24 </div>	K 7 5 J 9 7 6 2 10 8 10 9 7
	Q 8 6 2 K 5 4 J 4 K J 8 6	

West has a fairly obvious 1D opener. Clearly this was passed out at three tables, with North-South missing out on a good spade part-score. Who to blame?

There is a school of thought that says North should double holding 12 points, but this seems to be asking for trouble if South has hearts and only a modest number of black cards. Instead I believe that it is South who should come in with a double. Yes they have only 10 points, but an auction starting 1D-P-P is suggestive of the points being roughly evenly split between the two partnerships, and unlike North, South would be reasonably happy to hear partner bid any other suit.

Such doubles are sometimes referred to as balancing doubles and are made at least in part to protect partner in second position from the need to join in immediately with dubious values. Clearly partner needs to be aware of this, and shouldn't punish you by zooming off to the stratosphere when in fact your bid is made partly on the values they are assumed to hold. Here for example one would expect the North hand to be very interested in game opposite a second position double, but opposite a fourth hand double they should be a little more circumspect in case partner is merely balancing rather than holding a full blooded take-out double.

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.

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