

Board of the Week 9

By Dick Chapman

Each of the Boards of the Week 1 through 8 were hands that I personally had played. Today I'm providing a hand that our friend Bo Liu gave me to consider on New Year's Day.

♠AK72		♠QJ10953
♥742		♥K3
♦KQ2		♦8
♣AK5		♣8742

You are East, the contract is 4 spades, and the opening lead is the diamond jack. Give it some thought and don't peek at the answer until you state a line of play to yourself.

(Music playing...waiting...dum, dum, de dum)

At the table you bid this hand in less than 2 minutes, so you have 5 minutes to play it. Spent some of that 5 minutes thinking. [N.B. on the current board, not the ice cold slam you missed on the previous board, and not on what you will be having for supper tonight.]

There is an easy answer which will be right half the time. Perhaps you are the lucky one. There is an even easier answer, which is also the correct answer, and this one doesn't require any luck.

Ready?

Here's the easy answer: cover the diamond jack (losing to the ace). Put the ace of hearts in the North hand. Lose 1 diamond, 1 heart, 1 club, as your heart king will be a trick. Along the way, you will have to work to ruff a club with one of dummy's high trumps. This plan fails anytime South holds the ace of hearts (50%), as you will lose 2 hearts plus a diamond and a club.

Give it some more thought, because the easier answer (the correct one) is right in front of your eyes.

(More music...)

Ready again?

Duck the diamond jack. One of three things will happen:

1. South continues diamonds. Ruff the ace, draw trump, and put a heart loser on the established diamond in dummy. Lose one diamond, one heart, one club.
2. South switches suits. If a club or a spade, win and draw trump, then lead a diamond from dummy for the same effect (ruff the ace then return to dummy for a discard). If a heart, your king becomes a winner and you lose one diamond, one heart, one club.

3. North overtakes the diamond jack with the ace and leads a heart. You lose the ace of diamonds and two hearts (assuming South holds the ace), but your club loser evaporates. You have two diamond winners in dummy for the two club losers in hand.

The point of this presentation is this: often we intermediate and semi-advanced players don't see simple answers that are right in front of us. We go down the first path we see; it either works or it doesn't, and we move on to the next board. But 7 minutes is a long time if we use the time productively (and our opponents have not arrived at the table 4 minutes late, thus causing you to have less than 7 minutes *). Ask what could go wrong. Ask if there is a Plan B. Don't call a card from dummy until you have a solid plan (which could, of course, change as the play develops).

This is the kind of hand that a top expert will solve in 10 seconds. T.E. spends 30 seconds just to make sure, then ducks the lead and South holds. South leads to trick 2, there is no surprise defensive ruff, and T.E. claims 10 tricks after trick 4 or so. But we mortals don't have to do it that way. What we can do is stop being so reflexive ("Cover an honor with an honor!") and start being more analytical ("...unless you need your honors for a ruffing finesse"). Then we play out several tricks and claim at trick 7 or 8 or 13. If we get it right and duck trick 1, I mean.

When Bo gave me the problem, I was reflexive. I said it's easy if the heart ace is in North. Well, it's easy and heart ace is not in North, but I didn't see it. That's why I am not T.E.

My excuse for my reflexive play is I was occupied with another bridge club matter while looking at the layout. Sorry, bad excuse. A secret to winning is "don't let the distractions of the world interfere with good bridge." Push away the distractions for 7 minutes.

I'm grateful to Bo for suggesting this problem. I'm not sure if it was a hand he played, but it is useful to illustrate my point about stopping and thinking before plunging into a line of play that relies on luck. I'm also grateful that Bo was in Little Rock long enough to help a lot of us developing players. It was an honor being his occasional partner and pretty cool being his opponent as well.

* Note: If you are a habitually slow player (if you are one, you know it), you are stealing from your friends. They need their 7 minutes, and when you take 9, you grabbed 2 of theirs. Please don't be a thief. Thank you.