

Board of the Week 25

By Dick Chapman

Today's hand is wild but it did happen, in a very casual BBO session. As North, you hold these cards:

♠AKQJ953 ♥— ♦109532 ♣10

What a hand! 7=0=5=1, so you don't worry too much about points. EW vulnerable, East deals and opens 1 heart, pass by partner, 1 spade by West. Your call?

You pass smoothly. Two clubs by East, pass by partner, 3 clubs by West. Your call?

Three spades could be right, as now it is natural. Can you make it? With this vulnerability, you may not care. You will get forced but it is still tempting.

At the table, you pass. Now East fires out 3NT, pass, pass. Your call? Remember, they are vulnerable and you are not. You didn't bid 3 spades earlier and you wish you had. Should you sacrifice 4 spades now?

East	South	West	North
1♥	Pass	1♠	Pass
2♣	Pass	3♣	Pass
3NT	Pass	??????	

No. There is a better call. What is it? Give it some thought before reading further.

(More Jeopardy theme music, please)

Lightner doubles were invented to deal with slams. As North, you hear East open 1 club, West 1 spade, East 2 hearts (reversing) and the opponents end up in 6 hearts. You have a spade void and a side ace and want partner to lead a spade. You double which says "partner, make a lead you wouldn't normally make." By general consensus, this strongly suggests partner should lead the first suit bid by dummy which isn't trump. You get your ruff and the side ace, down one.

In modern bridge systems, Lightner doubles can also be useful when the opponents have bid 3NT. If the defending side has bid, the double says "I don't care if they bid 3NT, I still want you to lead my suit" or "your suit" depending on which defender bid. But if neither defender bid the double says "make the lead you normally would not make, i.e. dummy's first suit.

Here's the full deal: (next column):

	♠AKQJ953 ♥ ♦109532 ♣10	
♠10864 ♥Q2 ♦AJ7 ♣KJ96	V: B D: S	♠ ♥AKJ843 ♦K64 ♣A853
	♠72 ♥109765 ♦Q8 ♣Q742	

At the table, NS were not using Lightner doubles, so the lead was an uninspiring heart. EW cruised to 11 tricks and could have made more on this lead. A spade lead and it's down 3. Big difference.

But wait, what happens if North does make a Lightner double? It's not alertable, so the declaring side is left to its own devices. Hold the East cards; what do you do? You can ask about the double, and South would be obligated to say "partner wants an unusual lead, one I might not normally make." Now what? East might take a flyer for 4 hearts. This makes 12 tricks double dummy, but 11 might be a normal score. At imps this is about the same as 11 tricks in no trump. Making 10 tricks might cost an imp over 3NT making, but it's a safe move if 3NT is going down.

So is the Lightner double a good idea against 3NT? It's less risky when the declaring side is in slam because there are fewer places to run (they might run to NT, so even here the double isn't fool-proof). In 3NT there might run to 4 of a major (even playing in a 4-3 fit) or 5 of a minor. But in both cases (slams and 3NT) you have to weigh the likelihood of the contract making on the "normal" lead. If the likelihood is strong, then the risk of a runout of your double are not so consequential.

I'll leave to the experts whether doubling 3NT on this particular board is wise. The defenders might not ask, and they might not run. If they run, they might run into more trouble. Partner might have a spade void and they will make overtricks! There are many variables, and that's what makes bridge the fascinating experience that it is.

Some (or many) Easts will rebid 2 hearts and EW will cruise to an easy heart game.

For the record, NS can make 9 tricks in spades. But even going down 1 trick in 4 spades was 6 imps for NS compared to minus 4 imps for allowing 3NT to make. Doubling 3NT then sacrificing 4 spades over a 4 heart will pay off to the bold North players. You don't get 7-5 hands often, and they are almost always better on offense than defense. Unless you get a spade lead for down 3, of course. ☺

See you at the table.