

Board of the Week 81

By Dick Chapman

Here's a hand with lots of discussion points. Online imps pairs, vulnerable, you pick up these cards in fourth seat...

♠AKJ64 ♥A4 ♦KJ ♣KJ108

...and hear the bidding passed around to you. What is your opening call?

2NT comes to mind. But if partner is sitting on a Yarborough you don't want to play there. If partner has the slightest values you want to be in game, probably spades. So, you elect to call 1 spade. Leftie passes and your passed-hand partner erupts with 4 spades. Not a Drury call, for some reason. You are regulars with this partner and Drury is part of your system, but you have never discussed this sequence. Back to you. Pass? Make a slam try?

To answer that, you need more data: Barometer scoring so you know where you stand; Board 13 of a 24 board match; your side has made some unforced errors; you are about 8 imps behind in the match. You need a swing but it's not urgent yet. Now, what is your call?

I elected to make a slam try but even as I write this I'm not sure this was correct. No cue bidding, just RKC Blackwood. Partner comes back with 5 hearts, two key cards without the trump queen.

Does partner have 5 spades? If so, you don't worry so much about the trump queen. But partner might have 4 spades and a singleton somewhere. You are still wondering why no Drury. Maybe it's because partner has 5 spades and a very good passed hand. Maybe it's because partner forgot. Your call?

I hit the accelerator, 6 spades. It's either right or wrong, so let's see. You get an unrevealing heart 3 and this dummy:

♠AKJ64
♥A4
♦KJ
♣KJ108

♠98732
♥75
♦A84
♣A97

Well, it was 5 spades and a doubleton heart. You were really hoping for shortness somewhere. This does not look good. Who has the queen of clubs? There should be a book on that subject.

Ha-ha, that's a joke. There is a book, by the columnist Frank Stewart. It's on my to-read list, but first I have to get through the other 10 bridge books sitting on my shelf.

What is your plan? There is a 78% chance to make if you plan right. While you study, I will [listen to a little bluegrass jam](#).

Ready? Here is the plan you should have made: Win the opening lead, draw trump in two rounds, two top diamonds (no finesse!) ending in dummy, and ruff a diamond. Now you down to only trumps and clubs plus a heart in each hand. The opponents are out of trump. Then exit with a heart. Whichever opponent wins will either give a sluff-ruff by leading a red card or will start the club suit for you so as to eliminate your guess...you get a free finesse and bring in the dicey slam.

Notice I said 78%, not 100%. As in all cases, you should be asking "what could go wrong?" Sadly, when I played the board, what could go wrong did go wrong. The answer is: North is void in spades. Oops. Now what?

If South were void, you are going to lose a spade and you better have some very good luck. You would have to bring in the clubs without losing to the queen and be able to discard the losing heart on the fourth club before you get ruffed by North. That's asking a lot of the cards, but that is what you would have to do.

Lucky (?) for you, it was North who was void, and you can bring in the spades for no loser via a marked finesse. But you still have that pesky club queen lurking about. Do you see why we love/hate this game? Your mind is spinning and you still have to play the board.

There are several methods left. First is get the trump in (diamond in dummy, marked finesse) and just guess clubs.

Second is to try to use some table feel. At trick 3, the moment the trump problem is found, plunk the club jack on the table and check for hesitations by North. If none, win the ace and fly back toward hand with a finesse the other way. But there are problems with this method. First, this time it's online play and you can't get any real feel. Second, good defenders (which I had in this case) are never going to give you any table feel. Any good North holding the club queen is going to play low smoothly, because you are in slam and she would know where all the key cards are and would know what you are up to. Third (and certainly not in this case, as I personally know this defender to be highly ethical), there are some defenders who will try to unethically deceive you with unduly fast or slow play.

Third was the method I chose. I attempted to lure a defender into an error. I led the second heart at trick 3. My goal: North winning and then making a favorable lead. Let's look at the full hand for a better understanding of the situation (see next page):

	♠ ♥10963 ♦Q963 ♣Q6532	
♠AKJ64 ♥A4 ♦KJ ♣KJ108		♠98732 ♥75 ♦A84 ♣A97
	♠Q105 ♥KQJ82 ♦10752 ♣4	

There are two flaws with this method. First: It's true enough that a heart exit by North will solve my problem: I will discard a club in dummy and ruff in hand, then return to dummy to finesse spades and ruff out the clubs. A club lead by North is even easier, as I get an immediate free finesse. But notice that a diamond lead by North doesn't solve anything. The KJ is a red herring. Yes, I get a free finesse, but to what end? I can win the diamond jack and king, return to the club in dummy to parking one of my four clubs on the third diamond, then take the marked spade finesse. But then I'm stuck in hand with KJ10 of clubs...no good. The second flaw is that North might not win the second heart. When South wins and leads a diamond, I'm in the same pickle I was in before. I still can't find the club queen. What does "being in a pickle" mean, anyway? Trouble, that's for sure. And for that matter, what is a "red herring"? Words, words, words.*

A final method also won't work: go to dummy with the ace of diamonds, draw trump with the marked finesse, and ruff out diamonds, then exit with that last heart. The problem is "ruff out diamonds" burns up too many trump. You have to use three trumps to get in those held by South, then one to get back to dummy for the diamond ruff, and a fifth to actually ruff the diamond. When you exit with a heart, the opponents can lead a fourth diamond; you can ruff in dummy, but once again you are down to three clubs in each hand and don't know where the queen lies.

So, readers who are still with me, I decided to play for an error at trick 3, before the defenders had any concept of what was going on. Remember, bridge is game of incomplete information. With full information, either hand can win the heart exit and play a diamond. In the actual play, South won the second heart and got off lead with a club; from there it was easy: North had the queen, I got to dummy in that suit to draw trump via the marked finesse, and claimed.

It didn't cost anything to hope for an error. If I had received perfect defense, I would be right back to where I was after Trick 2, needing to guess the clubs.

The point of the entire article is, study the hand to see if there are legitimate ways to made the hand. I have often cited Eddie Kantar's books on alternative methods and which to use first (also read his columns, which he donated to the *Bridge Bulletin*). But, after you conclude there is no legitimate way to make a contract, and you aren't risking additional undertricks in the process, attempt to lure your opponent into a defensive error.

Another point: if you are resorting to hoping for a defensive error, try to get the error early in the play. Remember that bridge is a game of incomplete information. In this board, South doesn't know the diamond is a safe exit. Perhaps South should have known that a diamond was safer than a club (did he expect partner to have the KQ of clubs?) but we don't play bridge with "should have." We play the game with "what happened."

Conclusion: a very bad slam, making with lots of imps, and certainly nothing to brag about.

See you at the table.

* Hamlet, Act II, Scene 2.