

Board of the Week 83

By Dick Chapman

There is nothing exotic about this week's board, but I thought it was interesting.

You are midway through a match, doing ok but there have been two bad boards so you aren't winning. As West, you pick up this nice hand:

♠A653 ♥KQ8 ♦A96 ♣A102

No one vulnerable, your deal. You are playing a strong no trump, so that's your call. Partner 2 clubs. South chimes in 2 hearts. It's time to visualize.

Actually, your visualization was with the 2 club call. Partner might have a garbage Stayman hand, but that's not likely because of the heart call. Partner is more likely to have invitational or better values with four spades. But wait, partner also might have a balanced hand with no four card major and wants to invite with an interim 2 club call. This is a common treatment among some four-suit transfer fans, where 1NT-2NT would be a transfer to diamonds so your invitational sequence of 2NT must go through a Stayman call first.

In any event, you can still answer the question. Two spades by you. Now partner invites with 3 spades. Time to really think. What is your call?

The knee-jerk call is 4 spades. You have a fit, and you have top-of-range values, so why not accept the invitation and just bid the spade game?

There are a few things going on. The first thing is that South has come in with a heart call after your side has shown 26+ points. South could have AJxxxxx of hearts and maybe a couple of kings, but it's also possible South is psyching or just making some noise.

Second is this: you have zero ruffing power. You do not know about partner's shape, but there is a way to find out.

Third: spades might break poorly. South's call reveals much about the shape of the overall deal.

When I held the West cards, I trusted my partner to know what to do. I offered a choice of games by bidding 3NT! Now partner is on the hot seat. Let's see the two hands together:

♠A653
♥KQ8
♦A96
♣A102

♠QJ74
♥A6
♦Q103
♣6543

This is where partnership trust comes into play. Kathy knows (a) I have hearts stopped and (b) I have little or no ruffing power...otherwise I would just bid the fit, 4 spades. From her point of view, she also has no ruffing power (she won't need to ruff hearts based on

my stoppers). So what does a trusting partner do in this case?

Pass. Play 3NT and hope it makes 10 tricks.

Let's look at the full hand:

	♠K82 ♥32 ♦K8752 ♣Q98	
♠A653 ♥KQ8 ♦A96 ♣A102		♠QJ74 ♥A6 ♦Q103 ♣6543
	♠109 ♥J109754 ♦J4 ♣KJ7	

South's 2 hearts was indeed a psyche/noise. It's my opinion that the bid is unwise. Do you want partner to lead a heart when she might have a better lead? No, you do not.

Well, here you are on a heart lead. You have 3 stoppers. Count winners. Missing K1098 of spades, you almost certainly have only 3 winners. Add three hearts and you are up to 6. 2 minor aces, now 8. Where is your ninth trick?

Truth be told, I can't remember the exact play. I know I won the heart and gave up a spade and won the second heart. Toward the end I had to gamble on the diamonds, and I got lucky here: I led a low diamond and South smoothly ducked. What to do? I could put up the ace and come back toward Q10. If that happens, North must also duck smoothly and I will have to guess the King-Jack. Everyone likes to complain about bad luck, but in my case it's true: I am the worst King-Jack guesser in the entire world of bridge.

But as I said, I got lucky. I didn't put up the ace to come back toward Q10. Instead, I put in the 9 on the way over. Lo! the king won and my 9th trick emerged from the diamond suit. I scored 3 spades, 3 hearts, 2 diamonds (ace and queen), and one club.

How did it go overall? First, do you see a way to make 4 spades? No, you do not, because there isn't a way on good defense. You have the same 9 tricks and need the same luck to score them.

The traveler is on the next page:

<i>Bid</i>	<i>By</i>	<i>Tks</i>	<i>+Sc</i>	<i>-Sc</i>	<i>+</i>	<i>-</i>
4 ♠	W	-2	100		10	1
3NT	W	-2	100		10	1
4 ♠	W	-2	100		10	1
4 ♠	W	-1	50		7	4
4 ♠	W	-1	50		7	4
4 ♠	W	-1	50		7	4
2 ♥	S	-1		50	5	6
3 ♠	W	3		140	4	7
3 ♠	W	4		170	3	8
3NT	W	3		400	1.5	9.5
3NT	W	3		400	1.5	9.5
4 ♠	W	4		420	0	11

We don't want to pick apart the traveler too much, but I was wondering how some stopped in 3 spades. I don't see how you could stop. Two pairs made 10 tricks in spades, but shouldn't have. Our score of +400 was par for the deal and worth 86% of the matchpoints.

When I put the board to David, Matt, and Bill, David recalled a study he read about two flat hands opposite, where 3NT is better than 4M, sometimes even when there is a nine card fit. You could have four quick losers easily enough. According to David, 3NT works when there are no weak suits, plenty of high card points, and balanced and/or mirrored hands. This was certainly the case in the hand we are discussing.

Before I close, I want to reemphasize what I said earlier about partnership rapport. You have to know that your partner knows that you know she knows, etc. It's all about trust, and this is as important as technical skill. You don't want your partner thinking you don't know what you are doing, because then she will start masterminding the auction and things go off the rails. This was one of the best things I ever learned from my mentor Bonnie Melchior. She had to remind me a few times that she knew something about this game and that I should stop masterminding. Just trust me, she would say. Yes, ma'am. Once I did that, we started winning.

In other words

1. Trust your partner
2. Be a partner that your partner can trust

I have two agreements with my partners: The first is this: Trust me. If I'm wrong, it's my fault. If I'm wrong enough times, you will stop playing as my partner and I'm ok with that. But when we are partners, trust me. And I'm going to do the same with you. If we don't have that agreement, auctions and defense are nothing more than shooting dice. The second agreement is this: We are systems players. I don't care what the system is, but once we have it we are going to play it. No wild gambles. Judgment calls will

never be questioned, so long as we play the system. But breaking system on a whim destroys partnership trust, and now we are back to that first agreement.

See you at the table.