

Board of the Week 88

By Dick Chapman

Have you ever noticed that the big dogs seem to get card combinations right better than us mortal players?

Wait a second. Isn't that the first question posed in Board of the Week 87? Uh, yes it is. Here we go again.

Matchpoints, third board of 27 and you are upset that you bid a grand slam on the second board which didn't make, so you have a zero on your scoresheet already. Vulnerable opposite not vulnerable. As West, you hold these cards in second seat:

♠A8742 ♥AQ83 ♦AK5 ♣K

South passes. What is your call? It's easy enough to just call 1 spade, and you will get to game if partner so much as peeps. Now partner calls 3 diamonds. You alert and explain it's shortness in diamonds with spade support, invitational or better. Now what?

Well, your diamond AK seem to be wasted, but you don't want to blast 4 spades just yet. 3 hearts is fine. You think this shows extras but it's undiscussed. Partner comes back 3 spades, not 4. You have no agreement about that heart call...it shows extras but is it game forcing? If not, 3 spades by partner doesn't mean "extras." Partner may be giving you a chance to sign off. It's something you wished you had discussed.

But you aren't signing off. 4NT, partner shows 1 key card. Here is where you should sign off. I erred by asking for the trump queen when missing a key card, not generally a good idea. Partner doesn't have it, so you are stop at 5 spades, one level too high. You get the diamond 3 and see this:

♠A8742		♠10963
♥AQ83		♥KJ76
♦AK5		♦
♣K		♣A9432

Well, rats. You are missing some spades. You expected a bit more for the mini-splinter; however, with the ruffing power ("dummy points"), East's call is justifiable. Why have a toy if you don't get it out of the box and play with it once in a while, right?

Don't think about that right now. You wish you were in four spades. But as Gerald Koonce once reminded me, "Play the contract you are in, not the one you wish you were in."

What is your line of play? Give this some thought while I go finish the dishes. No music today. When you are ready to play the spade suit, check the next page.

Ready? I hope you didn't do as I do. I thought (a) "I can stand 2 spade losers so I will just lay down the spade ace then concede a couple of tricks, making 5 easily" and (b) "if the spades divide 2-2 I'm losing only one spade trick and I'll make 12 tricks." So without so much as a moment of additional thought I plunked the spade ace on the table.

Ready for the hand now? Here you are:

	♠ ♥10942 ♦A9732 ♣J875	
♠A8742 ♥AQ83 ♦AK5 ♣K		♠10963 ♥KJ76 ♦ ♣A9432
	♠KQJ5 ♥5 ♦J10864 ♣Q106	

When North shows out on the first spades, you wonder how long your partner will suffer your play. You end up losing three spades, down 1. Ugh.

Remember you can afford two spade losers, not three. You are going to lose one regardless of the division, so what is the rush to play the ace? Go over to dummy and lead the 10. If South ducks, so do you...and this time you find the bad break and will lose two spades. If South covers the 10, win the ace and after discovering the bad break you can drive out the remaining two honors and claim 11 tricks. Easy, right? You can check the traveler in just a second, to see how easy it was. Meanwhile, reflect on the teaching points here.

First is, there is no need to rush! Take some time to ask "what could go wrong?" Second is, don't let the horrible result from a previous board affect your judgment. The previous board is ancient history. In fact, I'm reminded of a pro who would never let his clients discuss a board during the game. The only word he ever spoke during the play was "History." In other words, stop yakking and play the next board. Judy does the same thing to me, by merely reaching down at the new board and tapping the number, sometimes saying "We're on Board 20 now." Third is, remember that if you are going to lose a trick in a suit, **it frequently costs nothing to take a safety play.**

Here the safety play is to guard against a 4-0 split. You can't do anything about KQJx in North, but you certainly can do something about that holding in South. Just lead the 10 and play as described above.

So I'm down 1, and pretty dejected. After the game I see we have a 50% of the board. What?!? It should be a zero! Let's look at the traveler (next column):

Bid	By	Ld	Tks	+Sc	-Sc	+	-
6♠*	W	♦2	-2	500		8.50	1.50
6♠*	W	♦3	-2	500		8.50	1.50
6♠*	E	♦2	-2	500		8.50	1.50
6♠*	W	♣5	-2	500		8.50	1.50
6♠	W	♥10	-2	200		6.00	4.00
5♠	W	♦3	-1	100		5.00	5.00
4♠	W	♦3	4		620	2.50	7.50
4♠	W	♣5	4		620	2.50	7.50
4♠	W	♣7	4		620	2.50	7.50
4♠	W	♣3	4		620	2.50	7.50
4♠	W	♦3	5		650	0.00	10.00

Notice that one West out of eleven found a way to 11 tricks and a cold top. Well done, Frank. Five were in slam down 2 (one wonders why a South holding KQJ of trump wouldn't double). All the others were making 10 tricks. The fundamental principle to make 11 is in place, but I (and 9 of my friends) didn't follow it: take the safety play. Start with the 10 of spades and let it ride. If it loses to a stiff jack in North, so be it, as you still are losing 2 spade tricks no matter what. Stated another way: South has followed to the first spade. Now when North shows up with a winning spade, the suit is dividing 3-1 for 11 tricks or 2-2 for 12.

Had I been thinking of all this instead of the silly grand slam I was in on the previous board, I might have remembered to play up toward my honor and bring in 9.5 matchpoints instead of 5. That's 4.5 I lost by not thinking.

Let's add some salt to my wound: Our pair finished with 166.15 matchpoints. This was good for second place. What was first place? 169.50 matchpoints. Oof, we were 3.35 back. The previous board we got a zero for being in a grand down 1, when bidding/making the small slam would have been 8.5. So my poor bidding and play dropped 13 matchpoints in the first round. Ugh.

Peggy Jett had this to say about bad scores: "Take your zero in the first round, not the last!" Well, I guess I followed her advice.

See you at the table. If any of my partners will still play after seeing this confessional article, I hasten to add.

Wait. I have one more thing, **and it's important:** When your partner drops 13 matchpoints in the first round, treat him or her like mine did me: "Well, that was pretty rough, but let it go, and let's get back in the game." I did, and we did. Thanks, Skip, I appreciate that courtesy and hope I show you the same when you err. It's a winning policy, for sure.