

Timing is everything

Today's hand from a local pairs evening has a number of points of interest both in the bidding and the play.

Firstly, let us look at the North and South hands and discuss the bidding.

♠ AK109
♥ 862
♦ AK10
♣ 653

	N	
W		E
	S	

♠ QJ87
♥ AK753
♦ 95
♣ Q9

N	E	S	W
1NT	- P -	2D*	- P
2H	- P -	2S	- P
4S		All Pass	

North opened a faultless 1NT (12-14); South transferred to Hearts and over her partner's dutiful 2H, bid 2S. For those partnerships not playing transfers, South will possibly start with Stayman. On this hand you find your spade fit and bidding game is easy. However, what do you do over a 2D response? You probably have (or certainly should have) a method with 5-4 in the majors to show a game force hand, an invitational hand and a 'sign off at the 2-level' sequence of bids available. However, it is something worth discussing with your partner to make sure that you are both on the same wavelength after a 1NT – 2C; 2D – 3H sequence for example?

This partnership's style was to play their sequence above as forcing to 2NT or suit agreement – that is both 3 spades and 3 hearts could be passed. On this occasion North had an easy raise to game.

You are declarer in 4S; West cashes the A♣ and K♣ and seeing the fall of your Queen switches to the Q♥. Take time, and make a plan. You may find it easier to sort out the cards from a pack and place them on the table in front of you. I will give you two clues – 4S means you need 10 tricks and don't expect everything to break kindly!

Now the play and time to see the full deal.

♠ AK109
♥ 862
♦ AK10
♣ 653

	N	
W		E
	S	

♠ -
♥ QJ109
♦ J864
♣ AKJ42

♠ 65432
♥ 4
♦ Q732
♣ 1087

♠ QJ87
♥ AK753
♦ 95
♣ Q9

You may have had thoughts about drawing trumps and setting up the hearts, but as you can see from the full deal (and my clue) this plan was destined to fail. Can you see another way to make your contract? You have 4 top tricks (A♦, K♦ and A♥, K♥) so 6 trump tricks would bring your total to 10. Take a look at your trumps, they are effectively solid. So 2 ruffs in the South hand – a club and a diamond – to go with your 4 trumps in dummy, will bring your total to 10.

So the plan is to cash your high cards, using diamonds and trumps as entries to ruff dummy's losers. Can you foresee any problems? Looking at all 4 hands, you see that if you try and cash your second top heart, East will unsportingly ruff it and down you will go. So, in keeping with the sound principle of, where possible, leading towards honours, our declarer having won the heart switch, led a diamond to table and a second heart towards her hand.

East is now in a bit of a dilemma. He realised that he would be ruffing a loser so elected to discard a club. South won and was now in control. A second diamond to dummy, diamond ruff; a trump to dummy and a club ruff brought her tally to 7 with three top trumps in dummy making a total of 10. East had the pleasure of ruffing his partner's winning heart at trick 13!

Can East do better by ruffing the heart and returning a trump perhaps? Let us follow the play through. South wins the trump switch in dummy and ruffs a club; returns to dummy with a diamond and ruffs a diamond; and finally a trump to dummy to draw the outstanding trumps. The last trick is her top heart.

The play was well timed by declarer and was rewarded by surprisingly being the only declarer to make 10 tricks. Several card-play principles occur in this hand. Leading towards top honours to either guard against unwelcomed ruffs or to establish suits is a common technique in both suit and no-trump contracts. For example; if you needed 2 tricks from this suit KQx opposite xxx you would try and lead up to the honours twice and hope that the Ace was well placed. Similarly, playing in trumps, let us assume you needed to cash top tricks, preparing for a cross-ruff perhaps, before drawing trumps. You have ♥ AKx ♣ xx opposite ♥ xx ♣ AKx, if possible, the correct sequence of play should be small to the Ace in one hand, small back to the Ace in the other, small back to the King and then small back to the other King rather than bashing down A,K, A,K and feeling aggrieved when one of them gets ruffed – not a great percentage chance of that happening but why take the risk.

The second technique here was not to touch trumps too early. Declarer could see that they may be needed as entries to dummy to allow here to ruff the losing minor cards. See what happens if Declarer plays one round of trumps. East can now ruff the heart lead off table and return another trump and Declarer's entries are now in a mess. Play it through with your cards.

Perhaps the take home message from this hand is, when a plan requires a favourable break in 2 suits, see if, as in today's example, there is a better play.