TIPS FOR TOPS

BY JANE JENNINGS

All boards referred to in this article were played in the 299er game at Bridge Centre of Niagara on October 26th, 2021, (Game #24131). Full results and game schedule at www.bridgecentreofniagara.com.

- Defence
- Whose 1NT?

Bd: 2 Vul: N/S Dlr: East	♠ 8654 ♥ 87 ♦ AT984 ♣ Q6	Optimum EW 2H: -110
♠ T32 ♥ AKQJT ♦ J2 ♣ T72	N W 2 E S	♠ AQJ ♥ 9642 ♦ K73 ♣ K85
6 11 HCP 13 10	♠ K97 ♥ 53 ♦ Q65 ♣ AJ943	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 1 2 - 1 - S 1 2 - 1 - E - - 2 - 1 W - - 2 - 1

This week I'm going to look at an exercise in defence. **Board 2** was played from the West in Hearts - usually in 4H. That contract was hopeless; perhaps West should have recognized their hand as invitational strength, and not forced to game opposite a minimum opener. But it's hard to resist when your suit is that good and your partner has promised support. And, as we saw last week, even when the defenders are bound to prevail, there can be a big difference, playing matchpoints, between down 1 and down 2.

What should North lead against 4H, their side having been silent during the auction? It's never good to lead an unsupported A; even worse to lead away from an A, so diamonds are out. The Qx of clubs looks pretty dangerous, and there's no reason to lead trump, so a spade looks best, and you find your partner winning the K.

Now, the suit that is key to the defence is the Clubs. With the CK in dummy, South's plan must be to not play the A until it captures the K. South must make a return that is safe, and wait for one of the other players to lead clubs. There is no danger in waiting; if West has club losers, they are not going away. There is no future in the spade suit; why not try a diamond? After North takes her DA, there are a couple of ways the play might go. But as long as North and South are careful to follow proper procedure, they should come to three more tricks.

North might decide to lead a club; if so, it must be the Q - the top of a doubleton. Today that works; NS get two club tricks and a ruff. But, leading the Q would be costly if West held the J instead of partner. So North can exit with anything else, and when West plays the club suit eventually, NS have to play second hand low. Leading from her hand to dummy's K is the usual way; South can capture that and NS will still collect their Q and J. If West tries ducking with a smaller club, South can win, and if she can still resist cashing the A, they will come to two more tricks. In todays' game, down 2 was worth 71% to NS, while down 1 scored only 28%.

Board 17 illustrates a point that's worth knowing. When the high cards are fairly evenly divided between the two sides, and there are no long suits, the hand is often played in 1NT by one side or the other. If this is going to be the case, you want to be the side that declares - whether or not you can make your contract. In other words, the side which bids 1NT usually wins the board.

Bd: 17 Vul: None Dlr: North	♠ 9632 ♥ T7 ♦ 9832 ♣ A96	Optimum EW 2Nx: +100
♠ 875 ♥ A63 ♦ KT5 ♣ T542	N W 17 E S	♠ AQT ♥ KQ85 ♦ J64 ♣ J87
4 7 HCP 13 16	♠ KJ4 ♥ J942 ♦ AQ7 ♣ KQ3	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - 1 - 2 - S - 2 - 2 - E 1 - 1 - 1 W - - - - 1

Looking at this setup; East opens the bidding 1C, and South has 16HCP, with clubs well stopped. Most Souths overcalled 1NT, and they went down 1 for -50. But, if South doesn't bid 1NT, choosing, perhaps, a takeout double, West's response of 1NT will buy the contract - and EW can make 1NT (the same 7 tricks) for +90. And in matchpoints, it's much better to be -50 than -90. In our game 1NT played from the South and down 1 earned an average score, but played in the West earned that pair 85%.