TIPS FOR TOPS

BY JANE JENNINGS

- 3rd Hand play
- Establishing sure tricks

All boards referred to in this article were played in the 299er game at Bridge Centre of Niagara on April 5th 2022, (Game #32543). Full results and game schedule at www.bridgecentreofniagara.com.

Bd: 18 Vul: N/S Dlr: East	♠ 3 ♥ KQT ♦ AJT97 ♣ 9853	Optimum NS 2N: +120
♠ Q842 ♥ AJ842 ♦ Q84 ♣ A	N W 18 E S	♠ K76 ♥ 9765 ♦ 62 ♣ KJT2
10 13 HCP 7 10	♠ AJT95 ♥ 3 ♦ K53 ♣ Q764	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 3 3 - 1 2 S 3 3 - 1 2 E - - 1 - - W - - 1 - -

Board 18 this week proved a difficult test for defenders. It was played in Hearts from the West, and most Norths led their singleton Spade. This would be clear if your partner had bid Spades in the auction, as some did; otherwise it would not be a good choice. You don't want to ruff, which is the usual reason to lead singletons. Looking at North's trumps; with KQ10, there is a pretty good chance you are always going to take two Heart tricks, based purely on strength; there is no advantage to using these to ruff.

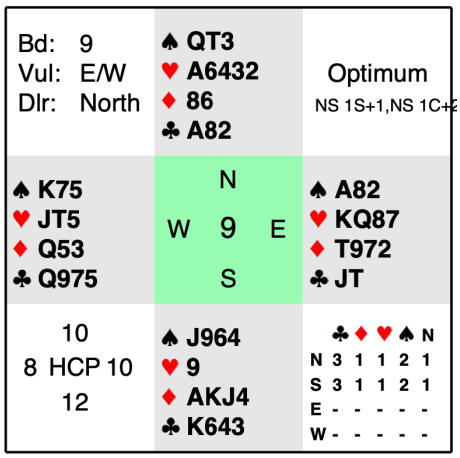
But, I will start with following on from this lead. All of our Souths wisely held onto their A, waiting to use it to catch the K, but many went astray by playing the J instead of the proper 9. It's top of touching honours when you're leading, but lowest of equals when you are following suit. Does this sound like pedantics? Consider what the situation looks like to your partner. If you don't follow the system, when you play the J, they have no idea where the 10 and 9 are. If you play the 9 and declarer wins with the Q, the 10 and J are unaccounted for; either you have them, or declarer has QJ10. Often the situation is clear.

So, West wins the SQ and cashes the CA, then, with no access to dummy, they have little choice but to lead trumps from their hand. Ace first, in case either K or Q is singleton, and then another, hoping for a 2-2 split. When N takes this trick, their best move is to cash their other trump winner, capturing two more of declarer's - a much better use for the boss trump than waiting to ruff with it.

And then? It's still not a good idea to cash the DA; Aces are best used to capture opponents' honours. You can be pretty sure that West has no more Clubs - cashing the A was a pretty sure sign of a singleton. A Club return gives declarer a pitch on the K, but this doesn't help them. They have, as you can work out, seven cards in the Spades and Diamonds combined, with a maximum of two losers in each of those suits. They can eventually ruff one loser with dummy's last trump and reach that CK, so leading a Club won't give them anything they can't get themselves.

On today's hand, a small Diamond also works, as long as South takes her K and returns the suit. But, if the K and Q were reversed, that would have cost a trick; the Club is safer.

I'm going to go back to an earlier trick, because not all tables followed the pattern I've shown so far. At some, West led another Spade before



pulling trump. Here, North has to pause and consider - do you want to ruff this? As stated earlier, your KQ10 is going to take 2 tricks - what will you gain by ruffing? Just as the usual second hand rule is "play low", it works similarly in ruffing - don't ruff ahead of your partner if there's a chance they can take the trick. And why shouldn't they? If declarer really had the A, K AND Q, would they take a chance on letting you ruff? Partner must have some good cards in her hand; you know that either because they bid, or because the opponents are not in game, and you don't have enough points to have kept them from game level. So North should discard if West plays a Spade, using your agreed system to tell South that you like Diamonds and don't like Clubs.

If defenders make the right move at each step, they should come to 6 tricks - 2 Hearts, 2 Spades, and 2 Diamonds.

On the play side, let's look at board 9, which was played in NT from the North or South. 1NT is plenty - neither hand has any reason to invite a game, and most declarers didn't manage to make 1. Let's see why.

Whatever lead you get, declarer should count tricks and make a plan. There are 5 top tricks - 2Cs, 2Ds, and 1H. The Diamond finesse might furnish one more, but you need two, so that's not a big help. But there is a sure way to promote two Spades by knocking out the A and K, so that's the suit you want to work on. This is something to always keep in mind; if there are tricks that you will always have to lose, and if losing them gains you what you need, give away your sure losers first.

But, going back to trick one: most declarers got a Club lead, and ducked - often a good idea, to disrupt the opponent's communication, but don't duck twice. Why? Because, between the two hands, you have seven Clubs and two stoppers, whereas in Hearts, you have six cards and only one stopper. And you have to lose two Spade tricks before you set up your winners. If the opponents switch to a Heart, you are going to lose three Hearts along with two Spades; you can't afford to lose two Clubs along with all of those. In fact, it's better not to duck at all; if the outstanding Hearts divide 5-2 instead of 4-3, you may have four losers there along with your two Spades. When the opening leader hasn't found the best opening lead, don't give them a second chance.

Similarly, when they get in with a Spade, if they switch to a Diamond, don't take the chance on the finesse. Thank them - silently - for not switching to a Heart, and keep working on the tricks you need. It turns out, there are lots of ways for the defenders to take 6 tricks, and only one way for declarer to take 7. But it's a race, as it often is in NT, and declarer doesn't have time to play around, getting sidetracked on her mission. ♠