

An everyday hand?

This was hand #32 from Sunday's match between Oxfordshire and Leicestershire:

Dealer W, EW Vulnerable

	♠ 10972	
	♥ QJ1095	
	♦ K5	
	♣ Q2	
♠ AQ63		♠ K84
♥ K842		♥ A
♦ 642		♦ A10983
♣ K5		♣ A973
	♠ J5	
	♥ 763	
	♦ QJ7	
	♣ J10864	

The hand was played at 16 tables in the match, and 13 of them reached a normal 3NT contract (mostly by West, but a couple by East). 12 out of 13 declarers made the contract. So an everyday hand with nothing of interest? I think it is worth another look – it is surprising how many small inaccuracies can be overlooked when declarer makes a hand...

Let's look at the play on a heart lead, which was made at 12 of the 13 tables in 3NT, usually, but not always, after North had shown the suit. Declarer has 8 top tricks, and the obvious possibilities for a 9th are in spades and diamonds. If spades are 3-3 declarer can make 9 tricks at any time, but it will take some work to establish another trick in diamonds. You expect to lose 2 tricks in the suit before you can take a 2nd diamond trick, and that leaves open the possibility that the defence can establish some heart tricks in the meantime. That won't be too serious if the hearts are 4-4 – in that case the defence will only have two heart tricks, and you can afford to lose two hearts and two diamonds. But what if hearts are 5-3, as the bidding typically suggested? The main countermeasure will be to aim to concede your second diamond loser to a hand without any more hearts.

Anyway, the first question is how to start the diamonds after winning HA at T1. There are 3 main possibilities: (a) start with a small one (or perhaps the 10); (b) start with A and another; (c) cross to the other hand and lead towards a middle card if North plays low. Which is best? (a) has the disadvantage that you will have 3 losers in the suit if North has a singleton honour. (b) loses some options on the next round (see below). So I think (c) is best, and spades is the obvious suit to cross in since playing a club leaves you a bit vulnerable in the suit.

So at T2 you play a spade to Q(say) and then lead a diamond to 5, 10 and J. South continues with another heart (at one table South switched to a club at this point, which made declarer's life a bit easier). What now?

The declarer who went off looked no further than winning HK and setting up his diamond winners – not a good idea when the defence ended up with 2 diamonds and 3 hearts. Everybody else correctly ducked the second heart. (I can't see how this can cost even if there has been no bidding to suggest the heart suit is a danger.) Most declarers won the third round of hearts, confident that the suit was 5-3 and that South was now out of hearts, although a couple of declarers ducked another heart, which has some potential merits (see the Postscript).

Say you win the third heart. What next? Well, assuming South has no more hearts then you are safe if you can lose your second diamond loser to South rather than North. The obvious way you can do that is if North started with only 2 diamonds and South 3 – not unlikely given the presumption that North has more hearts. But there is also another possibility. Suppose North starting with 3 diamonds with only 1 of the honours. Now there is scope for an avoidance play - if you lead a diamond from West you can duck the second diamond trick to South if North plays low, and play A and another if North plays an honour. That is why I think it is best to keep DA for this manoeuvre rather than play it on the first diamond trick. In practice North will play DK, so you win DA while South follows low. Now you know you can set up the diamonds, but you can't be sure who has DQ. If it is North then you may be about to lose a diamond and 2 more hearts. What can you do about this? Well perhaps now is the time to test the spades and see if they are 3-3? If they are, you will have 9 tricks without letting the defence back in.

Is there a danger in playing spades now? That depends on the heart suit. If hearts were 4-4 all along then testing the spades risks setting up a 5th defensive trick when spades are 4-2. (If hearts are 5-3 then you don't really mind setting up a possible defensive trick in spades. If South has the 4th spade along with the 3rd diamond then he will be able to cash it when in with the diamond, but that will only be the defence's 4th trick. If North has the 4th spade as well as the 3rd diamond then you will go two off rather than just one off if you play on spades first, but you were never going to make the contract, and surely it is worth risking an extra undertrick in order to make the contract rather than go off when North has the 3rd diamond but spades are 3-3?)

In practice only two declarers actually tested spades before playing another diamond. Did the others think hearts were 4-4? I rather doubt it, myself – the bidding and play at most tables seemed to give a pretty good indication that the suit was 5-3. So I am tempted to say that despite almost everybody making the contract, most declarers didn't actually play the hand as well as they might have done....

Postscript

What about ducking that 3rd round of hearts? It didn't cross my mind at the time, because I was pretty sure that North had started with 5 hearts and South with 3, in which case it was pointless. The same would be true if North had started with 3 and South with 5. But what if the hearts were 4-4? In that case, declarer would discover this by ducking the 3rd heart and would therefore know that they could afford to establish the diamonds rather than test spades first (and as we have seen, testing spades first risks going off if hearts are 4-4). So is it right to duck the 3rd heart? I suspect not – suppose hearts are 5-3 as seems likely, while diamonds are 4-1. If you don't duck the 3rd heart, you have time to set up your 5th diamond, losing 3 diamonds and 1 heart. But if you have ducked the 3rd heart then you will have too many losers playing that way now, losing 3 diamonds and 2 hearts, so will have no choice but to rely on spades being 3-3.

Alan Wilson, Nov 2025