

Report : match v Hertfordshire by Paul Whetton

No, I have not taken over from Rick just yet but I am trying to help out, and so I offered to write this report. I could only have wished that the results could have been better. However, the results are not so surprising. Hertfordshire are a strong team, and we had a number of regular players missing. Some of us, myself included, were playing in unfamiliar partnerships with, perhaps, rather predictable results. In spite of our best efforts, we were unable to perform well enough, but everyone deserves some credit for sticking to the task and giving their best in trying circumstances.

However, there were some encouraging performances. Caroline Gemmel and Mark Honess certainly deserve a mention as they stepped up to play in the A team and they topped the cross-imps table for Suffolk. A very creditable performance and I am sure that they will play more for the A team in the future. I am personally most impressed by the B and C team players who support the County to the best of their ability. The A team has been struggling of late due to the fact that several key players have elected not to play for the County anymore. We have had a couple of good results this season, but we were bound to get caught out eventually and it is the lower teams that we have to look to for support, and I thank them for it. However, it does mean that there are opportunities for people to step up a level as Caroline and Mark have proven, and of course, it is how Ralph Parish and I got our chance.

Although this is a report about the last match, I believe that it is important to look to the future by learning from the mistakes of the past. There were 3 deals in the match v Herts that are well worth taking a second look at. The first is board 10 which, I confess, I got completely wrong although I plead the case that I was not on the same wavelength as my partner, John Pearson, who stoically put up with my style of bidding. But I was not the only one to get this one wrong. The problem with deals where a pre-emptive bid is used is that the auction becomes a bit of a guessing game because so much bidding space has been gobbled up.

All vulnerable
Dealer East

North

♠ Q862
♥ 64
♦ 1064
♣ 8432

West

♠ AK1074
♥ Q
♦ Q873
♣ KQ6

East

♠ 9
♥ A8
♦ AK95
♣ AJ10975

South

♠ J53
♥ KJ1097632
♦ J2
♣

A grand slam can be made in either minor or in no trump but, when you have to contend with a pre-emptive bid, the grand slam is practically impossible to find, but we should be able to find the small slam. I would have had less difficulty if I had been playing with Ralph because we play a version of Precision Club and so our 1♣ opening bid would not have immediately shown a club suit but would have shown a hand of at least 16 points. This would have put West in a good position to realise that a slam could easily be on the cards. Therefore, we would have a chance of bidding the slam once a good fit had been found.

Unfortunately, I was playing a natural system with John and my mind did not make the required switch. As John diplomatically pointed out, I should have doubled the 3♥ pre-empt, which was made at very table. But where do you go from there? East should probably now cue bid 4♥. West would be bound to bid 4♠ and then East has to show his clubs, but does he bid 5♣ or 6♣? I would bid 6♣ being prepared to pass if West corrected to 6♦. This is not easy and what is most important is having an agreement with your regular partner about how you would deal with deals such as this one although it is vital that you understand just how strong a double is in this context. For me, it has to be reasonably strong otherwise there is no way of telling whether game is the limit of the hand or if slam is a possibility. Dealing with pre-emptive bids is an area that many of us do not discuss enough with our partners and will probably be a subject for my column 'Raising the bar'. It is also because of deals like this one that we always like to field teams of regular partnerships and only resort to unfamiliar partnerships in times of dire need. It is never a decision that is made lightly.

The other 2 deals of interest are both play problems. The first is board 14. This is not a difficult hand but not everyone gave themselves the best chance to succeed :-

None vulnerable		North			
Dealer East		♠	93		
		♥	K7		
		♦	AKJ873		
		♣	J53		
West				East	
♠	AKQ84	♠	J7		
♥	QJ92	♥	A543		
♦	Q10	♦	62		
♣	A2	♣	Q8764		
		South			
		♠	10652		
		♥	1086		
		♦	954		
		♣	K109		

At most tables, the contract was 4♥ by West. There are 2 parts to the planning of this hand. First of all, as I have stressed in my articles on declarer play, it is vital to plan the play from the

beginning before playing to the first trick. It does not really matter what the opening lead is for it should not take declarer long to realise that he has 3 inescapable losers, 2 in diamonds and one in clubs. It might be possible to discard a diamond on the spades but, at my table North led the ace and then the king of diamonds to prevent that from happening. He then switched to a spade. So, the second part of the plan has to be how to play the trump suit for no loss.

As it happens, I was not really tested. I took the spade lead in hand and led the queen of hearts. North covered with the king, and I took that with the ace. All that remained was to lead another heart and, when South played the 8, I covered it with the 9 and secured all the rest of the tricks except for the king of clubs. If North had held K10x of hearts, I would have failed, but I had no other choice.

Caroline Gemmell did not have it quite so easy. When she led the queen of hearts, North played the 7. The queen held the trick but now she had an interesting decision to make. Does she lead the jack next hoping that South held 10x or does she lead a small heart to the ace hoping that North held K7? She got this right by playing a small heart the ace taking the king. I do not know how she came to that decision, whether it was experience or just a good guess, but she got it right. Well played.

The point of this deal is that not every North played the way that North did at Caroline's table, but it is indisputably the correct play. It is the only way to put declarer to the test and it is a play that cannot lose. North does not know that his partner holds the 10 but has to assume that he does. The only time when it is correct to play the king on the lead of the queen is when he holds K10x and, even then, he will not lose if he ducks on the first round. With K10x, it does not matter what he does on the first round of trumps. If he ducks on the first round, he can cover the jack on the next round or, if declarer leads low on the second round, the 10 draws the ace and promotes the king. In fact, many text books will tell you that it is always best not to cover in this position on the first round. However, that is taking a good idea too far because declarer can always make life difficult for you by leading the queen when it is unsupported.

My last offering is board 25 :-

East/West vulnerable
Dealer North

North

♠ J5
♥ A852
♦ 1095
♣ A1042

West

♠ 1042
♥ Q103
♦ A7
♣ K9875

East

♠ AKQ8763
♥ K97
♦ 86
♣ J

South

♠ 9
♥ J64
♦ KQJ432
♣ Q63

At several tables, a high level competitive auction ended up with East playing in 5♠. They would have done better doubling 5♦ but that is difficult to see, and they were naturally reluctant to give up on a vulnerable game. At my table, and at Caroline and Mark's, we were allowed to play in 4♠. When Mark was declarer, he was given an easy ride when the opponents opened up the heart suit for him so that he had just 3 losers, i.e. 1 loser in each suit except trumps. John was not so lucky but both declarers did not give themselves the best chance for success.

When John was declarer, a diamond was led. John took the trick and drew trumps in 2 rounds and then led the jack of clubs. South played low and so John tried the king which was taken with the ace. At this stage, John has few clues available to him and the ace could have been in either hand and South could easily have held off if he had held the ace hoping that North could win with the queen. So, John's play of the king was not without some chance of success. However, not so on the day. North cashed the 10 of diamonds and led a club. After this, John had to open up the hearts himself and, inevitably, he guessed wrongly and lost 2 tricks in the suit. Caroline and Mark were lucky and we were not.

This cost us a game swing, one of several, and so it is important. All deals are important including the part-score hands, but it is the games that are crucial at teams. We are all taught that we should always push for games because we do not want to miss a game that the opponents bid and make. However, if you bid a game, you have to make it if it is makeable. It does not matter so much if you have bid a game that is not there because there is every chance that the opponents in the other room will do the same. But you have to make it if it is there.

It is not too difficult to improve declarer's chances on this deal. On a diamond lead, declarer takes the ace, draws trumps in 2 rounds and then exits with a second diamond. This is the position :-

		North			
		♠			
		♥	A852		
		♦	10		
		♣	A1042		
West			East		
♠	10			♠	Q8763
♥	Q103			♥	K97
♦				♦	
♣	K9875			♣	J
		South			
		♠			
		♥	J64		
		♦	J43		
		♣	Q63		

Whoever wins the second diamond has a difficult problem. A diamond lead gives declarer a ruff and discard and so reduces his losers to just 3. A heart wraps up the suit nicely leaving just 1 heart loser. The only way that the opponents can make life more difficult for declarer is to lead a club. However, if North is on lead, a club lead promotes the king of clubs for a heart discard and so the lead has to come from South. However, if South leads anything other than the queen, declarer ducks in dummy and North takes the ace promoting the king. Therefore, South has to lead the queen but, even then, declarer covers it with the king forcing North to take the ace. But then it is still not over because North still cannot lead a red suit without giving a trick away and, if he leads the 10 of clubs, declarer ruffs and the 9 is promoted. Therefore, North has to lead a small card hoping that declarer will think that South has the 10 and he ruffs. North is unlikely to do that unless he has a count of the hand because the 10 might be the setting trick. But, even if he does, declarer can succeed by not ruffing and taking the trick with dummy's 9, and he always has the heart finesse to fall back on, so he cannot be worse off.

This is not as difficult as it sounds. In fact, I have a little ploy that has always stood me in good stead in these situations. I always think that, if all else fails, see if there is any way that the opponents can be persuaded to help. First of all, it is necessary to eliminate the side suits so that the opponents' exit cards are removed. Then throw them in and see what happens. This is known as an 'elimination and throw in' end play and is very common and very useful. Very often, it is bound to provide an extra trick but there are times, such as in this example, where the result is still in doubt, but the opponents are presented with losing options as well as winning ones. There are several examples in my 'Raise the bar' column for those who are interested in trying to improve their game. As I mentioned earlier, games are crucial at teams. There are several different methods of finding that extra trick and several examples are given in my column.

I look forward, with interest and anticipation, to the next match. If a couple more players are available, if we are all able to play in our normal partnerships, and we all perform at our best, we

could easily surprise ourselves, and the opposition. We may not be as strong on paper as other counties are, but I am very impressed with the attitude and determination of our teams, and I look forward to trying again with you all.

If you have not read the articles in my column on the County website, please do. There are some interesting concepts described there. None of them are particularly difficult but an understanding of any one of them can make a difference. And, if you have any comments or questions about anything that I write, please contact me by e-mail at whetton@btinternet.com.