

Summertown Monday Bulletin No. 10

written by Steven Bliss

I hope you are all well and coping with two months of lockdown. I thought you might like two interesting bridge hands, and a poem.

I was never taught bridge properly (you might say it shows) - I picked up some basics from a friend at university and slowly learnt more from books. Steph however was taught, by a lady called Audrey Hoffman, who was married to a very good bridge player called Martin Hoffman. Hoffman had a terrible start in life: all his family were killed in the Holocaust and he spent three years in concentration camps. After the war he moved to England, and started to play whist and then bridge. He soon became one of the best, and certainly fastest, players of duplicate pairs, and could make more tricks than most people in half the time. He was still playing regularly, and very well, when he died in 2018 aged 88. Here are two of his hands from nearly 40 years ago.

| | | |
|-------|--------|-------|
| | KQJ6 | |
| | KQJ | |
| | AQ96 | |
| | A6 | |
| 94 | | 7 |
| T9843 | | 765 |
| T3 | | KJ52 |
| T542 | | KQJ73 |
| | AT8532 | |
| | A2 | |
| | 874 | |
| | 98 | |

The normal contract was 6 spades by South. On any lead but a diamond the contract is quite easy for a top tournament player: you win, draw trumps, play hearts discarding a club, then ace of clubs and a club ruff, and now, with only spades and diamonds left, you play a diamond and cover whatever card West plays. East is end-played and has to lead a diamond into the tenace or a club giving a ruff and discard.

However, Hoffman got the 10 of diamonds lead and still made the contract. He covered with the queen and East won the king and switched to a top club. Hoffman won, drew trumps, and played three rounds of hearts discarding a *diamond*. Now he cashed the ace of diamonds and took a ruffing finesse against the jack – East covered, South ruffed, and now he could cross to dummy with a trump and discard his losing club on the 6 of diamonds.

For the second hand Hoffman was playing with the celebrated Rixi Markus against two Israeli international players. Turn to the next page to see the hand ...

| | | | |
|-----------|----------|----------|--------|
| | 95 | | |
| | J86542 | | |
| | A87 | | |
| | AT | | |
| 64 | | KT2 | |
| A93 | | Q7 | |
| KQJ | | T6543 | |
| K9742 | | J85 | |
| | AQJ873 | | |
| | KT | | |
| | 92 | | |
| | Q63 | | |
| Bidding: | | | |
| N | E | S | W |
| | | 1 spade | Double |
| Redouble | Pass | 2 spades | Pass |
| 4 spades! | All pass | | |

North's redouble showed at least 8 points and not much spade support. South's 'free' rebid of 2 spades showed a limited hand with long spades and few defensive values. North should have passed this, but Rixi Markus was famously an aggressive bidder!

West led the king of diamonds, ducked, and then the queen, won by North's ace. Hoffman expected the spade finesse to work, but he would have to finesse twice, and that would only give him six spade tricks and two aces. He decided that he would need a favourable lie in hearts, and finessed the 10 at trick 3. West won the ace and played another diamond, ruffed by South. This was then the position:

| | | |
|-------|--------|-----|
| | 95 | |
| | J86542 | |
| | --- | |
| | AT | |
| 64 | | KT2 |
| 93 | | Q |
| --- | | T6 |
| K9742 | | J85 |
| | AQJ87 | |
| | K | |
| | --- | |
| | Q63 | |

Hoffman now led the queen of spades from hand! East had no answer to this. If he had ducked, Hoffman would have played the king of hearts (expecting to drop the queen), then ace and another spade: he could then win whatever East returned and cash all dummy's hearts. East actually won the king of spades and switched to a club: West had to put the king up, so Hoffman won the ace, returned to the queen, ruffed his losing club, crossed back to the king of hearts, and had only trumps left. His opponents were very impressed. Rixi only said 'You're supposed to play the cards well, Martin. That's why I gave you four spades.'

Finally, as a break from old bridge hands and a return to the present day, here is a poem which I wrote in the first week of lockdown.

The warmest day

this year, and Blenheim's so beautiful,
the grass so lush, trees in new bud.
I never heard the birds like this –
no traffic humming, children shouting -
my private kingdom. When I pass
scattered walkers I shout 'Good morning'
in distant camaraderie,
knowing not to get too near,
just happy to be here.

The old town now is quiet, eerie,
like the aftermath of some great war.
Essential shoppers scuttle from store to store.

The magnolia I pass each day
enjoys its annual fortnight's glory.
Purchased anemones console:
I re-read Fielding, watch *The Killing*,
phone family, email friends
and wait for this to end.

Steven Bliss