

Hi everyone – It's Roger Heath-Brown here.

It's my turn to describe how I learnt Bridge. At school, in the late 1960's, my chemistry teacher set up a bridge club, and taught us from scratch, playing an archaic form of Acol, in which we felt free to invent our own conventions. School rules required everyone to be outside at break times, except for those playing bridge – making the club quite popular! The school team was quite successful (or more probably, quite lucky), which kept our enthusiasm going.

I continued bridge at university, and to a limited extent when I moved to Oxford. I played for the college team in the "Cuppers", where we won the Plate two years in succession! Before you get too excited, I should say that the Plate was the consolation event for teams knocked out in the first round of the Cup competition.

After that I lapsed for many years. I read newspaper bridge columns, and loved bridge problems, but never played for real. Eventually, Paul Stevenson, finding that I was a bridge player, persuaded me to join the Summertown club, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Since lockdown I've been playing social bridge on BBO, and also various of the solitaire options it offers. One choice is called "Start a Bridge 4 game (Free)". Here you get to play hands in batches of 4 against three robots, scored by total points, at the end of which one receives a ranking for the four hands. The ranking might say 1620 – but it doesn't tell you how many this is out of! (My worst ranking has been several thousand, which gives some indication.) It is good relaxing fun, and the hands are stacked in one's favour, with most sets of four containing a potential slam. However one must remember that the robots play "Two over One". There is a full description of the system under the "Help" tab.

Another nice option is the "Practice" section. If you click on "Bridge Master" you find 5

♠ 65	
♥ A65432	
♦ QJ10	
♣ 32	
	♠ QJ10987
	♥ K
	♦ A987
	♣ J1098

levels, from Beginner to World Class, with a total of over 500 Problem hands to play as declarer, each with a detailed solution. Here is one I tried, which caused me to think. You are playing teams (IMPs) defending as East, after the bidding has gone 1♥, Pass, 4♥, Pass. (North-South play 5 card majors.)

You partner leads ♠ K followed by ♠ A, and then puts you in with ♦ A. What do you do now? Have a think before you read on.

If South has 12+ points for his opening bid, your partner has at most 3 points left. If he has ♦ K or ♣ K he should make it whatever you do. Might you make a trick with your singleton ♥ K? If South has 6 hearts he cannot go wrong, but if he only has 5 he will be faced with a classic "Finesse or Drop" situation. Can we do anything about it? Have a think before you read on.

The convention I use with opening leads is to play first Ace then King from a suit AKx; but instead West played ♠K followed by ♠A. For me this shows a doubleton. So if East plays another Spade at trick 4, partner can ruff. This will force out dummy's ♥A, leaving East's King good. (I believe this play is called an "Uppercut".) I confess, I might not think of this in the heat of battle, but presented as a problem, it seems a reasonable thing to try.

♠ 65
♥ A65432
♦ QJ10
♣ 32
♠ 432
♥ QJ1098
♦ K2
♣ AKQ

Now let's see the same hand from Declarer's point of view. This is the problem actually set in the BBO practice. As before, West starts with ♠K followed by ♠A, and then puts East in with ♦A. At trick 4 East leads the ♣J. You win, and play ♥Q, but West follows unhelpfully with ♥7. So, do you play for the finesse or the drop? Decide before reading on.

Taking the heart suit in isolation, the odds favour the drop, but only by a rather small margin. However, if East really did have the ♥K bare, he might have tried the "uppercot" manoeuvre, playing a third round of spades at trick 4, in the hope that partner would ruff and knock out ♥A. Since East in fact led a club at trick 4, it suggests that he did not have ♥K bare. So perhaps we should try the finesse.

However I have some concerns about this line of reasoning. One thing that Paul kindly (unkindly ?) pointed out to me, is that my "Standard Leads" are not the standard on BBO, where it is normal for the King to be led from AKx. That means we can't expect West to have a doubleton spade after all. The moral is clearly that we should ask the opposition what their lead system is.

It's time to look at the BBO solution, and to confuse matters further, in the *solution*, West begins with ♠A followed by ♠K, not the other way around. Now I don't know what's going on! But the official solution just says, with two trumps out, playing for the drop is the better bet. Once again, I've over-thought things!

Best wishes to all,

Roger Heath-Brown