

To cover or not to cover? That is the question.

And several defenders got it wrong last night, myself included. Here is Board 4, where you are defending as West. North opens 1NT (12-14). South uses Stayman and North replies 2H, after which South signs off in 3NT.

♠ 93	
♥ 873	
♦ Q1063	
♣ Q972	
	♠ AQ106
	♥ KJ4
	♦ A754
	♣ 103

Partner starts off with ♠7, which goes to Declarer's ♠J. A Heart is played to the King, followed by a spade back to Declarer's King. Another Heart is won by partner's Ace, and there is another round of Spades. Declarer cashes Dummy's remaining top Spade and Heart, leaving the following position, with dummy to play.

♠ -	
♥ -	
♦ Q106	
♣ Q97	
	♠ -
	♥ -
	♦ A754
	♣ 103

We know that Declarer started with exactly three Spades and four Hearts, and has ♥Q left; and started with exactly 6 HCP in the major suits.

Now Dummy leads ♣10. Should you cover or not? What would you do?

We have all seen such situations time and time again, both as Declarer and as Defender. Sometimes Declarer doesn't want to risk a finesse, and is just trying to tempt the Defender to cover. Maybe here Declarer has ♣AKJ? But why wouldn't Declarer risk a finesse, given that partner is out of Spades and Hearts, and Dummy has Diamonds stopped?

As it happened Declarer held ♣AJ5. West ducked the ♣10, which went to East's King, and Declarer was able to take a second finesse, making the ♣J as well as ♣A, for a valuable overtrick.

Let's look at the second example, Hand 11.

♠ AJ6	
♥ J94	
♦ 7632	
♣ Q42	
	♠ 1052
	♥ Q87652
	♦ J108
	♣ 9

South plays in 4S, and partner leads the ♥A. East encourages, and Declarer plays ♥10. West continues at trick 2 with ♥3. What should East do?

There is only one Heart left out, the King. If East has led from ♥A3, then Declarer has ♥K bare and if West plays ♥Q it will set up an extra Heart trick in Dummy.

But perhaps East started with ♥AK3, and is trying to reach West's hand for a Diamond lead though Declarer? In that case East must cover Dummy's ♥9 to avoid giving a trick away. I don't think it is a clear cut decision, but I suspect that many of us would not think of leading low from ♥AK3 at trick two – in which case it would be right for West to duck on the second round. And that was certainly right on the night.

Let's end with a Declarer problem. On Board 15, there were three pairs playing in 2S by South, making 7 or 8 tricks, while Deep Finesse says that 9 are available.

♠AQ8
♥KQ42
♦83
♣A1087
♠J7643
♥-
♦A7542
♣964

The ♥J was led, covered by the Queen and Ace, and ruffed. At one table Declarer continued with Ace and another Diamond, won by West who followed up with a Heart to Dummy's King:-

♠AQ8
♥42
♦-
♣A1087
♠J764
♥-
♦754
♣96

Declarer ruffed a Heart in hand, then ruffed a Diamond in Dummy and ruffed another Heart in hand, the defenders following throughout.

That left:-

♠AQ
♥-
♦-
♣A1087
♠J7
♥-
♦75
♣96

Declarer has taken 6 tricks. How would you continue?

Think now before reading on!

In fact one can now guarantee 3 more tricks, provided each defender has at least 2 Clubs.

Declarer should ruff a Diamond with the *Ace*. Even if someone has discarded a Club on this trick it is still safe to cash ♣A; and then ♠Q opposite ♠J7 are enough for one further trick.

Have a good 2023 everyone!

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