

Summertown Bridge Bulletin, 30 January 2023

When you and your partner have the values for game between you, it's often necessary to choose between playing in a suit and playing in NT. How should you decide?

If you're playing teams, of course, you always want to be in the safest contract, even if this means playing with a minor suit as trumps, because making your game is far more important than scoring an extra 10 points – and very often, this will mean playing in a suit, whenever you have a fit.

At pairs, there's much more to think about, even when you know you have a fit. Do you have stops in all four suits? If you play in a suit, will you be able to make extra tricks by ruffing? Or is there a danger that your opponents might get a ruff themselves? And most importantly, which game will score best?

This dilemma reared its head last night on the very first board of the evening, although it may not be apparent if North opens and rebids the long clubs, when it's harder to identify the 5-3 heart fit. If North devalues the ♠Q and chooses to pass, South will open and whether or not NS are playing 5-card majors, the hearts will come to light: but should South still consider the option of playing in NT?

Dir: North
Vul: None

♠ 10 8 6 4
♥ 8 3
♦ Q 8 7 6 5
♣ A 6

W	NORTH	E
E	1	S
S	SOUTH	T

♠ Q
♥ K 6 2
♦ K 3 2
♣ Q J 9 4 3 2

11				
6				5
				18

♠ A J 9
♥ A J 10 7 4
♦ A J 10 4
♣ K

♠ K 7 5 3 2
♥ Q 9 5
♦ 9
♣ 10 8 7 5

	♣	♦	♥	♠	N
N	5	4	5	2	6
S	5	4	6	2	6
E	-	-	-	-	-
W	-	-	-	-	-

On the night, three tables played in 4♥, and the other two were in 3NT, in all cases declared by South. Both games were equally safe (indeed, the analysis says that South can make 12 tricks either way, although this relies on a rather unlikely play in the diamonds). So which worked out best? Of those who played in hearts, one just made the game and two emerged with 11 tricks. Of the two in NT, one got a spade lead and settled for 9 tricks, which turned out to be a bottom; the other benefited from a diamond lead, enabling them to place the Queen, and thereby make 12 tricks for a top – but as we know, even 11 tricks in NT would have been enough for that, because of the extra 10 points it would have scored.

What might have swayed South to opt for NT? First, even though it's a singleton, you have a good honour in partner's suit. Second, you have strong tenaces in both the unbid suits (spades and diamonds), so a lead of either of those is not likely to be damaging – quite the opposite. And finally, you should be able to work out from the bidding that there are more than enough points between the two hands for game. With 28 or 29 points between you, NT is often a better choice in pairs.

Dir: South
Vul: All

♠ J 8 4
♥ Q J 9 8 5
♦ 9 2
♣ A 8 7

♠ 7
♥ A 7 3
♦ A Q 10 7 6 5
♣ K 9 5

W	NORTH	E
	7	
S		S
T	SOUTH	T

♠ A Q 10 6 2
♥ 6 4
♦ K J 3
♣ Q J 2

	♣	♦	♥	♠	N
N	-	-	-	-	-
S	-	-	-	-	-
E	2	6	2	3	2
W	2	6	2	3	2

♠ K 9 5 3
♥ K 10 2
♦ 8 4
♣ 10 6 4 3

	8	
13		13
	6	

Whilst we think we might have reached the right conclusion on Board 1 (if we'd been playing ...), we think we'd probably have done less well here on Board 7.

After West opens and rebids diamonds, East – who also has an opening hand – is definitely going to look for game. You know you have a diamond fit, but most pairs players will do anything they can to avoid playing in a minor suit game, for obvious reasons: so rather than supporting the diamonds, East will generally make some sort of forcing bid to enquire about the possibility of playing either in spades, or in NT. With stops in both hearts and clubs, it's very tempting for West to try 3NT.

On this occasion, though, the results merchants were doomed to failure after the stand-out heart lead. If the spade finesse had worked, they would have been fine: but as it was, in NT, eight tricks were the limit. Playing in diamonds, however, it's quite easy to rack up 11 tricks (again, the computer says you can make 12, but this requires a double-dummy manoeuvre with the spades).

Are there any warning signs that should lead you away from the primrose path? Well:

- You have only a singleton in partner's suit, and it's not an honour
- Your own suit, although long, is very gappy (as it happens partner has the missing honours, but you don't know that), so you might have to lose the lead more often than you'd like
- You have only one stop in each of the unbid suits, particularly in the unbid major, which is very likely to be led
- You have no extra values.

Compare all of these with the previous example, and the risks of playing in NT become fairly clear. But as we all know, sometimes it pays to take a risk in bridge... and who wants to play safe all the time? Not us, anyway!