Battling the Best

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BRIDGE WINNERS PRESS

DEDICATION

For Peter Gill, a great player and a major bridge influence.

Most of what I know about pairs and BAM scoring is linked to Peter, either from our playing together or from discussing these matters.

FOREWORD

I met Sartaj almost a decade ago when he started coming to national tournaments in North America. Like almost all Aussies I've ever encountered, Sartaj is a friendly outgoing sort, and our shared love of bridge led to many conversations on just about every conceivable topic related to the game. More recently, we have been teammates several times, always an enjoyable experience. This book covers the first of those occasions.

In *Battling the Best,* Sartaj tells the story of our run in the Reisinger Teams, the premier event at the Fall Nationals in 2014. But he provides so much more than a dry accounting of deals. We get his description of his growth as a player, and we learn about his primary influences. His selection of deals includes many that are superficially unexciting, but in which surprising conclusions can be drawn from the use of proper logic and technique. I call these "bell-ringer" deals—much harder at the table, where nobody is "ringing the bell" for you to pay attention.

In addition, Sartaj delves deeply into psychology, not only with respect to the dynamic between a player, his partner, and his opponents, but also as it applies to each player's struggle with his own insecurities. Another bonus is that we learn Sartaj's (often strong) opinions about the hot topics confronting modern bridge.

In short, Sartaj's personality shines through on every page. I trust that you will enjoy *Battling the Best* as much as I did.

Bart Bramley
2016

Table of Contents

PREFACE

Bridge books that test technique feature carefully crafted hands with neat, clean solutions. However, real-life bridge usually features hands where the techniques cannot be directly applied. At-the-table situations often feature ambiguous setups without clear answers. There is also abundant beauty in actual play that cannot be captured in a textbook. My primary goal is to illustrate these spheres.

Bridge books that feature high-level competition usually show only those hands where the superstars made spectacular plays. Fancy maneuvers make great print. I'm hoping to illustrate many day-to-day dull hands. Hands that may not be spectacular but capture the competitive struggle.

I'm also hoping to take the reader along on a journey of the psychological aspects of competition at the top levels. Understanding and managing emotions is a key aspect of competitive success at bridge, yet very little has been said about these issues in print. I'm hoping to break some introductory ground in this space.

Finally, I'm hoping to involve the reader by creating an accurate representation of actual problem points. This should give you a chance to compare your analytical skills with some very strong players. Since this is not a textbook with clean solutions, you might even argue with some of the analysis. I look forward to hearing your thoughts via email: sartaj@sartajhans.com.

I would like to especially thank Bart Bramley. This book would not have been possible without his detailed reconstructions. His commentary helped shape this book. I'd like to thank Adam Parrish for his invaluable editorial insights. I feel Adam managed to add a layer of polish to a rusty text. This book is

as much his as mine. Thanks also to Eric Kokish, Maurits van der Vlugt, Leigh Matheson, Wendy Ashton, Mike Doecke, and Mark Feldman for lots of useful feedback. Thanks to Sophie Ashton for helping with the cover photo. Many others helped, supported or egged me on to finish this project. Thanks to all of them, too.

Part I

Preliminaries

TODAY IS WHAT MATTERS

It's July 2011 and I'm at the US Summer Nationals in Toronto, waiting for the Round of 64 in the Spingold to start. Reading through the bulletin, I start counting the number of times Bob Hamman was part of the winning team. Quite clearly, he holds the record. The tally comes to fifteen. Whoa! What a track record. Fifteen wins in one of the toughest competitions in the world. It's impressive and inspiring. With this sentiment fresh in my mind, I walk towards the elevator. Turns out I have company and it's Bob Hamman.

"Do you know how many times you've won this?" I ask.

"Fifteen," says Hamman. There is no pretense of self-modesty. It was a matter-of-fact statement. No launch into a gloating monologue, either. It is what it is. I'm a bit tongue-tied and fail to come up with a follow-up line. I nod in agreement and tell myself off for asking such a stupid question. Of course he knows how many times he's won the Spingold. The elevator has meanwhile reached the playing area. As he leaves, Bob turns to me and says, "But you know what? Today is all that matters."

This made a great impression on me. Here is an absolute legend of the game, winner of multiple world championships, playing on one of the strongest teams in the world. Just because he has won so much in the past, he does not expect his opponents to fall over automatically in the Round of 64. He will need to prove his superiority today; all the past counts for nothing. Today is what matters.

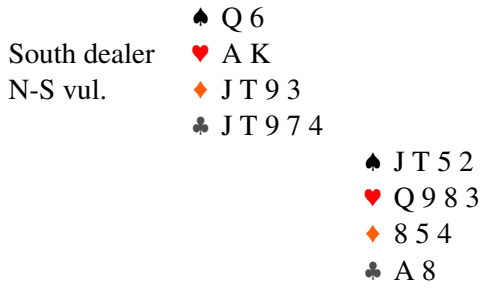
That is the reality of any day at the US Nationals. These tournaments feature not just the best American teams but also the cream from the rest of the world. There are roughly 30 to

40 playing sponsors, based mostly in the USA, who try to put together competitive teams. The top pros from the US quickly get snatched up, as do professionals from around the world. Strong amateur players who have not yet made the top grade head to these tournaments to take a bite at some professional flesh, hoping to make a name for themselves. Upsets often start as early as the Round of 64 in the premier knockout events. There are no easy fish in the Spingold.

The presence of all the superstars energizes the atmosphere. If one looked for the top 50 players in the world, they would all be here. In the same playing hall in early rounds, playing cards along with everyone else, hoping to work their way into more elite playing conditions as the tournament matures. Every amateur team has a fair chance of playing a very strong professional team. This accessibility is an aspect unique to bridge, and part of its charm.

Our team at the Toronto Nationals, where I had the chat with Bob Hamman, ran into a big-gun team in the Round of 32: FLEISHER (Fleisher–Kamil, Martel–Stansby, Levin–Weinstein). One hand from this match sticks out as memorable.

Try it first as a problem from the point of view of my partner, Tony Nunn:



West	North	East	South
Hans	*Martel*	*Nunn*	*Stansby*
—	—	—	1NT [1]
Pass	3NT	Pass	Pass
Pass			

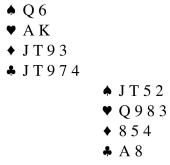
1. 12-14, denies a 5-card major

West leads the ♦2 (4th best) to dummy's ♦J and declarer's ♦K. Declarer crosses to the ♥A to lead the ♣J.

After the match was over, I recall Tony telling me that he was almost certain of the full hand by this point. Can you reach that level of certainty in your projections?

There are many clues…

The lead: Partner's choice of lead is a piece of treasure. On this auction, leading a minor is an unusual action, especially a 4-card suit as the ♦2 suggests. An expert partner will almost always lead from a 4-card major ahead of a minor after this auction. This inference almost guarantees that partner does not have a 4-card or longer major. West's shape is likely to be either 3=3=4=3 or (3–2)=4=4. The latter option would correspond with declarer's holding a 5-card major. Since that holding has been denied, a 3=3=4=3 partner and a 4=4=2=3 declarer appear almost certain.



The diamonds: Declarer has either ♦ KQ or ♦ AK doubleton. Partner is far more likely to lead from queen-fourth than ace-fourth; ace-fourth is one of the ugliest leads against a notrump contract. Holding the ♦A, leading a major even with a 3-card holding would be far more attractive. We can infer that declarer probably holds ♦ AK.

Declarer's clubs: With a holding like ♣ KQx or ♣ Qxx, declarer would have started the suit by playing from hand. The crossover to dummy to lead the ♣J marks him with the ♣K and correspondingly partner with the ♣Q.

Despite the uninformative 1NT–3NT auction, we have a lot of strong inferences about the distribution and high cards. Declarer's hand must look like either

♠ Axxx ♥ xxxx ♦ AK ♣ Kxx	or	♠ Kxxx ♥ Jxxx ♦ AK ♣ Kxx

When declarer leads the ♣J from dummy, the natural play is to play "second-hand low." However, the best defense is to rise with the ♣A and lead a heart; if we duck and partner wins his ♣Q, it is no longer possible for the defense to shut out declarer's deep club winners. Tony found this defense and we eventually discovered the full hand to be:

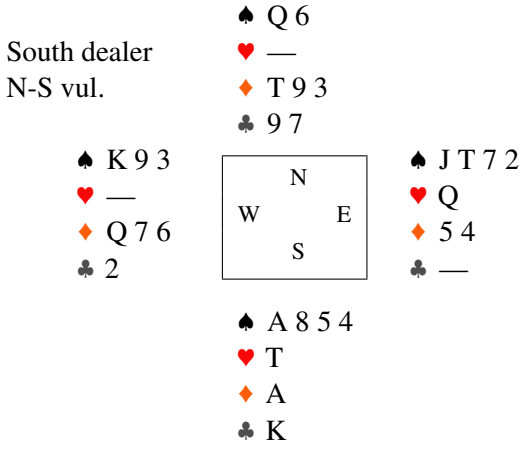
South dealer
N-S vul.

	♠ Q 6 ♥ A K ♦ J T 9 3 ♣ J T 9 7 4	
♠ K 9 3 ♥ J 6 4 ♦ Q 7 6 2 ♣ Q 3 2	N W E S	♠ J T 7 2 ♥ Q 9 8 3 ♦ 8 5 4 ♣ A 8
	♠ A 8 5 4 ♥ T 7 5 2 ♦ A K ♣ K 6 5	

A quick recap of the play: diamond lead to the ♦K, heart to the ♥A, club won by the ♣A, heart return. Declarer tried another club finesse and my ♣Q won as West.

The defense was far easier from my side of the table. Trick 1 marked declarer with ♦AK doubleton, and the play in the club suit was consistent with ♣Kxx. With declarer's distribution marked as 2=3 in the minors, the "no 5-card major" agreement projected South as 4=4=2=3. Partner's play of the ♥8 on the second round of the suit was consistent with holding the ♥Q. With a worthless holding in hearts, he would have a higher card to spare. Thus declarer was known to hold the ♦AK, ♣K, and no ♥Q. To make up his 12 points, he must hold the ♠A. Partner therefore must hold the ♠J as the range for 1NT was 12–14.

I cashed the ♥J and dummy pitched a club leading to this position:



With 3 tricks in the bag for the defense, the natural play seems to be to play a diamond. This helps set up the fifth defensive trick that can be cashed when declarer leads a spade towards the ♠Q after unblocking the ♣K. Seems like a straightforward way to down 1. Can you spot an improvement?

A better play is to dislodge dummy's ♠Q before the clubs are unblocked. I exited a low spade! Declarer can score a free spade trick, but the blocked clubs ensure that he loses out on 2 winners in the minors. The play logically progressed ♠Q, ♣K, ♠A. I unblocked the ♠K under the ♠A and declarer lost the last 3 tricks to partner. The defense scored 6 tricks: 2 spades, 2 hearts, and 2 clubs while restraining declarer to 7: 2 spades, 2 hearts, 2 diamonds, and a club.

If partner's spades were not as strong as the actual hand, we would still have achieved a down 1 outcome as East would have a spade and a heart winner to cash. So there was nothing to lose and a second vulnerable undertrick to possibly gain. I gave myself a pat on the back, not only for the technical accomplishment but also for the psychological aspect of pushing past the guaranteed set of down 1.

Thinking about the hand later, I realized that a stronger play than my low exit was to exit the ♠9. This starts the defensive

spade unblock, which could be necessary on layouts where partner's spade holding is ♠J8xx, and retains the possibility of a second undertrick.

While we went on to lose the match convincingly, this is the one hand I remember from that day. The situation reminds me of a quote attributed to Emmanuel Lasker, the second world chess champion:

When you see a good move, look for a better one!

THE FALL NATIONALS

The ACBL holds three North American Bridge Championships (NABCs) each year; my favorite is the Fall Nationals, held in late November/early December. The Spring and Summer Nationals each have two main events: a three-day pairs event—the Platinum Pairs and the Life Master Pairs—followed by a week-long knockout—the Vanderbilt and the Spingold. At the Fall Nationals there are four premier events: the Life Master Pairs, the Mitchell BAM, the Blue Ribbon Pairs, and the Reisinger. The LM Pairs and Mitchell BAM are both two-day events: two qualifying sessions on Day 1 and two final sessions on Day 2. The Blue Ribbon Pairs and Reisinger are three-day events, with cuts made after the first and second days to get down to a relatively small field for the finals. Since all of these events feature a cutoff for qualification rather than the winner-takes-all nature of a knockout, having a couple of disasters is not the end of the world. As long as you make the cutoff point, you are still alive and ready for a shot at glory.

Both the team contests, the Mitchell BAM and the Reisinger, feature Board-a-Match (BAM) scoring. I believe that this is one of the hardest tests of bridge skill. On every board, a team can score a 0 (lose), 1 (win), or 0.5 (tie). This scoring makes each board have a meaningful impact on the final score. The overtrick in a 27 HCP 3NT can be worth the same as bidding and making a close slam.

Every board has significant swing potential in BAM scoring, and the swings are more brutal than at IMPs or matchpoints. The hands featuring competitive bidding take on a life of their own. There is a serious incentive to bid aggressively. Sacrificing for −100 can lead to a full won board against +110

at the other table. It is often a winning strategy to double the opponents in partscores, and a slight mistake or overstep can have fatal consequences. One has to bid aggressively and play precisely. Board-a-Match is not for the faint hearted!

Let's compare BAM scoring to traditional teams scoring. IMP scoring is based on a scale where larger swings like slams and vulnerable games receive proportional rewards. Most top teams play a style of aggressively bidding games, and a lot of system work goes into improving the reliability of slam auctions. Doubling the opponents in a partscore is usually seen as poor IMP strategy, since the risks (doubling the opponents into a game contract) outweigh the rewards (extra penalties). In the play, the emphasis is primarily on making our contracts and defeating theirs, since the difference in score from an overtrick or extra undertrick is relatively small. There is a certain clarity of purpose.

Imagine declarer is in a 3♠ contract.

At IMPs, declarer's principal aim is to make 3♠; the defense's chief goal is to defeat it. In the bidding, the defending side would probably be happy with their accomplishment—they have managed to push the declaring side to the 3-level, where there is no additional bonus. The primary swing on the hand will rotate around which side manages to go plus: the declaring side for making their contract or the defending side for defeating it. Overtricks and undertricks can impact the bottom line, but their impact is not as significant as finishing on the plus or minus side of the ledger. This makes the objectives for both sides quite clear.

At BAM, declarer's objective is to optimize his score. Making 9 tricks in 3♠ might lose the board if the declarer in the other room makes 10. Situations involving risking one's contract in search of an overtrick often have no clear answers. Similarly, if the contract is failing, it might be crucial to hold

the loss to −100 in order to win the board on days when teammates bring back a score like +110.

From the defending side's point of view, there is often a huge premium on offer to double the final contract in a competitive auction. 3♠ doubled, down 1 vulnerable, earns the defense +200, a win against teammates' −140. The same undoubled contract gains only +100 and a loss against the −140 in the other room.

The objectives at BAM are unclear; the number of decisions involved in competitive auctions is greater; a lot is often at stake over an overtrick or an undertrick. It is a harder game to play.

IMP scoring is also more sensitive to the luck element. It is a game of big swings. While the stronger players have better chances of navigating big moments, an element of randomness can also play an influential role. A close slam, a blind opening lead, or a queen guess can have a serious impact on the final margin. Sixty-four-board matches are often not long enough to be a true test of skill. Unfortunately, the trend amongst tournament organizers seems to be towards shorter matches. One can understand perhaps shortening a Vanderbilt match to 60 boards to suit the playing schedule. However, it is a horrifying sight watching WBF administrators destroy the integrity of World Championship events by instituting 32-board knockout matches at IMP scoring.

At BAM, the impact of slams and the inherent randomness of some high-level bidding decisions is limited. Those decisions count, but their consequence is about the same as the decision of whether or not to bid 3♥ over 2♠. There are more opportunities for the better team to demonstrate stronger technique or better bidding judgment.

Occasionally, unfancied teams can win a Spingold or a Vanderbilt. The favorites in these events have an edge, but their likelihood of winning the whole event is not that high. On the other hand, the Reisinger rarely features a major surprise. The

winners are almost always regarded as one of the top teams in the world.

This claim can be verified by examining the list of recent winners. From 2004 to 2015, the powerhouse NICKELL squad won the event four times, CAYNE (featuring Lauria–Versace and other Italians) won three times and MONACO twice. There have been only two upset victories: team COHLER in 2005 and VAINIKONIS in 2015.

Another aspect of the form of scoring is that the players are constantly tested. In IMP-comparative terms, you could say that every board at BAM is a game or slam swing. At IMPs, the weaker team might bid and make a fluky slam and then rest on its laurels for a few boards. Often, it will take some time for a similar big moment to come up or for the accumulation of small moments to have an equally meaningful impact. At BAM, you bid a slam? Great, well done. Next hand, here you are defending 2♠. If you don't find the trump switch, the score will be even.

That is the beauty of BAM!

THE HANS TEAM

To follow the story of my team, let me start with some history. The story of my first game with Peter Gill is worth recounting. Back in the year 2000 I moved from India to Australia for work. Having already been bitten by the bridge bug, I keenly scoured the Internet to get a good feel for the top players in the country. Peter, in partial bridge retirement, was not part of this list.

When I visited a local club in Sydney, an unusual event called the Jackpot was being played on Wednesday nights. Out of every entry fee, some money went into a jackpot fund that accumulated until one pair won the matchpoint Howell game three weeks in a row. I stumbled upon a good pickup partner and we promptly scored two back-to-back 70% games, winning convincingly both nights.

Suddenly we were contenders for the Jackpot, which had been growing over the previous year or so and was now in excess of $1,000. There was a huge buzz around us and I instantly got some profile amongst the good players. My mindset, being young, was that I was the hotshot who was going to crush bridge in this club, this city, and this country.

We could not keep our heads together to win the jackpot. However, in this setting, a guy whom I'd often seen hanging around but never playing approached me. He had a bearded, nerdy but very friendly appearance and asked me if I had any plans to play in the Gold Coast Congress, a premier Australian national event. The manner in which he asked was not one of "Would you like to play with me?" It was more like, "If you are free, I could play with you." I could sense that there was some substance behind this confidence. Still, I bought a bit of time

with, "Not sure if I can make it. Give me a day or two to think about it. What is your name and number?"

When I checked with a friend whether this guy called Peter Gill is any good, I heard a huge bout of laughter. Peter was known as one of the very best Australian players. He had represented Australia multiple times in international competition, and a couple of years ago he and Michael Courtney had finished sixth in the Cavendish Invitational Pairs, the premier prize-money international tournament.

While this was a surprise, it fit very well with my picture of myself: *Of course it is logical that a top player wants to form a partnership with me. After all, I am the hotshot with the two 70% games in the Wednesday evening duplicate.* All right, bring it on!

Our tournament together was a humbling experience. I realized over the course of a few days how much I had to learn and how good Peter really was. I would misdefend 3NT one hand, next hand he would pull off a trump coup. Our team started slowly but towards the end we started building up some steam. There were two qualifying spots in our group, and we were in contention for one of them. In the last round of the Swiss, we played the leaders, HACKETT, at table one. A decent win would see us through. I faced a bidding problem similar to this hand:

South dealer
Both vul.

SOUTH
♠ K Q T 2
♥ A K
♦ K Q J T 9 4
♣ A

NORTH	SOUTH
—	2♣ [1]
2♦ [2]	3♦ [3]
4♦ [3]	?

1. Game force
2. 5+ HCP
3. Natural

What would you bid?

The winning answer is the simple 4NT, Roman Keycard Blackwood. Opposite no aces we can sign off in 5♦, opposite 1 ace we can bid 6♦, and opposite 2 aces we can bid the grand slam.

Caught up in the pressure of the moment, I woodenly chose to control-bid 4♥. It was a reflexive action coming out of a sentiment of, "We've set a trump suit? OK, let's control-bid to start a scientific auction." Two seconds after bidding 4♥, I realized how pointless it was.

When Peter responded with 5♦, I knew I had pushed myself into a corner. He obviously denied the ♠A. There was no longer a way of finding out whether or not he held the ♦A. Rustic "unscientific" Blackwood had been bypassed. I shut my eyes and bid 6♦. When Jason Hackett doubled on my left, I knew our campaign was over.

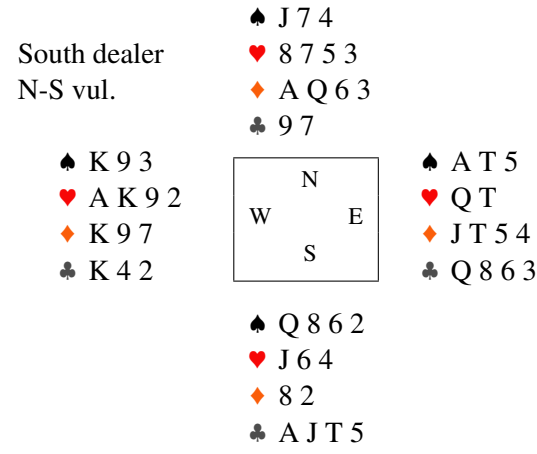
After the tournament, Peter was quite encouraging. He sent me an email along the lines of, "We will be teammates one day soon. I don't think we are suited to be partners." It was a great exit line. Far better than telling this young hotshot that he is just not good enough to be a top player yet.

While we did not play much after this game, over the years we talked a lot about bridge. I found him to be the only top Australian player interested in talking about the psychological side of performance. Since I have always had a keen interest in this area, we frequently compared notes. Talking about things like mindset, positivity, and distractions is not an everyday bridge conversation.

Dealing with mistakes and their cause is difficult, especially in a highly charged activity like bridge. Many people shy away from it by using narratives like, "I don't know what I was thinking" or "I had a blackout." Yet there is a lot more going on behind the scenes. Not all of it can be captured in language or understood perfectly. Concentration and performance are complex subjects that Peter was always willing to discuss. We built a rapport and friendship around these conversations.

Peter is also an outstanding technician, a player who has seen a lot and knows a lot. In 2004, he won the IBPA award for the best defended hand of the year. This was the hand:

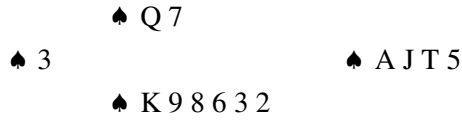
South dealer
N-S vul.



West	North	East	South
	Bloom		*Gill*
—	—	—	Pass
1NT	Pass	3NT	Pass
Pass	Pass		

Martin Bloom led the ♦3 (4th best) round to West's ♦7. Declarer next played a club to the ♣Q that Peter ducked!! Declarer naturally expected the ♣A to be in the North hand and continued with a club, ducking the ♣T. That was the end of his chances as the defense cashed out with 3 clubs and 2 diamond tricks. This defensive play is so unusual that it was widely appreciated.

I believe that he made this play because of a reference to a similar play reported earlier in the year in Ron Klinger's bridge column:



In a pairs tournament, Paul Lavings as South was declarer in a spade contract. When he led a spade to the ♠Q, Sheila Thompson as East followed with the ♠5. Since this suggested that the ♠A was in the West hand, Paul ducked a spade on the next round. Unexpectedly, he found himself with 3 spade losers. He recovered by executing a trump coup, but reported this neat defensive maneuver to Ron, who published it in his daily column.

Note that if East wins the ♠A on the first round, declarer has a cost-free safety play available of running the ♠7 next. The spectacular duck on the first round of trumps created an air of certainty around the trumps' being split 3–2. It also created the illusion of an extra trick if West held ♠ A3 doubleton.

It is a situation worth remembering. A few years after Peter's defense was written up for the award, I saw Giorgio Duboin make the same play to good effect. There are indeed many benefits to studying the game.

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

There are different kinds of players at the expert level. Some aspire to play in a technically flawless manner. They usually play for legitimate chances and operate on the basis of respecting the defense. These kinds of players rarely look really silly. They almost always have a technical justification for their actions.

The other kind of player is the one who aspires only to getting the best result. He is aware of the technical aspects of any situation but is willing to back himself and his read of what is going on. These kinds of players often win swings out of thin air, though they sometimes look really foolish when their play backfires.

Peter is certainly the latter kind of player. Here is a rough recollection of a hand he recently played.

♠ A 6 5 2
♥ Q 9 3
♦ K T 9 5 4
♣ 7

♠ K 7
♥ A K 5 4
♦ J 8 5 3
♣ A 9 4

> Plan the play in 3NT on the ♣3 lead (4th best) to the ♣Q.

Clubs appear to be 5–4 and we have dim prospects. The defenders will win the ♦A and cash 5 winners. There is an outside chance of playing for 6–3 clubs with the diamond entry in the short club hand. Ducking a couple of clubs seems like the reflexive thing to do.

Peter, however, had a devious plan. He ruled out the 6–3 club layout, as it was inconsistent with the ♣3 lead. He knew that the contract had no hope if East held the ♦A; East would win and return clubs, making the defense quite easy. The only chance of the defense's ever going wrong was if West won the ♦A.

With this intent, Peter won the first club and played a diamond to the ♦K. His plan was to continue with a diamond next and hope West won as East followed with the ♦Q. This might convince West that East had a diamond trick. If the clubs were something like ♣Jxxxx in the West hand and ♣KQTx in the East hand, West might try a major-suit switch.

On the actual hand, the ♦Q appeared on the first round of diamonds from East and was followed by an encouraging club discard, so the inventive play did not reap any rewards. But

I found this hand an excellent demonstration of the nature of Peter's thinking. He approaches things in a different manner from most.

Back to the story of my partnership forays with Peter. After our first outing, we did not play any serious events together but often ended up being teammates. Both of us were keen to play more at the US nationals. This common ambition saw us align to give the partnership another go at the 2012 Fall Nationals in San Francisco.

We started off respectably, making the top ten in two of the first three events. Quite unexpectedly, we were even leading the Blue Ribbon Pairs after the first day and running second after Day 2. Even though we fizzled out on the final day to 7th place, things were going well for us.

In this rush of an unfancied pair doing consistently well, we entered the Reisinger. While we had played many big stars over the week, the Reisinger was where the big sharks awaited us in their strongest lineups. We had many memorable hands in the 2012 Reisinger, but it seemed like a disproportionate number of them were against one pair: Lew Stansby and Bart Bramley.

Lew and Bart were a relatively new partnership. I knew both of them well from previous encounters. I had played against Lew, a multiple world champion, and his wife JoAnna Stansby, also a world-class player, at many international events. I had always found them very friendly and approachable; both are great ambassadors of the game.

Lew had recently ended his storied partnership with Chip Martel. In the era from about 1981 to 2011, they were one of the top pairs in the world, winning five world championships and dozens of American national titles. They were also the only top-level pair playing a system primarily based on weak notrumps. While some pairs were playing a weak notrump non-vulnerable

and others were using it at favorable, Martel–Stansby were the only pair using it as a system base. Since my partner Tony Nunn and I used to play a weak notrump system, too, they were quite naturally my heroes.

There is a funny story from the first time I played against Chip and Lew. To set the context, Tony and I started playing a system based on 5-card majors and a weak notrump. We quickly became one of the top pairs in Australia. Our system developed as we played more, but the core stayed the same.

As we started competing in international tournaments, we noticed a trend: opening a weak notrump in third seat vulnerable was asking for trouble! Since dealer was a passed hand, the fourth-hand opponents realized that there was less risk of being penalized for aggressive entry. We noticed that the opponents doubled more often on speculative hands. Wily opponents non-vulnerable might also try a double on 10 HCP on an auction like P–P–1NT–P; P–X. Being vulnerable made us easy targets. The penalties paid out were more frequent and the most beautiful auction in bridge 1NT–(P)–3NT was no longer possible.

We decided to switch to a strong notrump in third seat when vulnerable. Eric Kokish, a champion of the weak notrump, jokingly called us wimps because we played a very active and adventurous style otherwise. He prefers to retain 1NT as weak but makes some adjustments in the choice of opening bids: light hands tend to pass and many weak-notrump hand-types stretch to open 1M on a 4-card suit when convenient. This approach aims to reduce the risk while preserving the advantages of a weak-notrump base.

We, however, believed in the strong notrump in third seat vulnerable and in retaining our usual approach when non-vulnerable. In our view, it was a good mix of caution attached to a daring style and it was an adjustment of which we were proud.

With this background, we sat down to play Lew and Chip at the 2006 World Championships in Verona. I glanced at their system card and was very surprised to see that they played the same treatment as we: 12–14 1NT in all seats except third seat vulnerable, when it was 15–17.

Finding it amusing I said to Lew, my screen-mate: "Hah! So you guys worked it out too?" referring to the dangers of being vulnerable in third seat.

I got a wry smile back: "We worked it out 20 years ago, Sartaj."

Well, that was humbling!

Lew's new partner, Bart Bramley, is someone you can usually spot at the bar at the US Nationals. I've had many conversations with him over a beer or two on trips to the States. Jovial and always ready to share a story, Bart looks a bit like a university professor, which fits with his background as a math major from MIT. He loves to go very deep in any technical discussion. Sometimes I'll receive an email from him featuring a particularly complex deal weeks after the actual hand. He likes to get to the very bottom of any hand he analyzes; keeping pace with him in a technical discussion requires a lot of focus, concentration, and energy.

Among Bart's many accomplishments is his second-place finish in the World Par Contest in 1998. This event featured hands requiring a very sophisticated level of technical ability. Try the first of twelve problems that the contestants had to solve:

South dealer
E-W vul.

♠ A J 6 5 2
♥ J T 9 8 7 6
♦ 9 6
♣ —

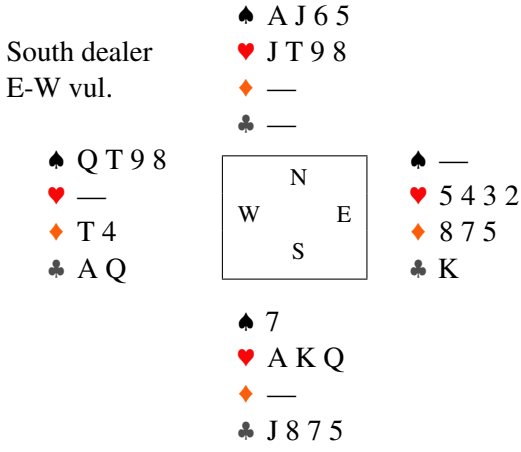
♠ K 7
♥ A K Q
♦ Q J
♣ J 8 7 5 4 3

West	North	East	South
—	—	—	1NT
2♠	Double [1]	Pass	Pass
2NT [2]	4♦ [3]	Pass	4♥
Pass	Pass	Pass	

1. Penalty
2. Minors
3. Hearts

West cashes 2 top diamonds and switches to a club. Taking the inference that West is 5=0=4=4, can you solve it?

The winning line is to ruff the club in dummy, cross to the ♠K and ruff another club, leading to this position:



Declarer now calls for a low spade from dummy! Since a crossruff is being threatened, East is forced to ruff this and return a trump. South wins to ruff a third club in dummy. Now he plays the ♠A; East has no answer. If he discards, declarer crossruffs the rest of the tricks. If East ruffs, declarer overruffs, ruffs the last club in dummy, and crosses to hand to draw trumps and enjoy the established clubs.

You can get a sense for the difficulty of the contest by appreciating that this hand was the first of the whole set and believed to be one of the easier problems. Scores were awarded for accuracy in play and for the amount of time taken to solve problems. While Bart finished second overall behind Michael Rosenberg, he made one fewer error than the winner.

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

Back to the 2012 Reisinger, where we had many memorable battles against Bart and Lew. Try this declarer play problem from the first day of the event:

North dealer
None vul.

♠ K 7
♥ 7 5
♦ A J 8 7 6
♣ A 6 5 4

♠ T 9 5
♥ A Q T 9 8 6 3
♦ 4
♣ Q T

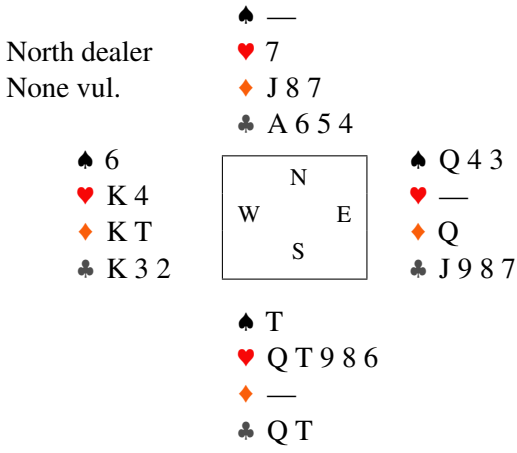
West	North	East	South
Stansby	*Hans*	*Bramley*	*Gill*
—	1♦ [1]	1♠	2♥ [2]
2♠	Double [3]	Pass	4♥
Pass	Pass	Pass	

1. Precision, 2+♦
2. NF, up to INV
3. Takeout

The ♠8 is led to the ♠J and the ♥J is returned. What are your thoughts?

Our line of play is irrelevant if East's holding is ♥Jx; the layouts that warrant consideration are when East holds ♥J singleton or ♥KJ doubleton. After lengthy deliberation, Peter decided to play for the former choice and rose with the ♥A, having spotted the one possible way of making this contract.

It feels natural to play a spade, setting up the ruff in dummy. Visualizing deeper, he played a diamond to the ♦A and ruffed a diamond. Now, he continued a spade. This was the position with East on lead:



There was no winning continuation for East. Say he returns the ♠Q. Declarer ruffs in dummy, ruffs a diamond, and drives out the ♥K. On the run of trumps, West will get squeezed between the ♦K and the ♣K. Declarer takes the last 2 tricks, losing a total of 2 spades and a trump.

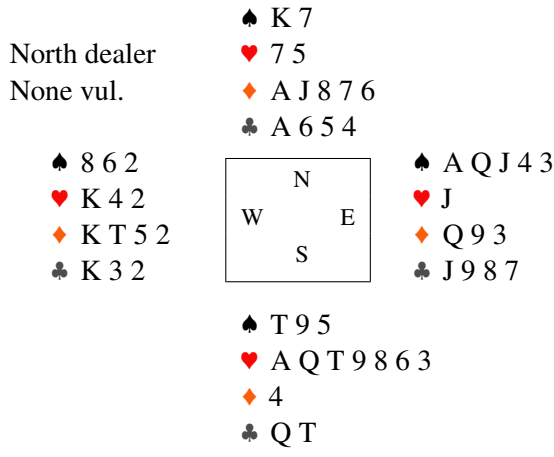
Note the importance of ruffing a diamond in early play. Declarer needs to take 2 diamond ruffs in hand to isolate the diamond guard in the West hand. If he prematurely sets up his spade ruff, East can tap the dummy, restricting the number of diamond ruffs declarer can take in hand and killing his squeeze chances.

This is another technical aspect to this hand. When Bart was on lead as East, he anticipated the upcoming squeeze and found the beautiful play of the ♣7. On the surface, this is a risky play as it immediately blows up a potential club trick. However, if declarer's clubs were ♣Qx, giving partner ♣KTx, it is the only way to break up the squeeze. Declarer loses access to the ♣A in dummy and there is no more pressure on West.

I found this attempted-squeeze-break-up play to be as excellent a technical effort as Peter's inspired line of play. On a hand where everyone distinguished themselves well in the play,

this was Peter's day as he scored the +420 and an almost certain win on the board. The full hand was:

North dealer
None vul.



The only winning defense on a spade lead is for East to play three rounds of spades. This play, however, has a double-dummy bias because returning a heart would be best if West held the ♥A.

When we met again two days later in the final of the Reisinger, I faced a unique defensive opportunity:

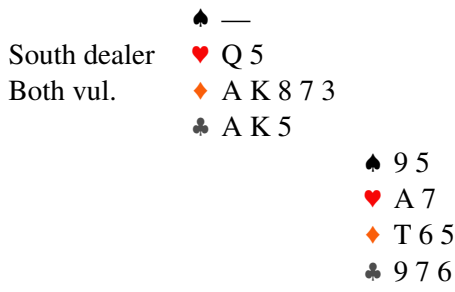
	♠ 3 2	
South dealer	♥ Q 5	
Both vul.	♦ A K J 8 7 3	
	♣ A K 5	
		♠ A K 9 5
		♥ A 7
		♦ Q T 6 5
		♣ 9 7 6

West	North	East	South
Gill	*Stansby*	*Hans*	*Bramley*
—	—	—	Pass
Pass	1♣ [1]	Pass	1♦ [2]
Pass	2♦	Pass	2♥
Pass	3♦	Double	Pass
Pass	Pass		

1. Precision: Strong, artificial, and forcing
2. 0–7 HCP

Partner led the ♦9 to the ♦J and ♦Q. I cashed 2 spades as partner played the ♠Q and then a low one.

The hand seems simple enough. Assuming declarer has the ♥K, we're sure to score 2 spades, 2 trumps, and the ♥A for down 1. If partner has the ♣Q, we have some chances of another trick. If he holds ♣QJ or ♣QT, we can duck 1 heart and lock declarer in the dummy for down 2. If partner holds the ♣Q but not the ♣J or ♣T, declarer can use the ♥K as an entry to lead the ♣J for a finesse. A devious option to distract declarer on this layout started building in my mind. Can you spot it?



If I tried the sneaky ♥7 right now, declarer might reflexively play low, hoping for the ♥A to be played on his left. Or he might try the ♥T from a holding like ♥KTxxx to see what happens. In those cases, he loses his entry for the club finesse.

Yes, that seemed right. It was a free shot at inducing an error. There was only one problem layout: when declarer's club holding was ♣Qxxx. With that hand, he can win the heart return, pull 2 rounds of trumps, and play 4 rounds of clubs, discarding a heart. As I would ruff with my trump winner, our heart trick would disappear and that would be −670 and a big sad face. The defense would score only 2 trumps and 2 spades.

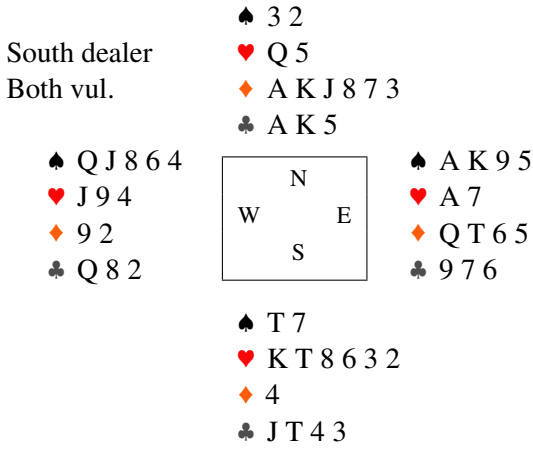
So, the ♥7 or the ♥A?

There are some inferences you can sensibly take against strong declarers. If he held ♣Qxxx, Bart would have won the first diamond, cashed the second, and played four rounds of clubs straightaway, discarding a spade. He would have a chance of making his contract by restricting the defense to 2 trumps, a spade, and a heart.

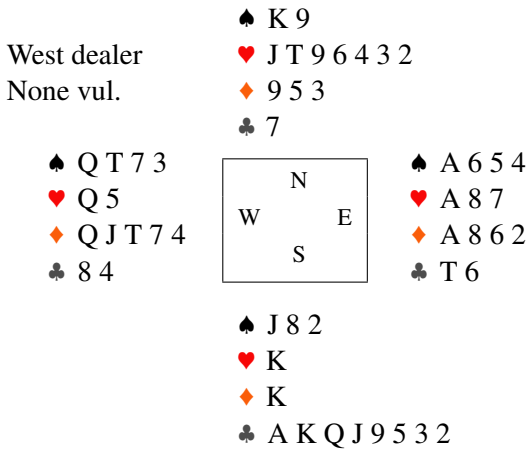
It was unlikely that this layout existed. Still, a potential misplay by declarer was an outside possibility. Everyone makes mistakes. Moments like this highlight a key difference between BAM and IMP scoring. Going back to a knockout score-up with the line, "I tried a tricky psychological ploy for an extra undertrick instead of taking my +200. Sorry about the −670 guys" helps lose teammates very quickly. Perhaps it would lose

teammates at BAM too, but I like to hope that there would be more sympathy for such a result.

I decided to back myself. I was playing the Reisinger final after all, against Bart Bramley no less. I played the ♥7 and it went to the ♥T, ♥J, and ♥Q. Declarer was now down 2, the full hand being:



Trickery succeeding on a hand like this is very satisfying. I felt some cozy smugness. Unfortunately, the euphoria did not last very long. The very next hand, Bart got a punch back in. This was the hand:



West	North	East	South
Gill	*Stansby*	*Hans*	*Bramley*
Pass	3♥	Pass	3NT(!)
Pass	Pass	Pass	

Peter led the ♦Q, and in some misguided vision of preserving defensive communication, I ducked. Bart showed his hand and that was that!

I think that the two hands were linked. The amount of time spent on the first board led to some sort of a decision-fatigue that influenced the fast duck on the second. There was also possibly a link to the euphoria associated with pulling off a coup. If you take a bit of time to think about it, playing the ♦A is not that hard a play to find. At-the-table bridge does not afford the same level of vigilance that a problem setting does. We are humans and our brains are not perpetually rational number crunchers, but are very susceptible to the effects of emotion.

I often explain to non-bridge-playing friends that bridge involves making a lot of decisions in a limited amount of time. Every card played and every bid made is in principle a distinct decision. Most choices are fairly routine and a limited amount

of mental effort is required. However, when a big moment arises, it is necessary to switch off the auto-pilot and turn on the deductive-reasoning engine. A lot of mistakes occur when a player carries on in the rhythm of the moment and fails to appreciate that a critical thinking moment has been reached. Learning to turn off the auto-pilot at just the right moment is a critical component of success.

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

In the 2012 Reisinger, our team (with Tom Hanlon and Mike Moss) finished in a respectable sixth place. Bart and Lew (with teammates Sabine Auken and Roy Welland) finished second, a tremendous result. The winning MONACO team featured Fantoni–Nunes, a tainted pair that used illegal signals to gain an advantage.

The sentences from the ACBL and EBL against Fantunes and the other cheating pairs were announced just as I was finishing this book. As I was writing it, mostly in the months between the accusations and verdicts, I knew I had to address the elephant in the room—the biggest cheating scandal in the history of bridge—especially since one of the central pairs won the event I was chronicling. (Spoiler alert!) The evidence against both Fisher–Schwartz and Fantunes was compelling, and hardly anyone in the bridge world believed in their innocence. Some die-hard legal-process adherents were stressing the principle of the presumption of innocence and excoriating everyone on the Internet who was convicting people without a trial. I believe in the legal process; it is one of the cornerstones of freedom in western societies. This quote from Chris Willenken on Bridge Winners beautifully captured how I and many others felt about this matter:

> *Now, I'm not saying that everyone suspected of cheating is guilty, and I strongly believe that*

everyone should have his day in court. But I am saying that "innocent until proven guilty" is a legal fiction which we properly use to protect the rights of those accused during formal proceedings. It is not a license to abandon common sense in your everyday life when you're trying to decide who is trustworthy and who is not.

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

Back to the tale of how our team for the 2014 Reisinger in Providence came together. Peter and I were looking for teammates and Boye Brogeland heartily recommend two strong Norwegian juniors: Tor Eivind Grude and Kristian Ellingsen. These are two names I suspect we will hear more of in the years to come. Both are young and highly talented. They have had solid results in junior competitions on the international stage and in open competitions at home. Tor is the quieter of the two, possibly because of discomfort in an English-speaking environment. He loves talking about the hands in great detail, and it is clear that he has a deep love of the game. Kristian is more fluent in English and easier to communicate with. He is very methodical in his approach. His maturity at such a young age is evident in his active organizational role in Norwegian bridge; he was one of the organizers of the European Bridge Championships in Tromso. Both Tor and Kristian were good teammates emanating positive energy.

Our original intention was to play four handed. Meanwhile, Bart and Lew, fresh off a win in the Senior Knockout, were looking for teammates and approached us. When the question of adding them came to a team vote, it was unsurprisingly unanimous.

PROVIDENCE 2014

Earlier in the week, Peter and I finished tenth in the Life Master Pairs, a respectable finish. A ritual that I invariably find myself going through after a result like this is to review all the hands and identify the matchpoint cost of our clear mistakes. I am not referring here to judgment calls like choosing between 3NT and 4♥ or opening lead problems. I mean no-win cases like forgetting the system, missing a discard, having a blind spot, etc. My theory is that each such mistake usually costs about one place. The winners and the pair coming second sometimes break away from the field, but the gaps between 3rd to 15th or so are almost always one-mistake-a-place. It goes to show how hard these national matchpoint pair games are and how consistently well one has to play to place highly.

Let's look at some eventful moments from the early part of the week.

South dealer
None vul.

♠ K J 8 3
♥ Q 5 2
♦ K 2
♣ J T 6 4

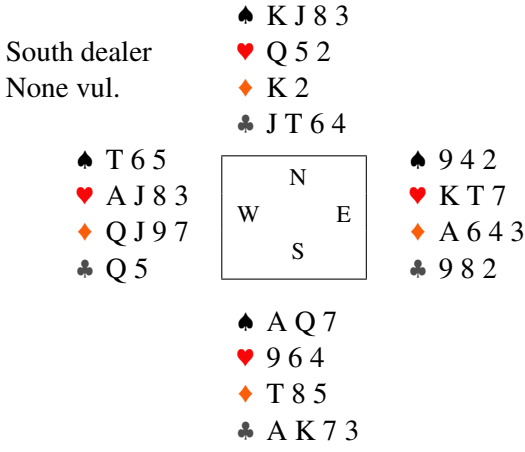
♠ A Q 7
♥ 9 6 4
♦ T 8 5
♣ A K 7 3

Plan the play in 1NT as South on the ♦Q lead.

This is the sort of hand where the amateur mindset runs along the lines of *I'll try the ♦K to see if it wins. If it loses to the ♦A, maybe the ♦9 is in the East hand and I'll have a diamond stopper. Let's find out what is going on in diamonds.* "Thanks, partner. King please."

The professional attitude runs more along the lines of *I will play the ♦K from dummy. If it wins, I'll … If it loses and a diamond comes back, the ♦9 rates to be in West hand. When diamonds are 4–4, I have to make 2 pitches from dummy and 1 from hand. If they are 5–3, I have to make 3 from dummy and 2 from hand. The heart switch is a live threat. With 1NT almost certainly not making, what is my objective? How should I discard? Are there any deceptive alternatives available?*

On the hand, the ♦A was offside and diamonds were 4–4. Discarding two small clubs from dummy seems obvious. Since discarding a heart from hand might signal some weakness, I decided to discard a club from hand. When declarer discards from the same suit both in dummy and hand, the defense can usually infer lack of ambition in this suit. Playing this suit is often their best bet. The club-discarding ploy worked spectacularly here as West fell for the bait: after cashing 4 diamonds, he exited a club, letting me score 4 spades and 3 clubs for 7 tricks and a great score. The full hand was:



It is not easy to find the winning defense of attacking hearts. One possible solution is help from partner with suit-preference carding. The return of the ♦3 (original 4th best) is essential to let West know that the diamonds are running. The next two cards should have suit-preference overtones. There are, however, three suits in play and only two cards to signal with. One could argue that spades are out of the picture and the suit preference should be between hearts and clubs. Even in well-oiled partnerships there would be an element of ambiguity about the message.

In situations like these, when partner's signals are hazy, the defense often relies on information from declarer. Both the discards and the level of comfort exhibited in making them provide clues about his holdings.

To counter this strategy from declarer's point of view, planning adequately for these eventual scenarios is a key skill for success. One may not score points in a technical discussion, but obfuscation can be a powerful tool, and creating confusion for the defense often leads to good results. The next hand features a similar theme. I got it wrong; see if you can do better:

	♠ Q T 9
North dealer	♥ K Q J 5 2
N-S vul.	♦ T 9 4
	♣ Q 9

♠ K 8 2
♥ A 7 6 4
♦ A K 2
♣ J 5 4

West	North	East	South
	Gill		*Hans*
—	Pass	Pass	1NT
Pass	2♦*	Pass	2♥
2♠	3NT	Pass	4♥
Pass	Pass	Pass	

West leads the ♦3 (3rd/5th). What is your plan?

Assuming we can get the spades right, we have 4 losers: 1 spade, 1 diamond, and 2 clubs. The best hope appears to lie in building a club trick for a diamond discard. However, the diamond lead has put the defense a tempo ahead. On most distributions of the minor-suit honors, this approach requires some sort of a misdefense. Say trick 1 goes ♦3, ♦T, ♦J, ♦A. Now the partner of the player who holds the ♦Q can win the first club and play a diamond through, setting up the defense's diamond trick before the club is established.

The legitimate winning layout appears to be one where one of the defenders holds the ♣AK and the second diamond honor. This possibility also appeared to be remote, since West would have led one of his top club honors if he held them and the bidding indicated that East was unlikely to have most of the missing high cards.

I thought my best shot was to hope LHO had the ♣K and a diamond honor. When I lead a club towards the ♣Q early in the play, without drawing trumps, he might fear declarer's play as being from ♣ Axx(x) and rise with the ♣K. Seeing nothing better than this, I called for the ♦T and proceeded with my plan. Soon enough, I was down 1. It was only later that I realized that I had a 12.5% "legitimate" chance. Have you spotted it already or want to have another go?

The simple winning play is to play small from dummy at trick 1! When West has the ♦8 and East has the ♦ QJ, it is practically impossible for East to find the winning play of a spot card, retaining his honors. From East's point of view, West could be leading from ♦ K83(2). Letting declarer score an additional trick with ♦ A7 opposite ♦ T94 is a risk he cannot afford to take. Also, on most layouts, East will play an honor from ♦ Hxx if we duck, which retains the original chance of hoping West will rise with the ♣K at trick 2.

The critical layout existed on the actual hand at the table. West had led from ♦ 873 and East held ♦ QJ65. I did not get it right this time but it is a situation well worth remembering.

Staying with the deception theme . . .

East dealer
N-S vul.

♠ J 7 4
♥ J 7 6 4 2
♦ T 7
♣ A 4 3

♠ Q 8 5
♥ A K 8
♦ A Q 8 6 5 2
♣ J

West	North	East	South
	Hans		*Gill*
—	—	Pass	1♣ [1]
Pass	1♦ [2]	Pass	1NT
Pass	2♦ [3]	Pass	2♥
Pass	Pass	Pass	

1. Precision: Strong, artificial, and forcing
2. 0–7 HCP
3. Transfer

West led the ♠A and switched to a club. Establishing the diamonds appeared to be the logical approach. Peter won the ♣A and took a diamond finesse. When that held, he cashed one high heart and continued with ♦A and another diamond, ruffing in dummy as West discarded. The diamonds were now set up.

Now he crossed to the ♥K in this end-position to play a diamond winner:

East dealer
N-S vul.

♠ J 7
♥ J 7
♦ —
♣ 4 3

♠ Q 8
♥ 8
♦ 8 6 5
♣ —

When he led the ♦5, West ruffed in with the ♥Q. What do you discard from dummy?

The routine discard is a spade, but Peter could see that West's natural defense would be to cash the ♠K. He attempted instead to create a diversion by discarding a club. West was conned into the mindset of *Declarer is discarding club losers from dummy.* He promptly played a second club, which cost him dearly. Peter was able to ruff and now take 2 spade discards on the established diamonds. 2♥ making 5 was worth a bundle of matchpoints.

Undoubtedly, West should cash the ♠K before playing a club. Since partner had discouraged spades at trick 1, the ♠Q was marked in declarer's hand. There was only 1 club winner that could potentially cash, and that could wait. However, the club discard on the diamond winner created an illusion, one that is very easy to fall for when defending reflexively.

Now I am going to broach a delicate subject: was West damaged by the off-shape 1NT rebid?

A case can be made that East-West were disadvantaged by South's holding a singleton in a notrump bid. One might argue that the play of a club, while a weak play on a technical basis, would be less likely to occur if the possibility of a singleton in declarer's hand had been highlighted by an alert. A heightened awareness of this possibility from an explanation

such as "17–19 balanced but can sometimes contain a singleton honor" probably would have helped the defense.

But is this really the way bridge needs to be played to protect litigious action? If so, every notrump opening and rebid would be an alertable event for most expert pairs; singleton honors make consistent appearance in notrump bids these days—it is almost a universal culture. Does the obligation to know and understand this culture lie with the defenders, or should they be prompted by the declaring side?

This is the first time I have seen Peter, or anyone for that matter, rebid 1NT on a 6-3-3-1 shape. It is 4-4-4-1 hands that are regular culprits in the offshape notrump domain. Does this event now oblige me to alert every notrump bid in the future in this partnership?

The Regulating Authorities might have policies for alerts of notrump bids holding singletons, but I'm not aware of them either in the US or Australia. I am sure that many of my peers are in a similar situation. The alerting of unusual situations seems to follow an unwritten code: where the meaning of a call or action deviates significantly from what might be expected, an alert is deemed warranted. In this case, my view is that holding a singleton in a notrump bid is so widely prevalent and accepted that it is does not warrant an alert.

The stronger the game, the more likely everyone is to be in rhythm on the subject. For example, these days if someone opens, say, 1♣ in third seat non-vulnerable on 6 HCP and 4-3-3-3 shape in a strong game, no one bats an eyelid. The opponents are aware of the possibility and adjust accordingly. Imagine a world where one had to alert every third-seat opening and offer a long disclaimer. When a pattern becomes mainstream, I feel that there should be no need to alert. However, if the defense makes an enquiry about style, they are entitled to a detailed and honest comment including recent examples in partnership history.

On the other hand, a treatment that has become quite popular these days is 2♣ as regular Stayman and 2NT (or 3♣) as Puppet Stayman over 1NT. Due to the structure of responses, there are certain inferences that can be taken from the path that responder chooses. Some play that 3♣ is Puppet Stayman and a 3♦ response denies a 5-card major; after this there is no way for responder to show 4–4 in the majors. The hand with both majors uses 2♣ Stayman. Does Stayman here become alertable?

In other versions, there are inferences about length in the shown major and implied length in the other major. The amount of information the defense can deduce from the approach taken is considerable. On the auction 1NT – 2♣; 2♥ – 3NT a valid inference for some partnerships might be that "Dummy is likely to have 2 hearts and 4 spades. With 3 hearts and 4 spades, he might have started with 3♣ as Puppet Stayman." I have not seen anyone alert any of these bids or offer this voluntary disclosure before the opening lead.

Where does the obligation to alert start and where does it stop? The boundaries of voluntary disclosure are ambiguous.


Similar ambiguities apply in many situations involving ethics, hesitations, fumbles, and breaking tempo. Not all cases are covered by the Laws. For example, consider this situation:

South is declarer in a spade contract. He leads the ♠J from hand, tempting a cover. West fumbles, says, "Sorry," and then follows low. What is going on?

There could be many innocent reasons for West's fumble: he might have been daydreaming, he might have expected another suit to be played, he might have been considering a suit-preference signal in trumps. But it is also possible that West had the ♠Q and that he quickly considered the possibility of covering the ♠J and then decided against it. What does saying "Sorry" before following low mean?

Defense at the world-class level involves anticipation of key moments: whether or not to cover a card led by declarer, whether to duck the ace when declarer leads towards dummy's king-jack. Elite defenders typically have a plan in place for these scenarios. I've always thought it was reasonable to expect this level of preparedness and that if a defender does not follow in tempo, declarer has a right to believe that he was contemplating playing the critical card. Even if the cause was a genuine, non-bridge reason, the defender needs to be sensitive to declarer's interpretation and should give away the location of the critical card by saying "Sorry" when not holding the queen and saying nothing otherwise.

I used to believe this philosophy to be a universal gentleman's agreement. I learned the hard way that not everyone views the issue similarly when a strong player said "Sorry" against me in this situation and turned up with queen-third. An informal poll of some elite players showed the existence of several schools of thought.

My school believes that a fumble usually indicates possession of a critical card, and that declarer has a right to make a deduction from the break in regular play. Defenders should be expected to follow in tempo in such situations, and if they do not they should penalize themselves by giving the show away, apologizing when they do not have the queen and saying nothing with it. Declarer should always get the guess right after a fumble based on the presence or absence of a "Sorry."

The second school believes that most fumbles are benign. Saying "Sorry" is just an indication that the player was caught

unawares or had a mechanical failure; it does not suggest or deny the possession of the queen. As declarer they do not feel entitled to any inference.

A third school holds itself to the toughest standard as both declarer and defender: as declarer they do not feel entitled to any inference if an opponent fumbles, but as a defender they apologize only if they do not hold the critical card. Depending on your viewpoint, this group could be seen as noble, idealistic but practical, or self-defeating.

Since nothing is clearly specified in the rules of the game, taking any approach is just a matter of personal or group culture. The expert bridge community needs to establish some standards for such situations, which should be applied universally after some documentation. It would be great to see a meaningful discussion emerge in this space.

BEST MOMENTS

Try this problem from early in the week in Providence:

	♠ 7 3 2
West dealer	♥ T 6
Both vul.	♦ J 8 7
	♣ J T 9 6 2
	♠ K Q J 8 6
	♥ Q 9 8 5 4 3
	♦ A K
	♣ —

West	North	East	South
Madala (father)	*Gill*	*Madala (son)*	*Hans*
1♣	Pass	1♠	2♥
Pass	Pass	Double	Pass
Pass	Pass		

Playing against father and son Madalas, on the lead of the ♣3 ($3^{rd}/5^{th}$) to the ♣A, plan the play...

My instinct was to ruff and play the ♠K. When playing in a weak trump fit, the best approach is usually to set up the side suit first. This is especially critical when the trump split is expected to be foul. Playing spades is also attractive because we threaten to ruff the fourth round in dummy. It feels like the natural line of play.

♠ 7 3 2
♥ T 6
♦ J 8 7
♣ J T 9 6 2

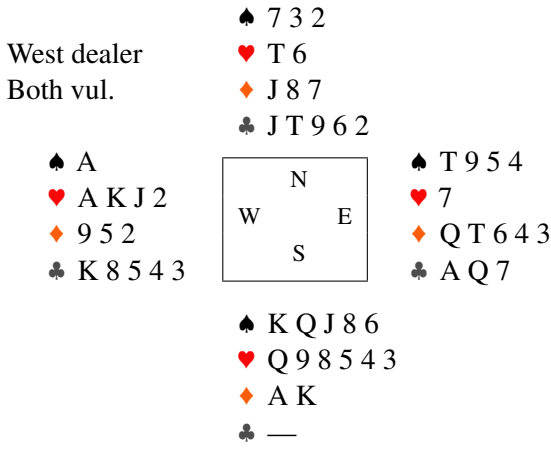
♠ K Q J 8 6
♥ Q 9 8 5 4 3
♦ A K
♣ —

A deeper analysis reveals a different picture. The 1♠ response by East marks West with at most 1 spade. The logical development of play would be: ♠K loses to the ♠A, club ruff, ♠Q ruffed, club ruff, ♠J ruffed. Having taken 2 ruffs with his small trumps, West can now cash the ♥A and ♥K, drawing dummy's trumps. The threat of a spade ruff in dummy is an illusion.

Pondering this bleak development of events, a thought struck me: what if West has the singleton ♠A? While unlikely, this possibility was not out of the question. I started examining the evidence. The ♣3 lead ($3^{rd}/5^{th}$) looks like 5 clubs, the penalty pass of 2♥ suggests 4 hearts, and the diamonds rate to be 3=5, making a spade singleton likely. If West were 1=4=3=5, that would give East 4=1=5=3. This projected shape was certainly consistent with the auction.

Checking against the high cards, the lack of a high club honor lead suggested East had the ♣AQ, leaving West with the ♥AK and ♣K in prime cards. The lack of a spade lead also pointed towards a singleton ♠A. The chances of the ♠A being bare increased with every iterative refinement of the assessment.

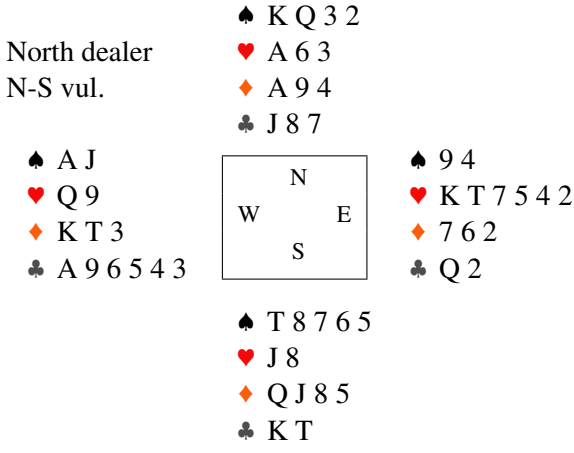
If the ♠A were bare, it appeared that I could restrict my losers to 1 spade and 4 hearts. Dummy's ♥T should come in handy in neutralizing East's pesky small trump. Backing this possibility, I tried a low spade. And BOOM! out came the ♠A. The full hand was:



The play follows logical lines and the defense has no counter to declarer's threat of playing spades at each opportunity (and ruffing the fifth spade with the ♥T). Of course, South cashes the ♦AK along the way before West discards his small diamonds. If West pulls trumps after ruffing spades, he loses control. If he keeps tapping declarer, all he scores is 4 trumps and a spade.

Finding a play like this is highly gratifying. Most of the technical plays an expert makes he has seen before, either in a book, at the table, or in the post mortem. He has probably messed them up a few times and gradually absorbed the mechanics. While a play like this spade duck must have been made before, it was not something I had come across. It was very satisfying to get this hand right.

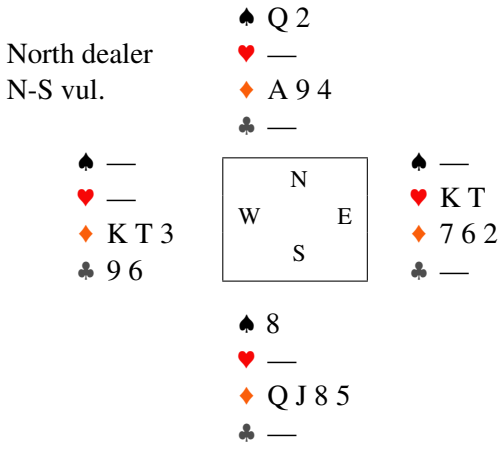
There have been very few situations in my playing career where I've had a similar glow of achievement. This hand from the Reisinger semifinals in 2012 was another such case:



West	North	East	South
Gawrys	*Gill*	*Lev*	*Hans*
—	1♦ [1]	2♥ [2]	2♠ [3]
3♥	3♠	Pass	Pass
Pass			

1. Precision, 2+♦
2. Weak
3. NF

I ducked the ♥Q lead and won the heart continuation to play a club to the ♣T and ♣A. Gawrys returned a club and I led a spade up. He rose with the ♠A to play a club, ruffed and overruffed. I drew the last trump and ruffed a heart to get to this end position:



I was due to lose a trick in each suit and make my contract. An overtrick was at stake if the diamond suit could be played for no losers. With the lead in the South hand, I led the ♦8 and ran it when West followed low. With this neat little subterfuge, the rest of the tricks were mine to take. Can you figure out why I made this play?

The third round of both hearts and clubs confirmed the defensive shape. East had to be 2=6=3=2 and West correspondingly 2=2=3=6. With diamonds knowns to be 3–3, there was no legitimate way to take 3 diamond tricks. Gawrys, the multiple world champion sitting West, was not going to make the palooka play of covering the ♦Q or the ♦J without the ♦T. The only chance was to play for this swindle. There was no danger: if the ♦8 lost to the ♦T, East would be endplayed to give me my second diamond trick or a ruff/sluff. If West held the ♦KT, running the ♦8 would pay a great reward.

The overtrick was crucial, as our +170 swung a full board against our teammates' −150. Pulling off a hand like this, a combination of a pseudo-double-finesse (against West's ♦KTx) and an unusual endplay (if East held ♦KTx) makes up for the tons of other simple baby mistakes. This felt beautiful, like creating something new!

I can remember to this day the looks on my opponents' faces after this hand was over. They were shaking their heads in disbelief. It is moments like these that keep us coming back to the bridge table.

What about West's defense? On the actual hand, playing the ♦T is the winning play, but it could easily be a big mistake. For example, imagine the layout where East's diamonds are ♦Jxx and South has ♦Q87. Now the ♦T play would help declarer achieve a free finesse against East's ♦J, an option not available in the regular course of play. It can be concluded that West can afford to play the ♦T risk-free on the ♦8 only if he holds ♦KT7.

This deduction can be developed further. If South leads a small diamond from ♦QJ8(x), West can never find the play of splitting with the ♦T with absolute certainty.

Wonder if I will ever see this combination again!

Part II

Reisinger 2014 – Day 1

SETTING THE LINEUP

The number of teams that enter the Reisinger is much lower than those that elect the ups and downs of the concurrent North American Swiss Teams. Only serious teams enter the Reisinger. It is an event where one bad session can be the end of playing time for the whole weekend.

In 2014, 47 teams entered the Reisinger; the top 20 would qualify to the semifinals, and the top 10 to the finals. The contestants for Day 1 were split into two sections, each playing two boards against every other team in their section. This is a fair format, pitting the big names against all players, giving every participant a chance to play against superstars.

While usually the major events at the NABCs are held in big banquet halls, the first day of the Reisinger was held in a smaller corner hall. The tables were somewhat cramped for an event of this standard. The air was tense, it had a sense of seriousness about it. No one plays the Reisinger just for fun, we were all here for business. Making the cut for Day 2 would be tough. There were very few weak teams and almost all of the big star teams were present. There would be many casualties and no one wanted to be the one left lying behind on the battlefield.

Logically, our team decided to anchor around the strongest pair, Stansby–Bramley. Having played non-stop for seven days, Peter and I were happy to take the first set off. We both needed to catch up on our sleep, a frequent casualty at the Nationals. Both of us are potential big sleepers. I managed to get 12 hours of restful sleep in, which helped cope with the fatigue accumulated so far.

While we were both dozing off in our rental house, Bart/Lew and Tor/Kristian started off the campaign.

TWELVE PUSHES

There are different cultures of scoring up with teammates. In Australia, when both tables have the same score, say +620 N-S, the scoreup usually goes: "Plus 620." "Flat." In the US, it's more common for it to go: "Plus 620." "Push." Australians like me who often compete at the US Nationals have embraced this terminology. "Push," said with an air of purposefulness, has a bit more zing to it than "Flat."

When Peter and I head to the venue to find out our teammates' score, the mood is a bit somber as we've scored 12 out of 26. "There were *twelve* pushes," says Bart with his customary emphasis. "We won six hands but lost *eight*." Eric Greco nearby comments on how his team had a similarly high number of pushes. I take this to mean that such a high number of push boards is unusual and that the boards were relatively dull. For the first day, when the field is somewhat weaker, this is a bad sign. It suggests that when we played some weaker competition the nature of the hands was such that our team was unable to demonstrate any edge.

The subject of speculation is the minimum qualifying mark. Less than half the teams are qualifying, so we need to be well over average for the day. We've dug ourselves a small hole with our below-average first round. Lew and Bart discuss the cut-off point and agree that 15.5 out of 26 should be enough. On paper, 15.5 feels like just a little bit over the average of 13. However, the other way to look at it is that to make this score, we need 5 wins and 21 pushes. For every loss, we need an extra win over 5. Five wins is like 5 tops in a pair game, so this is starting to sound like we need a 60% game. That is no easy task in the Reisinger, even on the first day. I decide to head to the table

and aim to concentrate. After the big sleep I'm feeling quite relaxed, but I know from past experience this sense of calm can lead to complacency.

Our opponents for the first two boards are the familiar faces of Sjoert Brink and Bas Drijver. They sit down at the table and shake our hands. In an environment where almost everyone is business-like, these friendly and good-natured guys are a rarity. Soon, I end up declaring 4♠ on these combined hands:

	♠ J 5 4 2 ♥ Q 6 ♦ A J 9 8 ♣ J 9 5
West dealer Both vul.	
	♠ K T 9 8 7 ♥ A K J ♦ K T 7 ♣ K T

West	North	East	South
Drijver	*Gill*	*Brink*	*Hans*
Pass	Pass	Pass	1♣ [1]
2♣ [2]	Double [3]	Pass	2♠
Pass	4♠	Pass	Pass
Pass			

1. Precision: Strong, artificial, and forcing
2. Natural
3. Usually 6–7 HCP

The lead is the ♥3 (3rd/5th) and I win the ♥Q in dummy as East follows with the ♥5. It seems natural to draw trumps. Still somewhat groggy, I have some vague visions of retaining the ♠J as an entry, so I play a spade to the ♠T, which holds. Regretting the choice in the spade suit, I cash the ♥A next and ruff the ♥K. I notice that the ♥2 has not yet been played by either defender. As I lead another spade. East wins while West

discards an encouraging club. East switches to a club, West cashes the ♣Q and ♣A and plays a third one as East ruffs with the ♠Q. I overruff and now face this position:

West dealer
Both vul.

♠ J
♥ —
♦ A J 9 8
♣ —

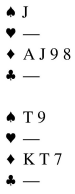
♠ T 9
♥ —
♦ K T 7
♣ —

With 3 tricks already lost, we need to guess the diamonds for our contract. What information do we have?

Counting the shape, West has shown up with 6 clubs, 1 spade, and 3 or 4 hearts (depending on whether or not he has the ♥2), giving him 2 or 3 diamonds. Twelve of his cards are accounted for; the last one is either the ♥2 or a diamond. His shape must be either 1=3=3=6 or 1=4=2=6.

The former shape would mean diamonds are 3–3 and finding the ♦Q is a total guess. The latter shape would mark East with 4 diamonds. In that case, the ♦Q is a favorite to be held by him because the person with length is odds-on to hold any specific card in a suit. The combined percentages thus clearly favor finessing through East: breaking even when the suit splits 3–3 and gaining mathematically when the suit is split 4–2.

Before committing to the diamond play, I play an extra round of spades. West discards a club and East the ♥2. Great! Now the defenders' shapes are known as 1=3=3=6 West and 3=5=3=2 East. This is a 50–50 guess after all. Which way would you go?



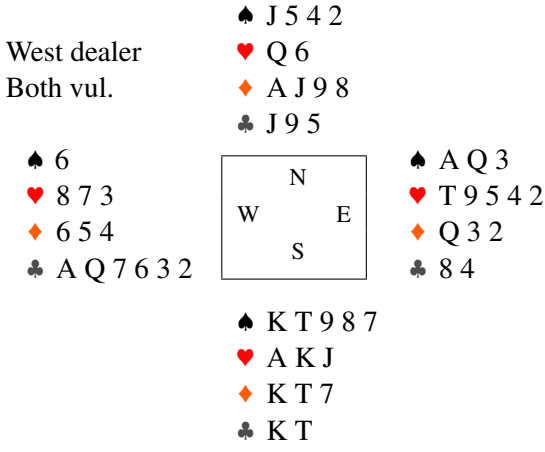
Just my luck, I recall thinking. *The whole board could swing on a blind guess that is totally random.* The first board can set the momentum for the whole session so I scrupulously check the shape and high cards again. And then suddenly I have a breakthrough.

I was not entitled to the information that East held the ♥2! He could easily have concealed that spot when I cashed the last trump. Had the ♥2 not appeared, I would have gone with my original assessment of playing with the odds and finessing through East. It was only *after* he volunteered this information that the situation became a 50–50 guess.

I eye East to size him up. This is Sjoert Brink, a world champion. A player who concealed the ♥2 on the second and third rounds of hearts. Should I trust him to be making a lazy play now?

No way! He is "helping me out" in my information gathering. I decide that the important information to take away from the ♥2 discard is not that diamonds are 3–3, but that East *wants me to know* they are 3–3. My despondence at the blind guess swinging a full board has switched to optimism. I confidently finesse through East and unsurprisingly, I'm right.

It was cunning play by Sjoert Brink. He may well have anticipated my likely problem, as the shape of hands round the table was known. He tried to help me along with the count of the hand. It was a devious deflective way to tempt me into a losing line of play. I'm glad I woke up in time! The full hand was:



At the other table, South opened a very heavy 1NT and was raised to 3NT. Declarer won the ♣6 lead with the ♣J in dummy to lead the ♠J. Lew Stansby was alert and rose with the ♠A to return a club to ensure beating the contract. If Lew ducks the ♠J, declarer could possibly switch tracks, guessing diamonds to make his game.

Those of you who have read *Winning Notrump Leads* by David Bird and Taf Anthias might be surprised that a world-class player led a club on this 1NT–3NT auction. Bird and Anthias used computer simulations to study the most effective lead strategies and came away with several guiding principles, many of which are contrary to accepted dogma. Their findings advocate a style of leading short honors in unbid majors (like ♠Qx) and warn against leading from long, broken suits (like the club suit above). On 1NT–3NT auctions, they strongly favor a major-suit lead. They back the hypothesis with data demonstrating a good degree of scrupulousness. It is a book worth reading.

However, their findings have had limited impact on the choice of opening leads at the highest levels. The mantra “The way to defeat 3NT is to lead from a 5-card or longer suit, then

wait and hope that the suit runs" shows no signs of going out of fashion.

There are many reasons why the findings of Bird/Anthias have not been embraced with open arms. One of the major flaws in their analysis is the "double-dummy bias." When opening leader leads the ♠Q from ♠ Qx, real-life human beings sitting opposite with holdings like ♠ Kxxx or ♠ Axxx will not think of switching to another suit. Even with four low spades, they will likely continue the spade attack. There is no way, without double-dummy knowledge, for third hand to differentiate between a lead from an honor sequence and from honor-x.

Double-dummy bias also assumes partner will find the switch to our strong suit (not led) when they get on play. Real-life human defenders operate with limited information about the shape and high cards. Partner's choice of opening lead is a key component in building a better picture of the full hand. Remember the first hand in this book when my partner took a range of inferences from my ♦2 lead against a 1NT–3NT auction. The "double-dummy successful lead" might be the winner in theory, but it assumes that partner will be able to execute "double-dummy later play." That assumption is obviously flawed.

Eric Rodwell, one of those top players in the world who has a scholarly mindset, made this observation when posed with a question on Bridge Winners:

> *Those books were quite interesting. The problem with using DD (Double Dummy) analysis is, suppose it goes 1NT–3NT and you have ♠ 53 ♥ Q943 ♦ A83 ♣ T843, the ♠5 is the best double dummy lead. This is because:*
>
> 1. *Partner, playing DD, never misreads the lead as being from a 4+ card suit. He has*

♠A842, dummy ♠J76, and he knows that declarer has 4 cards in spades and not 2 and defends correctly.

2. *Declarer never misguesses any suit combination DD. So, if the layout is dummy having ♠xxx and declarer ♠AKQ9, Declarer will, DD, play to the ♠9. And partner will split with ♠JTxx if it could help DD. So, unless entries are a problem you aren't doing your side any damage, DD, by leading the ♠5.*

Same argument for ace leads against suits. If you never misguess what to switch to, I'm sure leading an ace will do a lot better than it would in practice.

With these caveats in mind, I do think the books had a lot of useful insights.

I agree with Rodwell that there are there are many useful pieces of knowledge in the books. For example, leading passively against partscores is definitely the winning approach. Some of this opening-lead knowledge is already well known in the expert community. The books deserve credit for validating it with data and they raise some provocative questions, but their methodology does have serious flaws.

PRACTICAL PLAY

Say you pick up a bridge textbook and face a problem like this one:

♠ 4
♥ T 6 5
♦ A T 8 7 5
♣ K Q T 4

♠ K Q 7
♥ A K 7 2
♦ Q J 9 4
♣ A 5

> Plan the play in 3NT (at IMPs) on the ♠3 lead (4th best) to East's ♠J.

With 7 top tricks (1 spade, 2 hearts, 1 diamond, and 3 clubs), it looks like we need to build diamonds to make the eighth and ninth.

Since the finesse is into the danger hand, where a spade return could be fatal for our chances, this looks like a safety-play problem. One would cross the first hurdle by deciding to win the trick; this is not a hand where declarer ducks at trick 1. The second hurdle is to diagnose that the best play in diamonds must be a diamond to the ♦A, in case East has a singleton ♦K. If the ♦K does not appear, we continue diamonds. Declarer's hope is that West holds the ♦K and cannot play spades profitably. There is also the obscure hope of the spades being blocked. For example, East holding ♠J8652 and West having elected to lead low from ♠AT93.

♠ 4
♥ T 6 5
♦ A T 8 7 5
♣ K Q T 4

♠ K Q 7
♥ A K 7 2
♦ Q J 9 4
♣ A 5

Well done! Problem solved. Is that all?

The keen student might overcome the third hurdle. If we successfully negotiate clubs for 4 tricks, there are some additional chances in the heart suit. If we could arrange to duck a heart into the West hand, we would be able to test for a favorable heart layout. If East plays a heart honor, perhaps we can test for ♥ QJ doubleton. Nine tricks might come through without needing to develop diamonds. One issue is the choice of discard on the third club. If East follows with a small club on the third round, a diamond discard is no longer safe. Picture West with ♦ Kxx: he can now duck the second diamond and kill dummy's diamonds.

One has to weigh up whether playing clubs is worth the extra downside. Very diligently, a scrupulous student might now go about doing the mathematics and planning the precise order in which to try different suits.

Then there are also some lines with deceptive elements. For example, win the first spade, lead a club to the ♣K and try to run the ♥5 past East's ♥3 or ♥4. If West mistakenly continues spades, declarer gets a chance to check for 3–3 hearts before committing to a diamond finesse.

One could spend a while working out the best line. I am not really sure what the best approach is.

Does all this book work lead to at-the-table improvement in bridge results? As someone who has studied a lot of textbooks, I can attest to the limited advantage in perfecting technique. There is a lot of room for improvement in the earlier phases of one's development. However, once the expert level has been achieved in card-play, the law of diminishing returns sets in. You have to work more and more to make incremental advances. And the impact of stronger mathematical lines of play is minimal on actual outcomes.

After a basic level of skill has been reached, the best method to improve one's results is to focus on the practical

aspects of declarer play. These involve refining and polishing skills like gauging the opponents' shape, watching and interpreting discards, reading the tempo of the table, and knowing when to trust the opponents' signals.

There is limited literature on this subject. Krzysztof Martens' *Practical Aspects of Declarer Play* stands out alone as an excellent attempt at capturing this struggle. There definitely exists a repository of knowledge that the elite players have acquired, but it has not yet been written down. The next hand from the second session in the Reisinger is a great example:

North dealer
N-S vul.

♠ A 6 4 3
♥ 9 8 3
♦ K 4 3
♣ J 7 2

♠ 8
♥ A Q 7 2
♦ 9 8 7 6
♣ K Q 9 6

NORTH	SOUTH
Stansby	*Bramley*
—	1♦ [1]
1♠	2♣
2♦	

1. Precision, 2+♦

On the lead of the ♠Q, Bart Bramley had to plan the play of 2♦. What would be your plan?

This is certainly not a textbook hand. There is no clear approach, there are multiple unknowns. The play could take on a whole range of possibilities depending on who has what and who plays what.

With such a shaky trump fit, the best approach is likely to involve taking as many ruffs as possible in the South hand. Along the way, declarer hopes to take a heart finesse and build some club tricks. Say he ruffs a spade at trick 2 to lead a club to the ♣J and ♣A. The spade ruff will trigger a warning sign to the defenders: why is declarer tapping himself when he has a side suit (clubs) to establish? Most strong defenders will be onto declarer's intentions straight away, and trumps will be played by the defense far sooner than declarer would like.

Anticipating this likely development is the mark of practical play. Here is Bart's recounting:

I decided it would be too obvious if I ruffed a spade at trick 2, so I led a club to the ♣K, and then the ♣Q. (This should have been suspicious too, but…) East took the ♣A and cooperated by tapping me…

The position now was:

North dealer
N-S vul.

♠ 6 4
♥ 9 8 3
♦ K 4 3
♣ J

♠ —
♥ A Q 7 2
♦ 9 8 7
♣ 9 6

Since East had shown a king and an ace already and he was a passed hand, I was pretty sure West had the ♦A and probably the ♥K. I led a diamond right now to the ♦J and ♦K, ruffed another spade, club to the ♣J (West had shown an odd number), and ruffed the fourth spade for my seventh trick. I even got to lead the thirteenth club and hope they would screw up the heart suit, but they didn't and I just made. +90.

It is worth studying that thought process. Firstly, not ruffing a spade, aiming to exploit the defense's reflexive instinct to tap declarer. Secondly, the ♣K and ♣Q plays building entries for the deeper ruffs while watching the count signals. Then, the sophisticated play of a diamond to the ♦K early, exploiting another standard defensive maneuver of ducking the trump ace, gaining a vital entry. And after that, taking a few ruffs while

keeping a handle on the high cards and shape. This is a great example of practical bridge, the real stuff that separates the successful masters from the textbook masters!

Another hand of interest from the session was this declarer play problem:

South dealer
N-S vul.

♠ 4 2
♥ J 5 4
♦ A 8 7
♣ K 6 5 4 2

♠ A K 6
♥ A
♦ T 5 4 2
♣ A Q 9 7 3

West	North	East	South
	Gill		*Hans*
—	—	—	1♣ [1]
1♥	2♥ [2]	3♥	3NT
Pass	Pass	Pass	

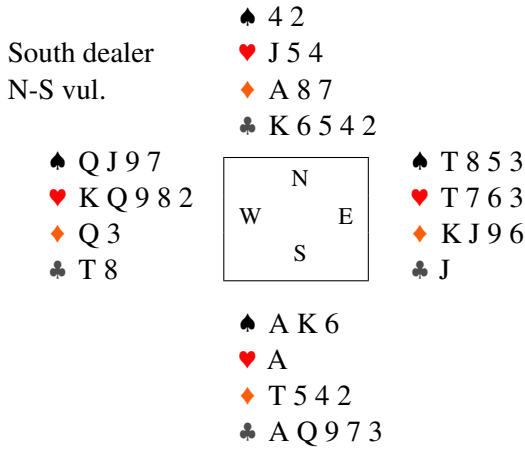
1. Precision: Strong, artificial, and forcing
2. GF, no ♥ stopper

The ♥K is led against 3NT by South. What is your plan?

Declarer has 2 spades, 1 heart, 1 diamond, and 5 clubs for 9 top tricks. The ♥J seems like the best candidate for an overtrick. Sadly, we lack a small heart in hand to lead towards it. Another candidate is the establishment of a diamond after ducking two rounds. The natural line of play appears to be "Run five clubs and watch the discards, eventually ducking a diamond."

However, I spotted a psychological ploy. Winning the ♥A, I ducked a diamond straight away, putting East on lead! He did

not know enough about the hand to stay off hearts. When he made the natural play of returning partner's suit, I could discard a spade and make 10 tricks. The full hand was:



Perhaps winning the ♦9 should be a prompt for East to realize what was afoot. He can deduce from the way this trick went that West has the ♦Q. Undoubtedly, the defense would have been easier if declarer had cashed 5 clubs first. Getting such hands right in the defense is very hard, which is why practical play tactics often work.

TIME TO SWITCH

Most of the elite partnerships play 3rd/5th (or 3rd/low) opening leads against suit contracts. The traditional approach of leading 4th best from honors and MUD (Middle-Up-Down) from three small cards currently suffers a bad reputation in expert circles. There are many hands where the knowledge imparted by MUD (lack of honors) is more useful than the one provided by 3rd/5th (better count in the suit). The popular opinion, however, seems to have swung in favor of count-based leads.

Bart Bramley's words on this subject are of interest:

> *Lew and I play 4th best against everything. I played 4th best with Sidney Lazard for many years, and I also play 4th when I partner John Sutherlin or Bob Hamman.*
>
> *Yes, there are occasional ambiguities, but they never seem to come up. I acknowledge the technical superiority of 3rd/5th (which I have also played extensively with most of my other partners), but somehow those fine edges for sophisticated carding just don't matter as much as sound technique and logical thinking.*

While the 3rd/5th approach is mainstream on opening lead, the choice of which card to switch to has not yet been standardized.

Before we develop this subject, consider this declarer play problem faced by Peter in the Reisinger:

	♠ 4 2
South dealer	♥ K T 9 3 2
None vul.	♦ T 6 2
	♣ K Q 2
	♠ K 7 3
	♥ A Q J 8
	♦ A K 7 5
	♣ 9 4

West	North	East	South
	Hans		*Gill*
—	—	—	1♣ [1]
Pass	1♠ [2]	Pass	3♥ [3]
Pass	4♥	Pass	Pass
Pass			

1. Precision: Strong, artificial, and forcing
2. GF, 5+♥
3. 17–19 BAL, 4♥

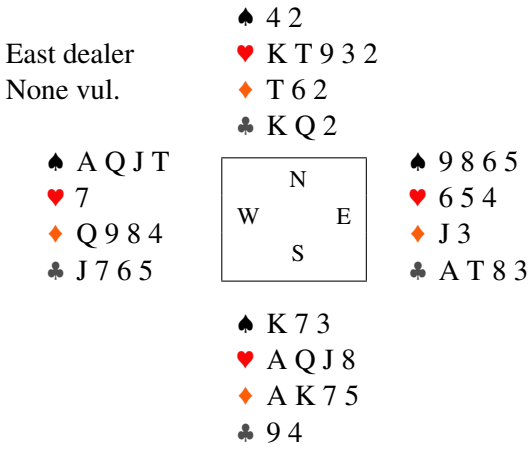
On the lead of the ♣6 (3rd/5th) declarer planned the play.

With almost certain losers in diamonds and clubs, the outcome appears to rely on the location of the ♠A; East is unlikely to give us a chance to build the diamonds in time. Is that it or can you spot something else?

The play went:

Trick 1:	♣6	♣K	♣A	♣4
Trick 2:	♠6	♠7	♠T	♠2

I was present at the table and I saw the tempo of the play. Peter managed to play the ♠7 on the ♠6 without a thought, in smooth tempo, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. The full hand was:



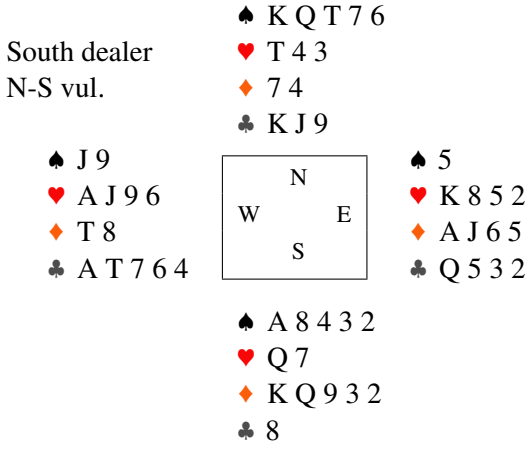
When West cashed the ♠A next, the contract was cold: dummy's diamond loser could be discarded on the established ♠K! The speed of play fit with my impression that declarer had spotted this opportunity as part of his trick 1 assessment. His play kept alive the chances of making on almost all layouts where the ♠A was onside, but it also combined the chances of a defensive mistake.

I was very impressed by this play. Most declarers would either put up the ♠K or fail to play low in a smooth enough tempo to induce the misdefense. Pulling off a coup like this is the reward of a thoroughly professional approach to each hand, of taking the time at trick 1 to consider all possible developments, and then being prepared to create the right setting for a defensive mistake.

The source of the mistake was perhaps the ♠6 switch ($3^{rd}/5^{th}$). At the other table, our teammates Bramley–Stansby switched to the attitude ♠9, after which the chances of a mishap were totally eliminated.

Is switching based on $3^{rd}/5^{th}$ leads a sloppy arrangement? Should the defense play attitude switches instead?

Consider this hand from the 2011 Bermuda Bowl:



West	North	East	South
Fleisher	*Nunn*	*Kamil*	*Hans*
—	—	—	1♠
Pass	3♦ [1]	Pass	4♠
Pass	Pass	Pass	

1. Bergen: 4♠, 9–11 HCP

On the ♦T lead to the ♦A, East switched to the ♥2 to emphasize attitude about hearts. West won the ♥J, cashed the ♥A and faced a difficult problem. Was the third heart cashing or was it necessary to cash the ♣A?

When he continued with the third heart, I was able to make an impossible game. A world-class partnership was unable to successfully address the challenges of the hand, one that was solvable only by playing 3rd/5th switches. With the 3rd/5th agreement, East switches to the ♥5 and follows it up with the ♥2 confirming a 4-card suit. West would know that the third heart is not cashing and be able to find the winning defense of cashing the ♣A.

These two hands show the practical difficulties of having blanket arrangements. Perhaps the best solution runs around a combination of both attitude (low likes) and count (3rd/5th).

The partnership needs to be flexible enough to embrace both approaches, leading high from xxx(x) when attitude seems most important and leading third-best from xxx(x) when count appears essential. And there needs to be enough partnership experience to build an understanding of partner's tendencies in marginal situations. It is certainly not a subject that can be agreed just by a few spoken words or a one-liner in the defensive system notes. Knowing when to do what and partner being on the same wavelength is the theoretically best approach. It is a difficult partnership skill to master.

TALLYING THE SCORE

At the end of the second session of Day 1, Peter and I finish up and wait outside the playing hall to compare scores. Tor and Kristian join us in anticipation. Normally an optimist, I'm gloomy about our chances of scoring the 15.5 we believe is needed. On the last board of the evening, I managed to bungle up a 3♣ contract as declarer, taking a fancy and inferior line. There have been many tournaments where my team has been knocked out and one totally stupid mistake I made was costly enough for the margin. If we missed out on qualifying by half a board, I knew the one hand I would remember from the 2014 Reisinger.

Bart and Lew join us. No one wastes time with pointless preliminaries like, "How did you go?" or "We have some good ones and some bad ones." We all like getting on with the comparison and saving any commentary for later.

When we start with "Push. Lose. Push. Lose. Push," it's not looking good. But a series of good scores follow. It is clear our teammates have had a good game. We win almost all the partscore battles, which is a huge accomplishment at BAM. After we compare the last board, Lew says, "Feels like enough. Let's total it up." The total comes to 16.5; that is the equivalent to a 63.4% score in a pair game. We let out a team cheer. Well, some of us do, while others breathe a sigh of relief. We will get a chance to fight tomorrow.

We go round to look at the scores and many famous teams have missed out. Among them are MONACO (Geir Helgemo–Tor Helness, Fulvio Fantoni–Claudio Nunes, Pierre Zimmerman–Franck Multon), CAYNE (Jimmy Cayne–Michael Seamon, Alfredo Versace–Lorenzo Lauria, Thomas Bessis–

Cedric Lorenzini), GORDON (Mark Gordon–Pratap Rajadhyaksha, Alan Sontag–David Berkowitz, Jacek Pszczola–Michal Kwiecien) and FIREMAN (Paul Fireman–Gavin Wolpert, John Hurd–Joel Wooldridge, Vincent Demuy–John Kranyak). The biggest surprise is MONACO, winner of the last two Reisingers. That this team failed to get through the first day shows the incredibly tough nature of play at the US Nationals. A few mistakes, a little bad luck, and a couple of hands lost as part of the negative momentum can be enough to say goodbye to the team's campaign.

I also check how a pair who were potential teammates fared; they eventually rejected us. Noticing that they failed to make the cut gives me some sadistic satisfaction.

Our team is planning for tomorrow. The morale is upbeat. Discovering that we topped our section for the evening session reinforces confidence in our chances. Peter and I will get another sleep-in through the morning, which we both appreciate. We wish our teammates luck and decide to head back to our house. One thing is for sure: there will be no easy teams on Day 2!

Part III

Day 2 – Semifinals

BIG GAME

While sitting out the first set of the semifinals, Peter and I elect to stay at our rented house rather than head over to the venue to find out the score. We appreciate the feature of the new ACBL Live website that sends us an email with the scores. The news is just unbelievable! Our team scored 18/30 in the first semifinal and we are running third. This is a huge thrill.

Closer to session time, we head to the venue where a surprise development awaits us. Bart and Lew will be sitting out the second session. They feel like taking a break, and since Tor and Kristian had a great set and played well, the best time for that break seems to be right now. The whole team is showing faith in our least experienced pair. In bridge, a lot rides on self-belief, and this sort of gesture of backing your teammates can be a great confidence and momentum builder.

The incident reminds me of one in the career of Giorgio Belladonna. In his first world championship final, Giorgio went down in a game that he later said, "I would normally make in my sleep." The match was still very close. The standard response to such a situation would be to rest the rookie player who obviously was feeling the nervous pressure of the occasion. The justifying narrative would run along lines of "This break will give him a chance to recover his composure and get back in the right state of mind."

Instead, the Italian team insisted that Giorgio play the next set. This was an incredible motivator for Belladonna and he went on to deliver a strong performance, winning a world championship for Italy. In his account of the incident, he talks of the fire that such a show of confidence by the team instilled in him. He was determined to deliver on their trust.

Belladonna went on to win 16 world championship titles including 13 Bermuda Bowls. Makes one wonder what his accomplishments might have been if that one decision early in his career had gone a different way.

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

Before we look at hands from the first semifinal session, consider this hand, one of our losses during the qualifying session courtesy of a scientific auction by Meckstroth–Rodwell:

WEST	**EAST**
♠ A K Q 8	♠ 9 6 5 3
♥ 5 2	♥ A K 7
♦ A 6 4	♦ 9
♣ Q 8 4 2	♣ A K 9 6 5

WEST	EAST
Rodwell	*Meckstroth*
—	2♦ [1]
2NT [2]	3♥ [3]
4NT [4]	5♥ [5]
6♣ [6]	6♠ [7]
7♠	

1. Precision: 10–15 HCP; 4414, 4405, or (43)15 shape
2. Asking
3. 4=3=1=5, non-minimum
4. RKC for spades
5. 2 keycards without the ♠ Q
6. Club suit ask
7. AK or KQ in clubs

Meckstroth won the diamond lead, drew trumps and made the correct play in clubs, cashing the ♣ Q first. This was crucial, as I held ♣ JTxx as North. The auction is elegant, and 7♠ is a great contract even without the ♥ K. Meckwell were able to diagnose

the exact shape and the holding of the critical cards to bid the grand slam.

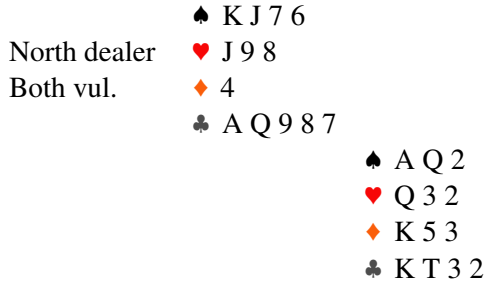
In the other room, our teammates started with the same Precision 2♦ opening. However, while Peter had passed, Ralph Katz interfered with a 4♦ non-vulnerable overcall on:

♠ T4
♥ QJ63
♦ KJT8532
♣ —

This made the untangling of the grand slam a practically impossible task. NICKELL had deservedly earned their win on the board at both tables.

This hand shows the power of the Precision 2♦ bid. When it comes up in a strong, uncontested auction, the certainty around shape enquiries is a powerful tool. Even in contested auctions, knowledge of the shortage can lead to juicy penalties or better judgment. The major negative against the 2♦ opening is the frequency of occurrence. The hand-type of a singleton/void in diamonds without a 5-card major is quite rare.

Despite the low frequency, the Precision 2♦ struck again in the 3-board semifinal match-up versus NICKELL. Try this defensive problem:



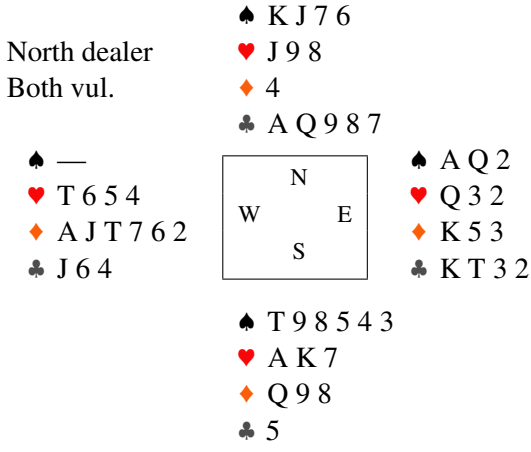
West	North	East	South
Katz	*Stansby*	*Nickell*	*Bramley*
—	2♦ [1]	Pass	4♠
Pass	Pass	Pass	

1. Precision: 10–15 HCP; 4414, 4405, or (43)15 shape

Partner leads the ♥5 (3rd/5th) to the ♥9, ♥Q, and ♥A. At trick 2, declarer plays a spade to the ♠K and ♠A as partner discards an encouraging diamond. What is your plan?

It is possible that partner has the ♥K, but there is no pressing urgency to cash it. With the clubs locked up in our hand and partner's discard confirming that the diamonds are not a serious threat, the defense is in control of all suits. When such situations arise, it is usually right to play trumps. Here, playing two more rounds of trumps would have set the contract.

At the table, East returned a heart. A grateful declarer won with the ♥K, played a club to the ♣A and ruffed a club. Now he played the ♦Q. The contract could no longer be defeated. The full hand was:

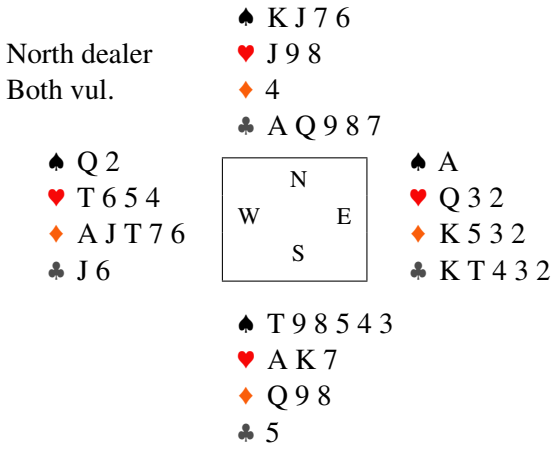


A quick recap of the play: heart lead to the ♥Q and ♥A, trump to the ♠K and ♠A, heart return, ♣A, club ruff, ♦Q. Declarer is threatening to ruff 2 diamonds in dummy. If the defense tries to stop the ruffs by playing queen and another trump, declarer has the entries to establish dummy's fifth club. The defense can counter the threat in one minor but not both.

It is an instructive hand, where the winning play is for declarer to play ♣A and ruff a club before starting on trumps. The defense cannot counter both the threat of the crossruff and that of establishing dummy's fifth club. In Bart's words at trick 2:

> *. . . Now I tried to go down by leading a trump. . .*

In an alternative universe, declarer ruffs a club at trick 2 but the full hand turns out to be:



East can win the ♠A and return a club, leading to 2 trump tricks for the defense. Such hands and layouts show the difficulty of BAM scoring. At IMPs, having successfully negotiated hearts, it is logical to ruff a club. It is the best way of ensuring the safety of the contract. A world-class declarer might think along the lines of: "*If spades are 2–1 either way, I'll lose 2 trumps and a diamond at most. If they are 3–0 onside, I'll make 5 spades, 3 hearts, a club, and a diamond ruff for 10 winners. The only dangerous case is 3–0 offside… <some further analysis>… I'd better ruff a club just in case.*"

At Board-a-Match, the risk of the overruff needs to be taken into account. It is a tough guess and declarer was lucky to survive this one unscathed.

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

Playing weak jump overcalls, what would you bid with this hand?

West dealer
None vul.

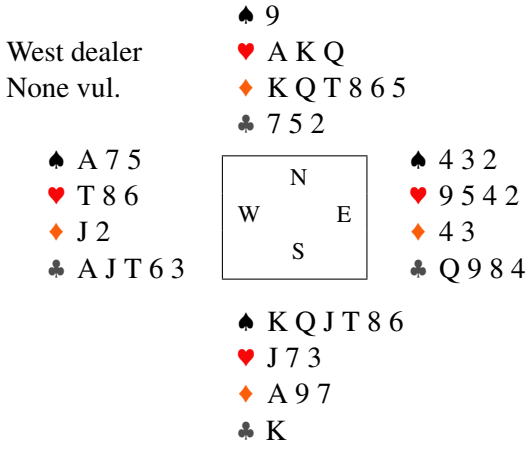
SOUTH
♠ K Q J T 8 6
♥ J 7 3
♦ A 9 7
♣ K

West	North	East	South
1♦ [1]	Pass	1♥	?

1. Precision, 2+♦

Weak jump overcalls are nominally less than opening-hand strength. Yet I've observed that their users often have wide-ranging strength, especially opposite passed partners; many try being inventive and mix it up a little bit. They even take some pride in this ambiguity. I have personally given up on weak jump overcalls. They sound great in theory, taking away bidding space and making life difficult and all that. In practice, the opponents these days just end up getting pushed to close games. Occasionally, we go for a number. I've come to prefer intermediate and Ghestem type suit-specific two-suited jumps.

Back to the hand above, with partner having passed over 1♦, would this qualify for a weak jump overcall? Our opponent thought that it did. But the mix-it-up approach did not work so well. The full hand was:



West	North	East	South
Stansby	*Cronier*	*Bramley*	*Zaleski*
1♦ [1]	Pass	1♥	2♠
Pass	Pass	Pass	

1. Precision, 2+♦

It is hard to blame North, who was expecting a far weaker hand. The ultra-light opening bid and the "automatic 1♥" in a Precision context created a challenge that North-South failed to address. Kristian and Tor easily sailed into game after West started with a pass.

Perhaps the root cause was North's inability to act immediately over 1♦. A common agreement over a Precision 1♦ is to treat it as natural, with the logical corollary that 2♦ is a Michaels' cuebid. Most experts have concluded that playing this way is not optimal. There are many hands, as here, where the inability to bid 2♦ as a natural diamond overcall adversely affects the intervening side.

An agreement set over a Precision 1♦ quite common at the elite level is:

2♦: Natural (then 3♣ by advancer is a cue-raise)

2♥: Michaels, regular strength range, non-forcing

3♦: Michaels, very strong, forcing

This approach ensures that we can bid all of our suits. Also, by splitting Michaels into two ranges, it avoids the potential disaster scenario of playing in 2♥ when cold for a slam on a distributional freak.

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

Speaking of slams, consider this slam-bidding problem:

North dealer
None vul.

SOUTH
♠ T 9 2
♥ J 7
♦ K 7 5
♣ Q J 9 8 7

West	North	East	South
—	2♣ [1]	Pass	2♦ [2]
3♥	3NT	Pass	?

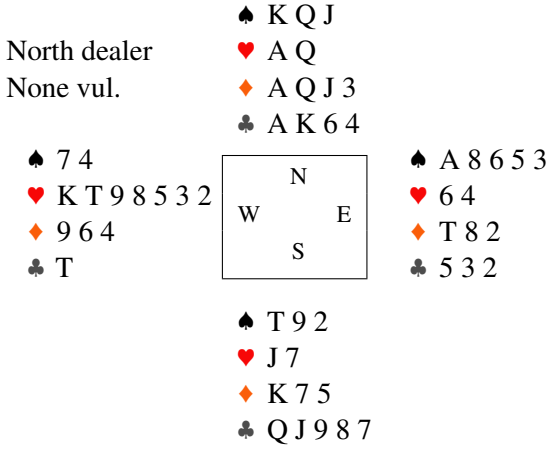
1. Game force
2. Waiting

Partner's 3NT bid is likely to be the most frequent hand-type of 23–24 balanced. In the spirit of "3NT ends all auctions," our opponent elected to pass. I view this as a clear mistake. The correct approach is to consider the auction from partner's point of view.

Having opened a game-force, North hears the opponents jam up the auction. There will be many hands where he is concerned that opposite South's likely weak hand 3NT is the last making game. Passing 3♥ risks South's bidding four of a minor, after which North-South may no longer have a making game.

Considering this prime risk, 3NT becomes a natural bid with a wide range of hands. It could contain extra values. After all, responder's most likely hands would fall in the 3–5 HCP range. Once South appreciates North's risk spectrum, it should be clear to act with a quantitative 4NT. This would help North-South bid their readily making slam.

Tor and Kristian navigated this hurdle and brought home +990 to win the board. The full hand was:



West	North *Grude*	East	South *Ellingsen*
—	2♣	Pass	2♦
3♥	3NT	Pass	4NT
Pass	6NT	Pass	Pass
Pass			

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

Try this defensive problem:

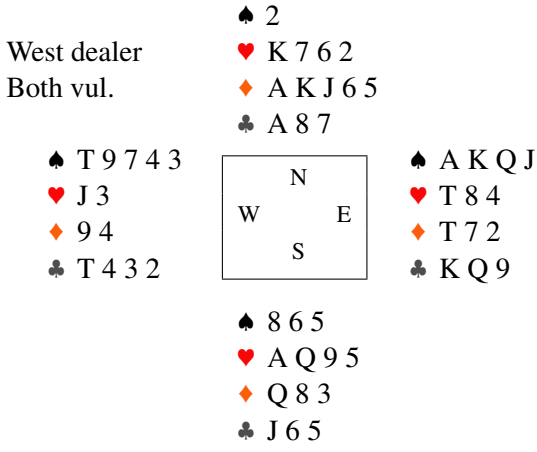
	♠ 2	
West dealer	♥ K 7 6 2	
Both vul.	♦ A K J 6 5	
	♣ A 8 7	
		♠ A K Q J
		♥ T 8 4
		♦ T 7 2
		♣ K Q 9

West	North	East	South
Stansby		*Bramley*	
Pass	1♦	Double	1♥
Pass	3♥	Pass	4♥
Pass	Pass	Pass	

Partner leads the ♠T. What do you play at trick 2?

It feels very natural to continue a spade. Touching any of the other suits appears risky at first glance. A sounder assessment should rotate around projecting declarer's likely hand. Partner could not muster a 1-level bid in response to our takeout double. This inference, coupled with declarer's acceptance of the 3♥ invite, suggests that almost all of the missing high cards are held by South.

Assuming declarer's trumps are ♥AQxx and that he holds the ♦Q, let's calculate his trick total: 4 high hearts, 1 ruff in dummy, 5 running diamonds, and 1 club adds up to 11. The risk of continuing a spade at trick 2 is self-evident: it would help declarer take 2 ruffs in dummy to get to 12 tricks.



Unless East continues a spade, declarer does not have the entries to both draw trumps and ruff 2 spades in dummy. Bart chose the dangerous looking ♣K exit. It was crucial to stay off spades to hold declarer to 11 tricks.

At the other table, North declared 4♥ after East overcalled 1♠. When East continued spades at trick 2, Tor was able to cross to the ♥Q to ruff another spade, leading to 12 tricks and a win for us.

Do you like the 1♠ overcall?

West dealer Both vul.	**EAST** ♠ A K Q J ♥ T 8 4 ♦ T 7 2 ♣ K Q 9

West	North	East	South
Pass	1♦	?	

I suspect many would. In a Master Solvers' type forum, the vote would be split between the two options of double and 1♠. The case for the takeout doublers, the camp I subscribe to, is nicely summarized by Bart:

> *. . . I don't like 4-card overcalls on hands that are otherwise OK for a takeout double, even when my 4-card suit is strong and my 3-card suits are weak. The overcall misdescribes both shape and strength and gives you guesses when partner raises.*

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

Try your hand next at this bidding problem faced by Lew and his counterpart:

West dealer
E-W vul.

SOUTH
♠ A 8 7 6 4 2
♥ 8 5 3
♦ 7 5 4
♣ 2

West	North	East	South
2♥	3NT	Pass	?

It is usually right to play in an 8-card major-suit fit. Especially when we hold a long, weak suit, a trump contract often helps secure extra tricks. Opposite a holding like ♠ Kx or ♠ Qx, we would score some of our small spades in 4♠. At notrumps, our hand would be dead if the spades do not run.

However, Lew reasoned that there was no guarantee of spade tolerance in partner's 3NT bid. It could be based on an off-shape hand full of tricks in the minors. A singleton spade was a live possibility. Their partnership style is to double first and bid notrump later when playing in the major is a serious candidate. Taking this inference, Lew found the winning decision to pass while his counterpart chose to bid 4♠. 3NT made 10 tricks in comfort while 4♠ went 3 down. The combined hands were:

NORTH
♠ 3
♥ A J 2
♦ A K Q 3 2
♣ A K 7 5

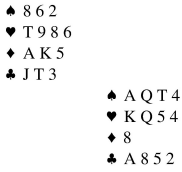
SOUTH
♠ A 8 7 6 4 2
♥ 8 5 3
♦ 7 5 4
♣ 2


Next try a defensive problem:

	♠ 8 6 2 ♥ T 9 8 6 ♦ A K 5 ♣ J T 3	
South dealer Both vul.		♠ A Q T 4 ♥ K Q 5 4 ♦ 8 ♣ A 8 5 2

West	North	East	South
Bramley		*Stansby*	
—	—	—	1♠
Pass	2♠	Pass	Pass
Pass			

The lead is the ♦3 (4th best) as declarer wins the ♦A, following with the ♦2 from hand. Next comes a spade to South's ♠K and partner's ♠J. Now declarer plays another spade as partner discards a discouraging heart. What is your defensive plan?



If you cashed 2 more spade winners, you join a very popular club. Lew found the much stronger defense of switching to the ♥K.

Partner's 4th-best lead marked declarer with 5 diamonds, and the play of the ♦A at trick 1 suggested that declarer's diamonds were ♦QJxxx. With any other holding, he would likely have run the diamond around to his honor or partner would have led the ♦J from ♦JTxx. The layout where the defense had to be precise was if declarer held 5=1=5=2 shape with the ♣K. Drawing trumps on that layout would give declarer an entry to dummy in diamonds that could be used to lead up to his ♣K. By holding off on playing trumps, West can deny dummy that entry. The full hand vindicated the analysis:

South dealer
Both vul.

	♠ 8 6 2 ♥ T 9 8 6 ♦ A K 5 ♣ J T 3	
♠ J ♥ J 7 3 2 ♦ T 6 4 3 ♣ Q 9 6 4	N W E S	♠ A Q T 4 ♥ K Q 5 4 ♦ 8 ♣ A 8 5 2
	♠ K 9 7 5 3 ♥ A ♦ Q J 9 7 2 ♣ K 7	

The reflex play of pulling declarer's trumps will work out favorably or neutrally for the defense 99 times out of 100. Stopping oneself from this natural impulse is not easy. It's very difficult to get this sort of hand right at the table. This hand remains one of my favorites from the whole tournament. The simplicity of its solution is beautiful.

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

Thanks to the range of hands our teammates got right, our team is lying third heading into the second session of the semifinal. As Bart and Lew head off to rest, we wander into the playing area to take our seats. Our big game from the morning has not gone unnoticed. A few people say “Nice game” as Peter and I head to our table. It’s a nice, cozy feeling and I’m in no mood to spoil the accolades with a factual, “Thanks. But we were sitting out.” Better to soak in the glory and prepare for a possible fairy-tale run.

NO FAIRY TALE

The playing venue is beautifully laid out. A large hall that could host well over a hundred tables contains only 20 tables with screens. This layout of the hall creates an atmosphere of privilege. A handful of kibitzers are grabbing seats to watch their chosen stars. Time is generous: we are allotted 30 minutes for our 3-board matches. The room is totally quiet and the playing conditions are majestic. This is what bridge luxury looks like.

When the bridge starts, it is clear very early that our story is not going to be the fairy tale of the event. Everything seems to go the way of our opponents. On the first board, their system somewhat randomly forces them to stay out of a 50% game. Our teammates, like most others, bid it and fail. Then, I face this situation:

East dealer
Both vul.

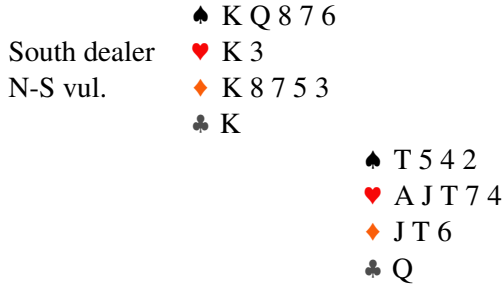
SOUTH
♠ 6 3 2
♥ Q 5
♦ 7
♣ A Q J 9 5 3 2

West	North	East	South
	Gill		*Hans*
—	—	1♠	2♣
Pass	2♥	Pass	3♣
Double	Pass	Pass	?

My table-feel convinces me that West did not think this was a marginal double. He felt quite sure about his action. I decide that our best bet of avoiding a penalty is for me to run to 3♥ and do so both quickly and confidently. The operation succeeds because 3♥ gets passed out. I can sense that my screen-mate is kicking himself for not doubling it. However, the patient dies. Despite clubs being ♣ KTxx offside, 3♣ doubled is cold and our teammates quite reasonably scored −670, while we were down 1 in 3♥.

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

The semifinals and finals of the Reisinger are scored Barometer style, with each table playing the same boards at the same time. This gives teammates an opportunity to compare scores after each round and track their progress. Concrete knowledge of the running score adds a significant psychological effect. As our poor results continued mounting and our comfortable position near the top of the leaderboard continued to slip, the negative momentum kept piling up. This hand contributed:



West	North	East	South
Gill	*D.Becker*	*Hans*	*J.Weinstein*
—	—	—	Pass
Pass	1♠	Pass	1NT
2♣	2♦	Pass	2NT
Pass	3NT	Pass	Pass
Pass			

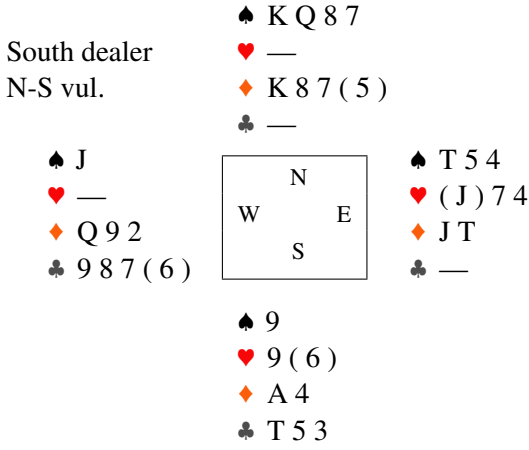
Peter led the ♥8; ♥3, ♥T, ♥Q. A club to the ♣K was ducked and declarer crossed to hand with the ♠A to play the ♣J, which partner won; both dummy and I discarded a diamond.

Peter continued with the ♥5; ♥K, ♥A, ♥6. Our leading agreements at notrumps are that we lead top of both doubletons and 3-card worthless suits. Would you cash the ♥J?

The play and opening lead were consistent with partner's having led from ♥ 852. Thinking no further than this, I cashed the ♥J. Yet, I had missed a vital clue. Can you spot it?

Declarer's play in the heart suit marks partner with a doubleton heart and declarer with four of them. If South held ♥ Kx opposite ♥ Qxx he would have called for the ♥K from dummy at trick 1. This is the only way for declarer to retain control of the suit and disrupt the East-West link in hearts.

The position as I cashed the ♥J, partner discarding a club, was:

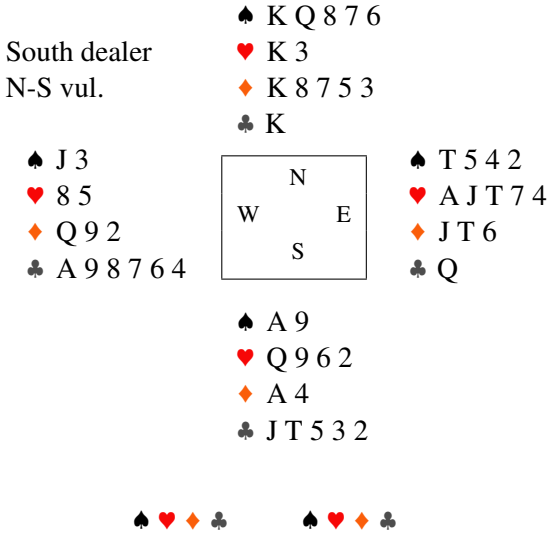


What should East play next?

Dispirited by the development, I continued with a heart. Declarer won and cashed his spades, squeezing West in the minor suits. South scored 3 spades, 2 hearts, 3 diamonds, and 2 clubs for 10 tricks. A sure zero if there ever was one.

The winning defense was to exit a diamond. This would disrupt squeeze communications and hold declarer to 9 tricks.

Let's go through my creative accomplishment. First of all, discarding a diamond forced partner to guard that suit, creating a squeeze threat. Then cashing the ♥J set up a trick declarer did not deserve. Finally, exiting a heart helped declarer execute the squeeze. Our teammates had a nice result of +600, so my mistakes cost a full board. The full hand was:



Phrases like “mental toughness” are easy to use in print. At the table, when things are not going well it is hard to stay on the job. Invariably, bad results lead to a negative frame of mind. Every serious player understands that maintaining one’s performance level in such a state is a key trait for competitive success. This is not easy to accomplish.

In a game like bridge, where there is a significant amount of luck involved, it is tempting to take a risky action with the aim of changing the trend. This does not have to be a big slam gamble or an outright psyche. It often involves making a choice on offer in a close decision, choosing perhaps between doubling the opponents or passing. In a neutral environment, one might be objective about one’s decision. In the stressful environment that emerges when the tide is flowing the other way, it can be tempting to choose the active option. Double them instead of passing or take a pushy competitive action instead of a passive one. This is just human nature. It takes a lot of personal and competitive discipline to overcome this

urge and retain objectivity. Jeff Meckstroth has some advice in his book *Win the Bermuda Bowl with Me:*

> *How one copes mentally with disasters is critical to success… Maintaining concentration on the job at hand is vital… Doing something outrageous in an attempt to recover the loss on the next deal seldom works. The usual result is that your position gets even worse. Be patient… Things will turn naturally.*

At the table, it's not easy. Here we were running third in the event with ambitions of building a decent carryover into the final. Instead, it felt like we were spiraling out of the top ten and the negative momentum was getting out of hand.

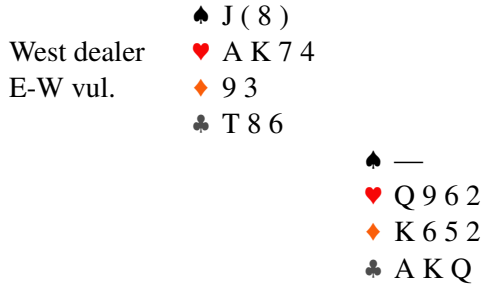
Try your hand at another defensive problem I faced:

	♠ J 8 5 ♥ A K 7 4 ♦ 9 3 ♣ T 8 6 3	
West dealer E-W vul.		♠ T ♥ Q 9 6 2 ♦ K 6 5 2 ♣ A K Q J

West	North	East	South
Gill	*Piekarek*	*Hans*	*Smirnov*
Pass	Pass	1♦ [1]	2♠ [2]
Pass	Pass	Double	Pass
2NT [3]	3♠	Pass	Pass
Double	Pass	Pass	Pass

1. Precision, 2+♦
2. Weak
3. Scramble

Partner leads the ♣4 ($3^{rd}/5^{th}$) to your ♣J as declarer follows with the ♣7. Since declarer might need to ruff diamonds in dummy, switching to a trump feels logical. Partner wins the ♠K and returns a trump. What do you discard?



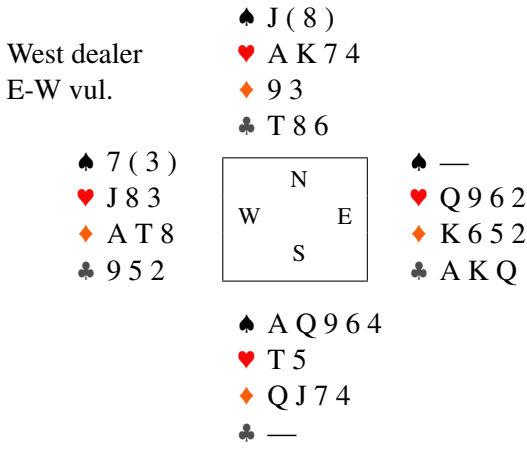
A diamond discard feels intuitive. Our club and heart holdings seem worth preserving, and there is probably no upside in holding on to those small diamonds. I pitched a diamond and it cost the contract. A thorough analysis could help us get closer to the winning defense.

Considering the high cards, partner must have the ♦A to justify his penalty double. Since he can play another trump when in with the first diamond, our defense is unlikely to matter if he holds ♦ AJ or ♦ AQ. Playing the third round of trumps will limit declarer to 5 spades and 2 hearts in top tricks.

Considering the shape, declarer is marked with 6 spades. Partner's scrambling 2NT is consistent with either a 3=2=4=4 shape (and declarer correspondingly 6=3=3=1) or 3=3=3=4 shape (declarer correspondingly 6=2=4=1).

The critical layout where the contract might be at stake has to be a 6=2=4=1 declarer with a diamond holding like ♦ QJxx. If partner holds ♦ ATx, we need to preserve the fourth diamond because it is a potential trick. This was the actual layout at the table.

The position when partner returned a spade was:



Even looking at all four hands, the winning discard is not immediately obvious. Can you spot it?

The only discard that works is a heart. This leaves declarer with no winning options. Ruffing out the hearts can establish the ♥4, but it uses up dummy's entries and he can no longer score a diamond. He scores 5 spades and 3 hearts for down 1.

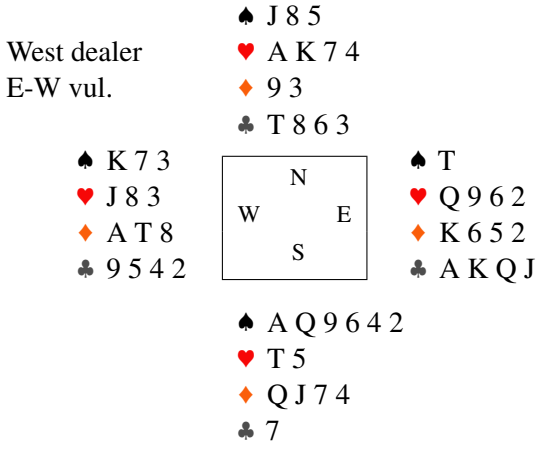
On the alternative line of playing diamonds, East has to follow up with accurate defense: diamond to the ♦Q and ♦A, spade (another heart discard), ♦9 from dummy ducked to the ♦J, and declarer must lose 2 diamond tricks. Declarer can score 8 tricks via 5 spades, 2 hearts, and a diamond.

On my diamond discard at the table, Alex Smirnov had 9 tricks via 5 spades, 2 hearts, and 2 diamonds.

It was a very difficult hand to get right. It requires visualizing the critical shape, appreciating the power of the ♦5, and calculating through the suit-establishment threats in hearts, diamonds and clubs. The recap sheets show that 9 tricks in spade partials was a common occurrence and many stumbled in the same way I had.

Discarding a heart is not risk-free. If declarer's shape is 6=3=3=1 and partner holds strong diamonds, it costs the second defensive undertrick. Declarer can score 5 spades and 3 hearts.

While the second undertrick can be crucial, especially at BAM, a large premium still should be placed on defeating the contract, particularly when we have doubled. We can never know with any certainty the score at the other table. In actively contested auctions, going plus is usually good strategy: it ensures a win on the board if teammates have a positive score and keeps other favorable outcomes in play if they do not. This was demonstrated on the actual hand: teammates were −50 and defeating the contract would have led to a full board swing.



On a double-dummy basis, this hand fits what in chess would be called a forcing variation. To beat 3♠: West must lead a club, East must switch to a trump, West must continue trumps, East must discard a heart, then on a diamond play East must play low, West must continue with another spade, East must discard another heart, now on another diamond East must play low again. And finally, after all that, South is down 1!

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

Midway through the set, Peter faced this bidding problem:

West dealer
None vul.

SOUTH
♠ K T
♥ K J
♦ K J 9 8 7 5 4
♣ A K

West	North	East	South
3♣	Double	Pass	?

What would be your choice?

Often our natural impulse is to consider only "What is the best bid?" It is usually better to identify the objectives that we wish to accomplish, and then to choose amongst bids and bidding strategies that help us accomplish our goal.

South's diamonds are strong enough that they should run opposite a holding like ♦ Axx or play for 1 loser opposite ♦ Qxx. With such a strong hand and a solid or semi-solid suit, it is clear that we will play a slam unless we are off 2 aces. Notrump figures to be the right strain at BAM, so the contract we are aiming for is 6NT. A grand slam is also possible if partner holds all 3 aces.

The critical piece of information we need to uncover is the number of aces partner holds. That is our objective. Opposite 1 ace, we'd like to play 5NT. Opposite 2 aces, the desired destination is 6NT. Opposite 3 aces, 7NT would be the target.

On surface, 4NT as straight Blackwood seems to accomplish our goal. There are two major risks with it. Firstly, we had no agreement about what it meant. Despite over 100 pages of system notes, this situation was not documented, nor was it covered by any generic agreement. There was a live risk that partner might treat 4NT as a quantitative move. Secondly, partner might have only 1 ace on a hand that acted on shape

and is light in high cards. Opposite the 1-ace response of 5♣, we would like to sign off in 5NT, but partner would interpret 5NT as a king-ask. We would be forced to bid 5♦ and almost certainly lose the board.

Peter found an ingenious solution. The auction continued:

West dealer
None vul.

SOUTH
♠ K T
♥ K J
♦ K J 9 8 7 5 4
♣ A K

West	North	East	South
3♣	Double	Pass	4♣(!)
Pass	4♥	Pass	4NT(!)

4♣ asks North to start bidding playable strains, usually majors, up the line. 4NT was Roman Keycard Blackwood in hearts, just as useful as straight Blackwood for determining partner's number of aces when you hold the ♥K. Opposite 2 or 3 aces, it would be easy to set the contract. Opposite 1 ace, his intention was to continue with 5♠. In our methods, this constitutes an asking bid for the ♠K. Looking at that card in his own hand, Peter knew that I would have to deny the ♠K. Since my "No king" response would be 5NT, Peter could pass that to achieve his objective!

At the table, I showed all 3 aces so he had an easy 7NT bid and we pushed the board. However, I admire the ingenuity of his approach. It was a great example of establishing your objective and then directing the auction to achieve it.

Would any of the world-class partnerships in this event have an agreement about this obscure auction? Later that evening, I found out. Marty Fleisher and Chip Martel had this situation documented in their notes. Chip had recently managed

to convince Marty to change it from quantitative to straight Blackwood. They had an easier path to 7NT. Chip's thoughts on the rationale behind the change were very relevant on this hand:

> *The idea behind removing 4NT as natural, quantitative was the thought that it doesn't work so well even when it comes up, while some hands clearly want to bid Blackwood, with a good chance to then reach the correct contract.*

STAYING ALIVE

After 7 out of 9 rounds in the second semifinal, our team score was 8.5/21, effectively a 40% game. I noticed Bart and Lew occasionally checking the scores, watching us barely hanging on to one of the qualifying spots for the top ten teams. I wondered whether they were questioning their decision to sit out this session. Hindsight bias is a natural human trait; it is easy to build stories after the event.

Chess trainer Willy Hendriks has recently written an excellent book called *Move First, Think Later: Sense and Nonsense in Improving Your Chess.* This thought-provoking book demonstrates the difficulty, in sporting pursuits, of objectively evaluating a decision in the past. If we had qualified comfortably, the story we would tell ourselves would be along the lines of "That was a good decision. Our top pair were well rested and would be able to play both sessions in the final at their best ability. Our least experienced pair had a great confidence boost. The team backed them to play two critical sessions of bridge where they played very well. A good example of a practical team decision."

If we failed to make the cut, the narrative would run along the lines of "A questionable decision. It makes no sense to rest the strongest pair in such a tough field. Having only a 2-board margin from the last qualifier should have been a warning sign. A risky choice paid its price."

Hendriks argues convincingly that building a story around a sporting event after the moment is over is nothing more than "scoreboard journalism." Decisions are made in real time and all we can ever do is broaden our experience set to equip us better to make the best choice. It is a book I recommend every serious bridge competitor read.

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

Back at the table, the breakthrough finally came. The trend of the opponents playing well and marginal decisions going against us had to change eventually. In the eighth round, our opponent faced this bidding problem:

West dealer
Both vul.

SOUTH
♠ A 9 5 4 3
♥ Q 4 2
♦ 9 6 5
♣ J 3

West	North	East	South
Gill		*Hans*	
2♦ [1]	Double	2♥	?

1. Precision: 10–15 HCP; 4414, 4405, or (43)15 shape

What would you bid?

We have a natural bias to spend partnership discussion time on constructive auctions. There are clear ways to improve our methods and make progress. This sort of work leads to a sense of accomplishment because the improvement is tangible. Working on competitive auctions does not offer the same immediate rewards, but it is where the biggest source of value in system work lies. In this domain, improving effectiveness is less direct: the partnership needs not only to discuss specific auctions but also to work towards building principles that cover undiscussed scenarios.

For all artificial, weak opening bids my partnerships have this generic agreement: first double shows values, second double is takeout, third double is penalty. Where the anchor suit is discovered after the second double, the third double is still for takeout. This relatively simple agreement has served us well over the years.

Against the Precision 2♦ opening specifically, a common expert agreement is

Double:	Values, next double shows "cards"
2♥/2♠:	Natural
2NT:	Strong NT, 15–18
3♣:	Strong 3♦ overcall
3♦:	Natural, weaker than bidding 3♣
3♥/3♠:	Natural, stronger than 2M

The partnership at our table had not discussed their arrangements over our 2♦ opening. North intended his double as general values, while South thought that it showed diamonds. When South bid 3♦, in his mind raising partner's suit, we were quick to pounce on the opportunity of penalizing the opponents in a 4–3 fit. When the smoke cleared, we were +1100.

This hand set the trend for the next two. I played 1NT redoubled, which required precise defense to beat. The −1100 was still fresh in our opponents' minds, and there was still some lingering negativity from the argument that had ensued. Their chance of getting the defense right was very low. Dealing with a disaster in a high-stress, high-level environment like the Reisinger semifinals is not an easy task. It is especially so towards the end of the day while carrying a dispirited attitude from a poor showing in the event.

Our three-board set looked like we had two sure won boards. Even though the last round had technically started on the clock, I was keen to score up with Tor and Kristian. It was important to let them know that qualification was almost a lock now. We had merry faces all around when our scores matched nicely for a win on the third board, too, leading to a 3/3 whitewash. As we rushed back to the tables, the positive

momentum continued in the next set; the 2.5/3 we scored there gave us a final tally of 14/27 a very respectable 52% game.

We had gone from being at risk of not qualifying to finishing fourth for the day. That is how quickly things can move in bridge. A bit of luck, a bit of technique and the tide can change very fast.

The day over, we had a glass of wine with some friends before heading off to bed. Peter and I had the morning set off again. Tomorrow would be the big day: the Reisinger final!

Part IV

Day 3 – Finals

THE BIG DAY

If the playing conditions for the semifinals were luxurious, the layout for the finals was perfect. The same ballroom that felt roomy the previous day with twenty tables felt palatial now with only ten. It was as if the hustle and bustle of the Nationals had stopped and only the ten top teams were left. Of course, there were a lot more tables in play in various other ballrooms. But they were on a different floor, and the Reisinger playing venue held an element of prestige.

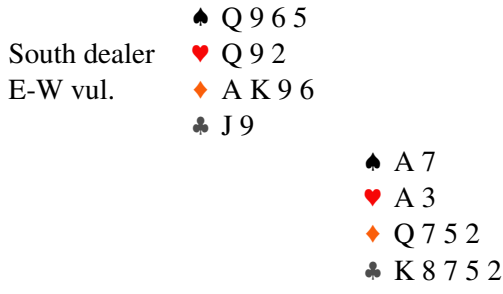
I personally appreciate great playing conditions. Many of the Reisinger finalists are full-time bridge professionals and used to playing in all kinds of settings. They have to train themselves to play close to their best ability irrespective of the atmosphere; their livelihood depends on it. A certain toughness emanates from people who play bridge for a living. It is a tough life, highly rewarding if successful and a grind if not.

In the finals of the Reisinger, the teams (in qualifying order) were:

1. NICKELL (Nickell–Katz, Meckstroth–Rodwell, Levin–Weinstein)
2. ZAGORIN (Zagorin–Bathurst, Brink–Drijver)
3. SCHWARTZ (Schwartz–Graves, Fisher–Schwartz, Brogeland–Lindqvist)
4. HANS (Hans–Gill, Stansby–Bramley, Grude–Ellingsen)
5. WOOLSEY (Woolsey–Stewart, Sutherlin–Morse, Jacob–Baran)
6. GROMOV (Gromov–Dubinin, Buras–Narkiewicz, Piekarek–Smirnov)
7. BOCCHI (Bocchi–Madala–Bianchedi–Duboin–Zia)
8. FLEISHER (Fleisher–Martel, Welland–Auken, Rosenberg–Willenken)
9. STRUL (Strul–Becker, Elahmady–Sadek, Jansma–Coren)
10. LIU (Liu–Liu, Hu–Chen)

Despite the early exit of a few of the favorites (MONACO, GORDON, FIREMAN), the field was very strong. Other than the surprise appearance of the LIU team, all the teams featured household names.

In the first session of the final round, Board 3 featured a difficult defensive problem:



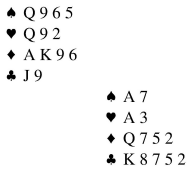
West	North	East	South
Willenken	*Grude*	*Rosenberg*	*Ellingsen*
—	—	—	1♠
Pass	2NT [1]	Pass	3♠ [2]
Pass	4♠	Pass	Pass
Pass			

1. ♠ fit, Limit+
2. Minimum

Partner leads the ♦8 (4th best) to dummy's ♦A. Declarer leads a spade and you rise ♠A; declarer plays the ♠3 and partner the ♠8. What next?

A high-card review marks partner with one possible major honor. Hoping to hit the ♥K and score a ruff, it is attractive to cash the ♥A. Another possibility is giving partner a diamond ruff. The third option is to play partner for the ♣Q and a doubleton diamond. On that layout, we need to switch to a club right now if declarer holds precisely two clubs. This would help set up our club trick before declarer builds a discard on the thirteenth diamond using his ♦JTx.

Can partner help us with a signal? The only signal available was on the round of trumps. West played the ♠8. Playing this situation as suit preference is standard at the expert level, yet it is of limited practical use. The ♠8 could be high from ♠84 or ♠82 or it could be low from ♠J8 or ♠T8. Even if we knew it

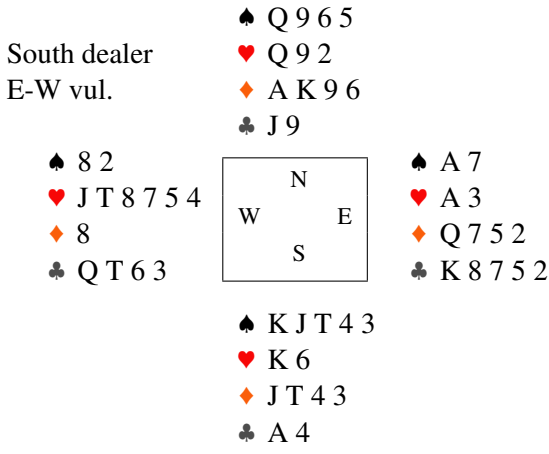


to be high, there are three suits in play. Does high suggest the ♥K or a diamond ruff?

This is the sort of real-life bridge problem for which there are no perfect answers. Many players got to this situation on similar auctions. The wide difference in actual outcomes shows something about the randomness of bridge.

Figuring that a diamond ruff could always wait, Michael Rosenberg and Bas Drijver tried the ♥A. When partner discouraged (♥4 playing standard carding and ♥T playing upside-down carding, respectively) they faced a new problem: did partner have a singleton or a doubleton diamond? It would be nice if the discouraging heart signal could explicitly mean that the diamond lead was a singleton, but with a third suit (clubs) in play, that just doesn't seem practical. Imagine declarer is 5=3=3=2 without the ♣Q, and a club switch becomes necessary.

The defenders considered the situation from partner's point of view. With limited high cards in his own hand, West could reason that the East hand was marked with almost all of the defensive assets. A lead from a doubleton is very attractive in such a scenario. Both elected to play partner for 2 diamonds. After the ♥A, they tried a club for a highly unsuccessful −420. Partner had a singleton diamond and the ♣Q. The full hand was:



Tarek Sadek returned a trump without cashing the ♥A. After the ♠A hop, only Piekarek–Smirnov got the defense right when Piekarek returned a diamond at trick 3. Given that this pair has since admitted to "ethical violations," one can only speculate whether any illegal communication helped their cause.

As you can see, a diamond ruff works at any point. Another winning defense is to switch to a club without cashing the ♥A. It was the combination of cashing the ♥A and playing a club that earned the sad score of −420. Bridge can sometimes be a tough game. The limited information available often leads to losing decisions.

At Bart and Lew's table, Roy Welland opened 1♣ as South (playing a funky system where 1♣ is the default opening bid for all balanced hands outside of the range for 1NT or 2NT) and rebid 2♠ over partner's 1♥ transfer response. Since this would usually deliver a 4-card spade holding and not 5, East felt less urgency in rising with the ♠A. When he ducked at trick 2, the active defense possibilities mostly evaporated. Bart won the ♠A on the second round to play a club, leading to down 1 and a win for our team.

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

There's always something interesting happening at Zia's table. Take a seat alongside him as declarer:

East dealer
N-S vul.

♠ A
♥ Q 3 2
♦ K Q J 8 3
♣ A J 6 3

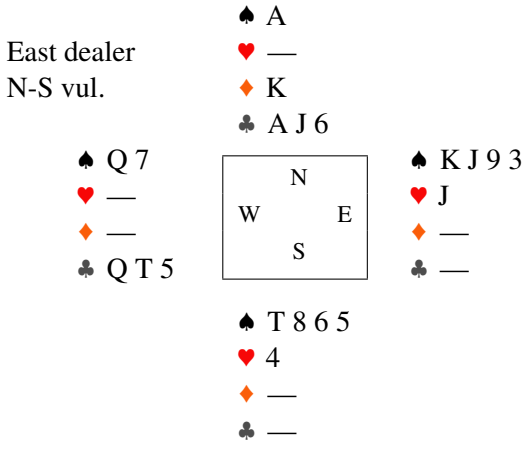
♠ T 8 6 5 4
♥ A K 7 4
♦ A 7 5
♣ K

West	North	East	South
Ellingsen	*Duboin*	*Grude*	*Zia*
—	—	Pass	1♠
3♣ [1]	3♦	Pass	3NT
Pass	4NT	Pass	6♦
Pass	6NT	Pass	Pass
Pass			

1. Weak

West leads the ♣T, and both defenders follow to the first two diamonds. What would be your plan?

After the second round of diamonds, Zia tested the hearts. When East showed up with 5 hearts, he cashed the third heart and finished running diamond winners. Kristian as West had two defensive objectives: keep the clubs guarded and avoid a one-suit endplay. This was the position when the last diamond winner was cashed:



West has no defense. If he discards a spade, declarer cashes the ♠A and comes out a low club. If he discards a club, declarer builds a club trick by playing ♣A and another.

Note that it is crucial to try out the hearts before finishing off the diamonds. If declarer fails to take that care, the defense can discard craftily to mask the heart split. If declarer tries to cater to hearts being 3–3, the lead after all winners are cashed would be in the South hand. The 4-card end position is similar to the diagram above, except that the diamond winner has already been played. West can discard down to 2 spades and 2 clubs, and declarer can no longer establish clubs without releasing the ♠A, which helps build the defense's second trick.

Next an instructive lead problem from a different match-up:

West dealer
Both vul.

WEST
♠ 7 4 3
♥ 8 6
♦ Q T 9 6 3 2
♣ K 7

West	North	East	South
Narkiewicz	*Katz*	*Buras*	*Nickell*
2♦ [1]	Double	Pass	3♦
Pass	4♦	Pass	5♥
Pass	6♥	Pass	Pass
Pass			

1. Weak

What would you lead?

The opponents appear prepared for a diamond lead. Their most likely weakness is in clubs. The natural lead, if attacking clubs, appears to be the ♣K. Narkiewicz, however, found the excellent lead of the ♣7.

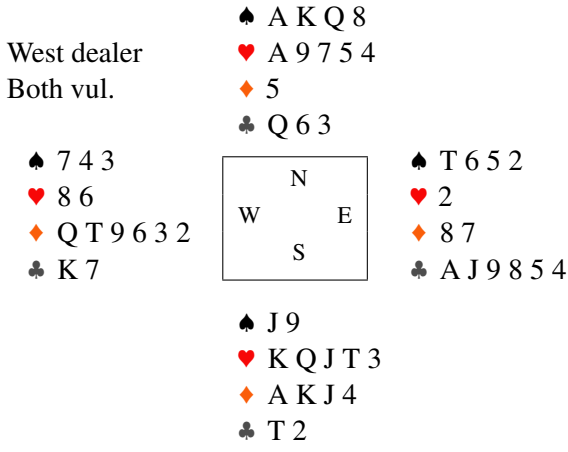
The primary technical reason for this choice is to solve partner's problem when he holds the ♣A. With no way to differentiate between leads from a singleton ♣K, ♣Kx, or possibly ♣KQ, he has to guess whether to overtake and attempt to give us a ruff. From his point of view, ducking the ♣K could end up being a fatal move for the defense. A low club lead avoids that ambiguity. It also builds partnership confidence in overtaking next time the king is led to a slam.

If partner holds the ♣Q, leading either low or high from ♣Kx achieves the same outcome: we set up a trick. If partner holds the ♣J, we might be able to give declarer a guess in the club suit by leading low. Finally, if partner holds nothing in clubs, leading low might preserve our trick. For example, consider this layout:

Leading the ♣7 might see declarer take a club finesse later in the play, avoiding a disastrous outcome.

It is worth nothing that this concept of leading low from Kx (perhaps even Qx) applies only to slam-level contracts. At lower levels, it is better to lead the honor, as the considerations are more complex. At the slam level, the objective is simpler: we need 2 tricks. This permits us the luxury of differentiating between a singleton and a doubleton.

On the actual hand, the lead was a spectacular success. The full hand was:



East was able to win the ♣A and effortlessly return a club. Imagine East's predicament on the ♣K lead. It is quite pleasing when a nice technical play hits the critical layout to which it caters. Buras–Narkiewicz fully earned their won board here. They created a quantitative problem for the opponents in the auction, found the suit to lead, and then attacked it with the best card.

In our match versus SCHWARTZ, both Brogeland–Lindqvist and Grude–Ellingsen faced no opposition bidding. Both pairs agreed hearts and diagnosed the club flaw via control-bidding, avoiding the bad slam for an elegant push.

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

Try this bidding problem next:

North dealer
N-S vul.

SOUTH
♠ A 9 4 3
♥ A T 7 5 4
♦ 3
♣ Q T 8

West	North	East	South
—	Pass	1NT [1]	?

1. 15–17

Pass or bid 2♣ for the majors? Many players faced this decision. The 5-4-3-1 shape and rank of suits (majors) are attractive features for acting. However, the vulnerability, partner's passed-hand status, and the strong action by the opponents are the arguments against it. The chances of making a game are low. Our likely upside is winning a partscore battle. The risks of paying a penalty or of tipping the opponents to our distribution are very real. For example, warned about foul major-suit splits, the opponents might play 3NT instead of their 8-card major fit. At IMPs scoring, my view is that the negatives marginally outweigh the positives; I would sway towards a pass, although I suspect that any decent bidding panel would have some support for entering the auction.

At Board-a-Match, however, scoring +100 against +110 or +140 is the loss of a full board. It is as bad as losing 12 IMPs. Given the form of scoring, I feel that the winning action is to bid 2♣ for the majors. If you go for −1100, shrug your shoulders

and move on to the next board. There is too much at stake to give up peacefully to a non-vulnerable 1NT.

At the table, bidding was a big winner, as North-South can make 10 tricks in spades, which was no consolation for the +50 available defending 1NT. The decision between action and inaction was a frequent source of swings in many matches.

Next up a complex declarer play problem:

East dealer
N-S vul.

♠ J 3
♥ A 6 5 4
♦ Q T 8 7
♣ K 4 2

♠ A K Q 6 5 2
♥ —
♦ A J 9 2
♣ J T 5

West	North	East	South
Levin	*Bramley*	*Weinstein*	*Stansby*
—	—	—	1♠
Pass	1NT	Double	Rdbl
2♥	Double	Pass	2♠
3♥	3♠	Pass	4♠
Pass	Pass	Pass	

Plan the play on the lead on the ♦5, a likely singleton. The ♦Q holds in dummy at trick 1 as East follows with the ♦4.

The straight-forward line is to cash the ♥A discarding a club, pull trumps, and then take a club finesse. The ♣A rates to be offside. If the ♣Q is onside, East can shut out any possibility of an entry to dummy by ducking the ♣A. Also, West can cover on

♠ J 3
♥ A 6 5 4
♦ Q T 8 7
♣ K 4 2

♠ A K Q 6 5 2
♥ —
♦ A J 9 2
♣ J T 5

the first round. Declarer would lose a club and a diamond and take 11 tricks. However, if East holds the ♣AQ, the defense can cash 2 clubs and exit in hearts, locking him in hand. This would hold declarer to 10 tricks: losing 2 clubs and a diamond. This approach leads to 10 or 11 tricks depending on whether or not the club finesse works.

Lew opted for a more sophisticated line. In principle, his plan was to play for the ♣Q to be held by East. He aimed to pull trumps, retaining the ♥A in dummy, and then play the ♣J. If East won the ♣Q, he would have to provide access to dummy for a diamond finesse and thus concede 11 tricks. East's best defense would be to duck the club. But now declarer can switch tracks and play ♦A and another. The trick count would be up to 6 spades, 3 diamonds, a club, and a heart to score 11 tricks. It is quite an impressive line of play, deliberately stranding the winning ♥A in dummy. It is the only way to make 11 tricks if East holds the ♣Q. After trumps were drawn, the stage was set...

East dealer
N-S vul.

	♠ — ♥ A 6 5 ♦ T 8 7 ♣ K 4 2	
♠ — ♥ Q T 7 3 2 ♦ — ♣ Q 9 8 6	N W E S	♠ — ♥ K J 9 ♦ K 6 3 ♣ A 7 3
	♠ Q 6 5 ♥ — ♦ A 9 2 ♣ J T 5	

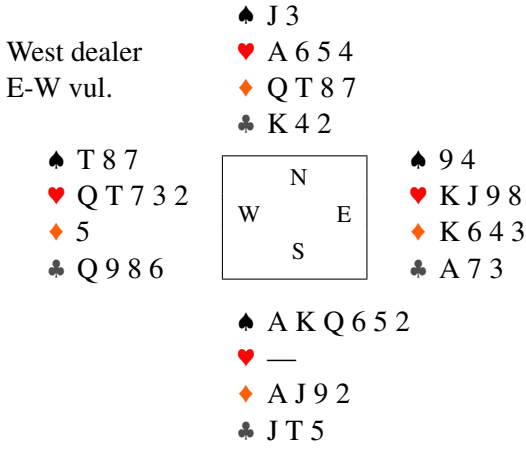
Declarer tried the ♣T, playing for the ♣Q to be offside or to sneak it past West. If West plays low on the actual hand, East has to duck to deny dummy an entry. Declarer can now play ♦A and another, eventually using the ♥A to discard a club. Effectively, South manages to achieve the same outcome as when East holds the ♣Q.

Bobby Levin, however, spoiled the party by making the strong play of covering the ♣T with the ♣Q. There is still a way home for declarer for 11 tricks. Can you spot it?

At the dispiriting development of finding West with the ♣Q, Lew covered ♣K and was held to 10 tricks. It is very natural to sigh and resignedly cover. The winning play, however, is to duck the ♣Q!

This creates a new problem for the defense. If West plays a heart, declarer gets a club discard and takes a diamond finesse for 6 spades, 4 diamonds, and a heart as 11 tricks. So West must play a club. Declarer plays low and East must duck to deny dummy an entry. South wins and exits a club and East is endplayed into offering dummy an entry in either diamonds or hearts. This would let through 11 tricks via 6 spades, 4 diamonds, and a club.

The only time the defense can prevail is if East started with 4 clubs. On that layout declarer scores the same 10 tricks he achieved by covering the ♣Q with the ♣K. Thus, ducking the ♣Q gains sometimes as here and does not lose. Yet, psychologically, it is a difficult play to find. The full hand was:



Many declarers, including Nick Nickell at the other table, opted for subterfuge. Using a similar strategy of retaining the ♥A in dummy, they won the diamond and took two rounds of trumps ending in dummy. Hoping for East to hold 3 spades, they now took a diamond finesse. When West ruffed, the best defense is to switch to a club, ducked by East, which limits declarer to 10 tricks. However, the natural play is a heart. It is difficult for the defense to anticipate that declarer deliberately stranded a winner in dummy. Every defender in this situation exited a heart and declarers notched up 11 tricks via a club finesse later; they lost only a club and a trump.

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

What are your thoughts about this high-level bidding situation?

West dealer
N-S vul.

SOUTH
♠ —
♥ K Q J T 7 5 4
♦ A T 5
♣ Q T 6

West	North	East	South
Bramley	*Weinstein*	*Stansby*	*Levin*
Pass	1♣	4♠	?

The choices appear to be 5♥, competitive, or 6♥ as bit of a shot in the dark. Levin took advantage of a useful partnership agreement: he bid 5♥ as a slam try. Weinstein had an attractive acceptance, and they won the board for bidding the slam.

This treatment might leave one wondering about how they express a hand that wants to play 5♥. The answer is that those hands start out with 4NT, which ostensibly is two places to play. Over partner's 5m, South can correct to 5♥ to show a single-suited hand in hearts without any slam interest. This approach (direct 5♥ as a slam try, going via 4NT as a to-play maneuver) has the distinct advantage of making the slam-try message clear. The alternative of directing the slam-try through 4NT has a flaw. Consider this sequence:

West	North	East	South
Pass	1♣	4♠	4NT
Pass	5♦	Pass	5♥

If one used the path via 4NT for the slam try, then the sequence above becomes ambiguous: South could have either the heart single-suited slam try hand-type or a two-suited hand with clubs and hearts, and it would be impossible for North to distinguish between the two.

This ambiguity is resolved by making the direct 5♥ action a slam try. Not surprising that one of the top partnerships in the world have this situation figured out and got their team a well-earned swing.

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

Things were going smoothly in the first final until Josef Piekarek decided to throw two punches:

South dealer
N-S vul.

SOUTH
♠ T
♥ Q 5 4
♦ Q T 7 4
♣ A Q T 4 2

West	North	East	South
Ellingsen	*Smirnov*	*Grude*	*Piekarek*
—	—	—	Pass
2♠ [1]	Pass	3♠	?

1. Weak

Would you pass or act? Josef opted to double, which was a big success as his partner bid and made a tight 4♥. While I'm a big advocate of aggressively entering the auction, especially at BAM, this choice at unfavorable vulnerability is way too rich even for my taste.

Piekarek faced a lead problem on the next hand:

North dealer
None vul.

SOUTH
♠ J 3 2
♥ 8 3 2
♦ K T 4 3 2
♣ J 3

West	North	East	South
Ellingsen	*Smirnov*	*Grude*	*Piekarek*
—	1♠	Pass	2♠
Double	3♠	Pass	Pass
Double	Pass	4♥	Pass
Pass	Pass		

What would you lead? A case can be made for practically any suit. "Lead partner's suit" never goes out of fashion. With dummy likely to track with a singleton spade, a trump has to be a candidate. Attacking diamonds before dummy's expected club suit sets up could be right. A club is also a possibility, aiming for a ruff if partner has a trump entry. Piekarek's choice of the ♣J had a big payday when partner held the ♣AK and was able to issue a ruff, the only defense to hold the contract to 10 tricks.

There is a lot of value in getting marginal decisions like this lead right. The level of technique in the Reisinger finals is high. It is hard to win points in the card-play, but being on the right side of a couple of close opening leads can make or break one's day. Thankfully, this board was a push. Lew managed to bid his clubs, making it easier for Bart to duplicate the lead.

In September 2015, Alex Smirnov publicly issued the following statement:

> *Josef Piekarek and I are aware of the "whispers" circulating about our ethical conduct, and we are*

> *sorry to say there is some truth to them. We regret that in the past as a partnership we committed some ethical violations.*

They admitted later to sending a minimum-or-maximum signal with the placement of their cards in the bidding tray. This was the official basis of their indictment.

Many of the suspected cheating pairs similarly faced a one-point charge, since this makes a conviction easier. The widespread belief amongst the crew of people who devoted hundreds of hours to investigative efforts is that the cheating pairs were up to multiple methods of mischief. Whether Piekarek–Smirnov's "ethical violations" included illegal communication in the two hands noted above, we do not know. But these hands help illustrate the amount of damage illegal agreements can cause. An opening lead can often swing a full board, and having an indication of partner's values can help swing a close competitive bidding decision.

Many situations in high-level bridge have no clear right-or-wrong rationale. The contenders are often weighing the positives against the negatives, as the amount of information available is usually incomplete and one has to take a best guess. Often, decisions are taken on the basis of average expectancy of success. This translates to "judged well" when it works or "took a losing view" when it fails. Having some illicit help in such situations can be the difference between winning and losing.

Also, it is hard to put an accurate value on momentum. A team that has been on the losing side of two close decisions will rarely play at its very best for the next few boards, while a team or pair that got two gifts have a great wind behind their sails.

Ironically, I was quite likely the benefactor of Piekarek–Smirnov's cheating behavior; they were my teammates at the 2014 World Bridge Championships in Sanya. They played an anchor role in our team's reaching the round-of-16, where we

finally ran out of steam. A question you might ask is whether I suspected they were cheats.

Alex Smirnov has been involved with the Australian youth bridge scene as a mentor for many years. He has a likeable personality and we always got on well as friends. While the revelation about him and Josef Piekarek came as a big shock, I think he has still retained a lot of his friends in our small Australian community. The question marks around their partnership have been around for a while. But it was compelling to believe their counter-argument before the revelations came out. It ran along lines of American professionals being jealous of and spreading rumors about top European partnerships who came to the US nationals and threatened their livelihood. It was easy to see how human self-interest might lead to the propagation of false accusations. I certainly had seen no evidence involving them. It was natural for me, like many others, to believe my friend Alex.

Just before the cheating scandals broke, I had asked some elite players about their suspicions. It was eerie how the first three choices of most players fit the order in which the cheating accusations came to light: Fisher–Schwartz, Fantoni–Nunes, and Piekarek–Smirnov. There were some references to Balicki–Zmudzinski, the fourth suspected pair, but the first three won the popularity contests by far.

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

As the last few hands show, the morning session belonged to our opponents. Mostly, they played very well and we were on the unlucky side of many close decisions. When our team tallied the scores, our 11/27 was good enough only for 8th out of the 10 teams, a long way off contending for a top spot. It was a disappointing situation to be in, especially considering our fourth-place carryover into the final. Would the tide change during crunch time?

CRUNCH TIME

How does one find motivation when performing poorly on the scoreboard? Running 8th in such a strong field, we were a long way off the pace. The Buddhist approach would run along the lines of "Enjoy the playing process and ignore the result." Such a pure attitude would undoubtedly be effective in achieving competitive success, but it is very hard to implement.

Real-life humans are markedly influenced by momentum. When things are going well, it is easier to play accurately, to concentrate and stay on the job. When things are going poorly in a high-level competitive setting, lack of momentum does not lead to outright sloppiness. Instead, it seems to cause small inaccuracies and induce laziness in marginal situations. These will sometimes lead to an adverse result, which contributes to more negativity. The circle of gloom seems to build on itself. Occasionally, someone will take a risky or rash action and usually pay the price. Luck seems to desert the dejected.

The major positive Peter and I had going into the evening session was that we had no psychological baggage from the morning set. There were no nagging hands, no narratives like "If only I had done this…" and no wasted emotion. The playing hall was a wonderful sight and just being present in such surroundings felt like a privilege.

We sat down to play and the very first board Peter took a highly unusual action:

South dealer
None vul.

NORTH
♠ A J
♥ T 8 4 3
♦ J T 9 5
♣ A 7 4

West	North *Gill*	East	South *Hans*
—	—	—	1♥
Pass	2♥ [1]	2♠	3♥
3♠	?		

1. Constructive

As any advanced player knows, 3♥ is not an invitational bid. Players who bid 4♥ in situations like these often get reprimanded and sometimes lose their partners. Yet Peter Gill, a world-class player, chose to bid 4♥. Why did he take this action?

A big part of the reason is the form of scoring. At match-points or IMPs scoring, going plus in a partscore battle is the primary goal. At Board-a-Match, there is no such security. You just have to do the right thing.

None vulnerable or "both white" is a special vulnerability at BAM. A score of −50 or −100 is often a serious candidate for a win against making partscores, so declaring the contract at this vulnerability is a serious advantage. Peter judged that the penalty from 3♠ doubled may not be enough to make up for our +140, so he took the gambling action of bidding 4♥. It might make or it might induce a sacrifice; also, if 3♠ was making, it could win the board if 4♥ is only down 50 or 100. To some extent he realized that he was behind in the auction to developments at the other table. Most players would have issued a 3-level raise with the North hand on their first go. This would likely lead to East-West being blown out of the auction. Defeating 3♠, even doubled, by 1 trick would likely be a lost board. He was fully aware that this was a unilateral action that

would receive little sympathy if it didn't work. I am certain that at any other form of scoring he would not make this choice.

That being said, playing for a likely minus score, especially opposite a limited partner (and in a situation where the opponents have an easy double) is long-term losing bridge. But BAM isn't about the long term, it's about what works on this board.

On the actual hand, these were the combined holdings:

South dealer
None vul.

♠ A J
♥ T 8 4 3
♦ J T 9 5
♣ A 7 4

♠ 7 6 5
♥ A Q J 7 5
♦ K
♣ Q 9 5 3

On the ♣J lead in 4♥, the ♣K was almost certainly marked with East. The contract appeared to hinge on a successful finesse of the ♥K. Thinking about how much was potentially riding on more or less a random factor, I was reminded of the second hand of the qualifying session where I was on a queen guess against Brink–Drijver. This could be a make-or-break moment. Here, however, no special skill was required. I rose ♣A, played the ♥T, and shut my eyes. When I opened them, the ♥T had held. Phew! A bit more luck was forthcoming when trumps were 2–2. A club toward the ♣Q saw us notching up +420 and an almost certain win on the board. It's good to start the final of the Reisinger with a lucky board. Our opponents were gracious enough not to mutter any foul words.

On the second board, I missed a sophisticated inference:

	♠ 7 6 4 3 ♥ Q T 7 ♦ Q 8 6 4 2 ♣ 6	
South dealer E-W vul.		♠ A K 8 ♥ J 9 5 4 3 ♦ K J 9 ♣ 8 5

West	North	East	South
Gill		*Hans*	
—	—	—	1NT [1]
Pass	2♣ *	Pass	2♠
Pass	Pass	Pass	

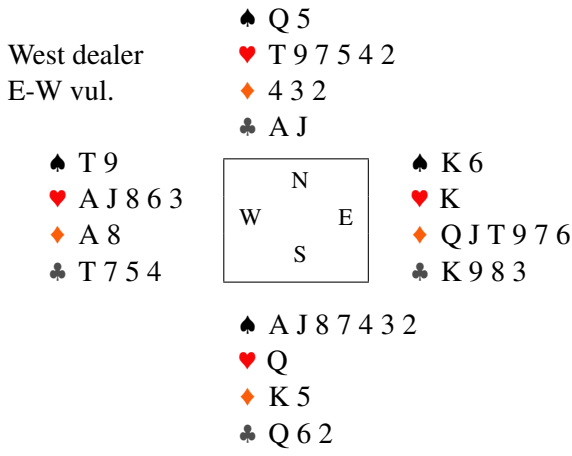
1. 15–17

Partner leads the ♠T. What is your defensive plan?

My assessment at trick 1 was that declarer's most likely shape was 4=3=2=4. Partner had gotten off to the best lead for the defense from ♠T9 doubleton. With the threat of the diamond suit well under control, it felt natural to play three rounds of spades. This was even more attractive when I considered the spade spots. Declarer would be forced to win the trick in his hand, meaning he'd be unable to lead a diamond towards the danger holding of ♦ ATx.

As I cashed the ♠K and ♠A, I realized I had missed an inference from the lead...

Earlier in the week, Peter had demonstrated quite effectively a false-card position well known in the expert community:



West	North	East	South
Gill	*S. Moss*	*Hans*	*B. Moss*
Pass	Pass	1♦ [1]	1♠
2♥	Pass	3♦	3♠
4♦	4♠	Pass	Pass
Double	Pass	Pass	Pass

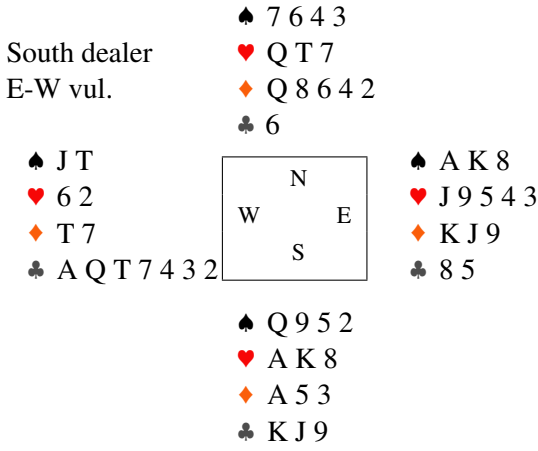
1. Precision, 2+♦

As West, Peter led the ♦A and heard the disappointing news as I followed with the ♦Q. Next, he cashed the ♥A as everyone followed. The natural play now is a trump to cut down on potential club ruffs. Holding T9 or T9x of trumps is a special situation when the correct card is not the routine ♠T but the deceptive ♠9! It is unlikely to cost and can create a losing option for declarer. Declarer may elect to believe the ♠9 and attempt to finesse through East's putative ♠ KTx.

After Peter played the ♠9, Brad Moss evaluated the situation. The false-card is known and he suspected Peter might be up to this technically justified trickery. After a long thought, he put up the ♠Q covered by ♠K and ♠A. Now he led a club to the ♣J and ♣K as I returned a trump. He guessed to play low,

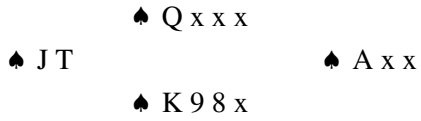
lost to the ♠T and acknowledged the play with a gracious "Nice defense."

Despite this recent hand, I did not fully come onboard in the hand in the Reisinger where Peter led the ♠T of trumps. Thinking he had ♠T9 (of course, he would lead the ♠9 with that holding!), I played 3 rounds of spades. The full hand was:

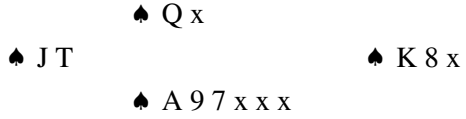


Consider declarer's point of view on the ♠T lead to the ♠K. The trick 1 play indicates that East holds the ♠J. If I stay off spades, he might be tempted to finesse against the ♠J later. He should probably get it right since East's logical play with ♠AKJ8 is to play low at trick 1 and ensure 3 trump tricks. Still, we might have had some chances on the hand if I was able to get in tune with partner. Playing 3 rounds of spades saw us conceding −110. Declarer was able to set up the diamonds, losing 2 diamonds, 2 spades, and a club.

The situation (leading the ♠T from ♠JT in trumps) is worth remembering. It marks an extension of 9 from T9. Some other layouts where it might work are:



Declarer might rise ♠Q and finesse against the ♠J.



Declarer might play a spade to the ♠9 on the second round.

A couple of boards later, I was in the hot seat again.

North dealer
Both vul.

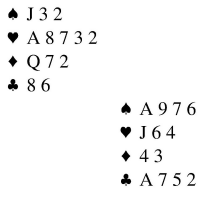
♠ J 3 2
♥ A 8 7 3 2
♦ Q 7 2
♣ 8 6

♠ A 9 7 6
♥ J 6 4
♦ 4 3
♣ A 7 5 2

West	North	East	South
Gill		*Hans*	
—	Pass	Pass	1NT [1]
Pass	2♦ *	Pass	2♥
Pass	Pass	Pass	

1. 15–17

Partner leads the ♣T to your ♣A. What do you return?



A passive club return is possible, but partner's lead of the ♣T suggests clubs may be a source of tricks for declarer that he can use to pitch a spade or diamond loser. Attacking one of those suits before declarer can get a pitch looks like a better option. If partner has ♥ Kx(x) and the ♦A or ♦K, a diamond ruff would be an extra defensive trick. On the other hand, if partner has the ♠Q, it might be critical to start spades before declarer can build a discard on the deep diamond or on a club.

I chose to switch to spades. The play went:

Trick 1:	♣T	♣6	♣A	♣4
Trick 2:	♠6	♠T	♠K	♠2
Trick 3:	♠5	♠3	♠A	♠Q

At this point, I could not be totally sure whether partner held ♠K5 or ♠K54. Declarer could be false-carding in spades to deflect us from the ruff. He might also be building entries with a 3-card holding to lead a heart through East.

I tried to give partner a spade ruff. The winning play was to switch to a diamond. Partner held the ♦K and the ♥KT and it was my hand that needed to get a ruff.

Did I have any clues to successfully choose between the two options? The only real clue is the tempo of partner's spade return. Peter returned a spade in tempo and I elected to play one back.

Situations like these occur frequently. Often, a slow spade is consistent with an original tripleton (suggesting a diamond switch) and a fast one is consistent with an original doubleton, suggesting a spade ruff. According to the rules of bridge, the tempo of partner's play is unauthorized information; the defenders are supposed to ignore any information transmitted by the tempo.

This all sounds good in theory, but any experienced player knows the real situation to be different. The tempo of play often leads to unauthorized knowledge. It is practically impossible to avoid such situations. One can aspire to "always play in tempo," but this is likely to lead to some awful results. There are too many situations where it is impossible to either be prepared for or to make an important decision in a split second.

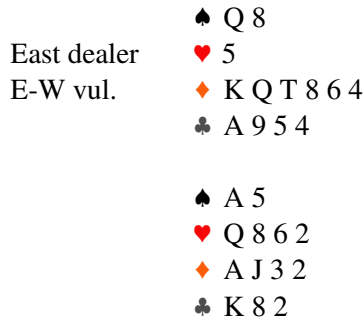
Some pairs and players aspire to minimize the damage. They possess heightened awareness of tempo-sensitive situations. When such moments arise, they try their best to play their card in tempo. No one can be perfect, but aspiring to minimize the number of occurrences seems like a noble goal. If an out-of-tempo situation does occur, they try to act ethically by not taking advantage of unauthorized information.

Sadly, there are some who are very happy to take all the advantage they can gather. It is very hard for declarer to seek recourse, even for a well-established break in tempo in the defense. The offending side can often build a logical-sounding case for their choice, especially because defense is so difficult and many options can appear reasonable.

Some pairs get such situations right more often than others. Some get them right almost all the time. This is just the reality of high-level bridge. Anyone who argues otherwise is either kidding themselves or has not seen enough of it to know.

SQUEEZE CHOICE

As the next round started, Peter got to a routine 3NT.



West	North	East	South
	Hans		*Gill*
—	—	2♥	Pass
Pass	3♦	Pass	3NT
Pass	Pass	Pass	

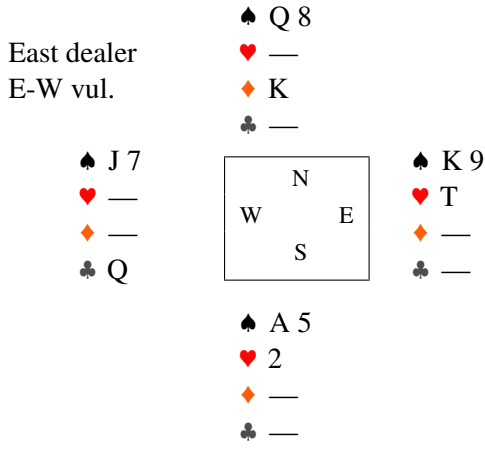
West led the ♥K, encouraged, and continued with a heart to the ♥A. East returned the ♥J as West discarded a spade. What is your plan?

Declarer has 10 winners (1 spade, 1 heart, 6 diamonds, and 2 clubs) and the defenders have taken 2 tricks. So the battle is for the 11th trick. Since there are no possible finesses and we can't afford to lose the lead, it must come from a squeeze, for which the count has already been rectified. The logical way to produce the squeeze is to run our diamonds. The question is, which squeeze to play for?

♠ Q 8
♥ 5
♦ K Q T 8 6 4
♣ A 9 5 4

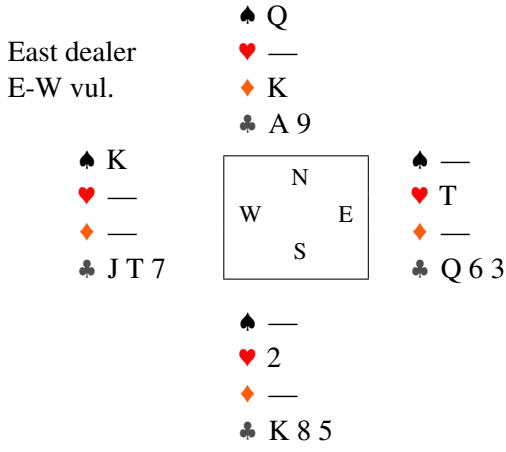
♠ A 5
♥ Q 8 6 2
♦ A J 3 2
♣ K 8 2

East is marked with the heart guard. If he holds the ♠K as well, declarer can run his diamond and club winners. The ending with 3 cards to go will be:



On the last diamond, East cannot retain guards in both majors. If he discards the ♠9, say, declarer would know that the ♥2 is a loser that can be discarded. The ♠K now falls under the ♠A. A simple squeeze in the majors comes off with no ambiguity. All declarer has to do is count the number of hearts discarded, as the bidding and early play has marked East with 6 of them.

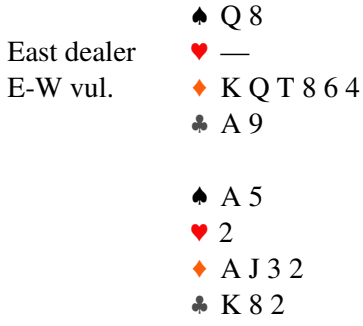
On the other hand, when West holds the ♠K, declarer needs to play for a double squeeze. Unblocking the ♠A (a Vienna Coup), declarer can run his diamond winners. With 4 cards to go, the position would be:



On the ♦K, East must retain the ♥T, so he has to discard a club. Declarer discards a heart and now the focus shifts to West. In order to retain the ♠K, he must also part with a club. South's third club now delivers the extra trick. This is a classic example of the double squeeze—each defender has to guard one suit by himself, so neither can retain a guard in the third suit.

Note that for the double squeeze to operate, declarer needs to get the ♠A out of the way at some point. For the simple squeeze to operate, the ♠A needs to be retained as an entry. Declarer has to commit to one squeeze or the other. Which option should he choose?

Back to the problem again:



♠ Q 8
♥ 5
♦ K Q T 8 6 4
♣ A 9 5 4

♠ A 5
♥ Q 8 6 2
♦ A J 3 2
♣ K 8 2

Peter showed another example of practical play when he cashed 3 rounds of diamonds without committing to either squeeze. When East discarded a discouraging spade, he chose to play for the double squeeze. He unblocked the ♠A and finished running diamonds to pull off the overtrick and a win on the board.

From a theoretical point of view, his line of play can be improved. Declarer can run 5 rounds of diamonds; the situation with South to play would be:

East dealer
E-W vul.

♠ Q 8
♥ —
♦ (K) Q
♣ A 9

♠ A 5
♥ 2
♦ —
♣ K 8 2

After East has played on the fifth diamond, North can decide on which squeeze to play for. If electing for a simple squeeze against East he can discard a club, cash ♣K, ♣A, and now cash the last diamond. For the double squeeze, he can discard a spade, cross to the ♠A and now back to the ♣A to cash the last diamond.

It is somewhat unfair to offer such pedantic criticism of declarer's line of play. His table presence was astute enough to know that he was going to be successful. A very strong declarer got the ending wrong at the other table, which argues for just giving partner a pat on the back with a nice little, "Well done."

Soon after this hand, Peter faced a high-level competitive bidding decision:

West dealer
None vul.

SOUTH
♠ Q J 4
♥ K Q T 9 5 2
♦ Q
♣ 7 4 2

West	North	East	South
Madala	*Hans*	*Bianchedi*	*Gill*
3♦	Double	4♦	4♥
5♦	Double	Pass	?

What does North's second double mean?

Doubles in high-level competitive auctions have to cover a lot of ground. This can range from takeout to cards to penalty to a whole heap of things in between. It is very difficult to have precise agreements about such auctions. Most top partnerships have general guidelines with some rules thrown in. Coupled with previous handling of similar situations, a partnership philosophy starts to emerge.

The first thing worth establishing is whether we are in a forcing auction. The answer, for us, is no. We play hardly any forcing passes. The 4♥ bid in response to a takeout double does not promise any exceptional strength. It could be made on a hand as weak as, say,

	SOUTH
West dealer None vul.	♠ 7 4 ♥ A J 9 6 5 2 ♦ 6 2 ♣ 7 5 2

West	North	East	South
3♦	Double	4♦	4♥

To pass with such a hand is no way to win at BAM. Or IMPs or matchpoints for that matter. Since 4♥ does not promise great offensive values and the takeout double could be a minimum, no force exists, at least in our partnership. The double is used to create a force. It sends this message: "*I have enough high cards to believe that we were making 4♥ or another game. By doubling, I am creating a force. We cannot defend this hand undoubled.*"

This type of double has many names: "Action" double, "Balance of Power" double, "DSI" (Do Something Intelligent) double. It basically claims ownership of the hand and gives partner the option of passing for penalty or pulling to a contract he thinks we can make.

Peter chose to bid 5♥. He was running hot again as his evaluation was spot on. The full hand was:

West dealer
None vul.

	♠ A T 6 5 3 ♥ 8 7 4 3 ♦ A 4 ♣ K Q	
♠ K ♥ — ♦ J T 9 8 6 2 ♣ A J T 8 6 3	N W E S	♠ 9 8 7 2 ♥ A J 6 ♦ K 7 5 3 ♣ 9 5
	♠ Q J 4 ♥ K Q T 9 5 2 ♦ Q ♣ 7 4 2	

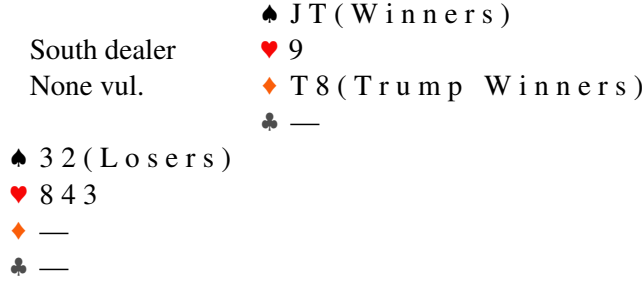
West	North	East	South
Madala	*Hans*	*Bianchedi*	*Gill*
3♦	Double	4♦	4♥
5♦	Double	Pass	5♥
Double	Pass	Pass	Pass

On the lead of the ♣A and the ♦J switch, he notched up +650 for a likely win. As East-West left the table, I heard Bianchedi apologize, which felt unusual. After all, it was Madala who made the final decision to double. It's only when I considered the situation later that I realized West's intention when doubling was to propose a 6♦ sacrifice. After all, a preemptor who sacrificed by bidding again over 4♥ can never have a penalty double. The double of 5♥ was intended to send the message "*I'm really keen on bidding 6♦ as a sacrifice. Instead of doing it myself, I'm doubling just in case you have enough defensive resources to beat their contract. What do you think?*"

East would usually bid 6♦ unless he judged that 5♥ doubled was going down. Aha! Thus the apology: East felt that passing the double was an error.

PAINFUL

Bridge is a game of mistakes. We make different kinds of errors, but some are worse than others. Midway through this set, I was defending in this end position against a 3♦ contract played by Eric Rodwell.



I was on lead as West, holding only spades and hearts in front of dummy. All the trumps had already been drawn. My spades were losers and dummy's spades were high. The ♥A was still outstanding. What should I play?

It seems like a no-brainer. Dummy's spades are high so our only chance is to play a heart. A simple count of HCP would mark partner with the ♥A. Even without the count, there is no point in playing a spade; exiting a heart should be the default since the spades in dummy are known to be winners.

Despite all this pointed rationale, I consciously played a spade at the table. It was not a mistakenly played card, it was not that I forgot about the spades being high, and it certainly was not a mechanical error. It was a card I deliberately played having considered my options for a few seconds. This blind spot was caused by the fixation around declarer's holding the

♥A, an assumption I made early in the hand and failed to readjust as the play developed.

Peter is a great partner who almost never conducts a post-mortem at the table. Even if we have a disaster, it is very rare for him to display any trace of an emotion. After my spade play here, even he could not manage his usually perfect manner. I blanched seeing the ♥A flashing out of his hand under the screen as Rodwell claimed the rest of the tricks, pitching his heart loser on dummy's spades.

Thinking about this hand even months after the event gives me the shivers. I mean, this play might be understandable in a very weak club game. But this is the final of the Reisinger, one is supposed to know their stuff when playing here. What to do about it?

There is this piece of advice in Bob Hamman's book *At the Table:*

> *In my 30-plus years of playing bridge in pretty good competition, I've learned to focus on the hand I'm playing—and only the hand I'm playing. It may be stating the obvious to say that nothing can change the result you just got, but I've seen lots of players make the mistake of dwelling on past history.*
>
> *If you screw up or partner blows one—or even if the opponents fix you somehow—no amount of recrimination, self-flagellation or excuse-making can change the result. Indulging in such exercises does nothing but distract you from the task at hand—which is the next board you're supposed to play.*
>
> *Bridge is a highly competitive sport and there's often a thin line between winning and losing. Sometimes it seems like it's a tenth of a millimeter. At many of the championships I've won, if an*

opponent had been even semi-conscious at some key point along the line we would have lost.

Disciplining one's thought process after a blunder like this is very tough. In a game like bridge where there is so much idle time, it is natural for the mind to wander back to problematic moments. What I try to do when such events occur is to make myself accept the error. Instead of wasting energy on *Can't believe I was so stupid* or *I'm so much better than this,* I try to focus on a narrative along the lines of *Bridge is a game of mistakes. This was yet another case. There will be others. Let's focus now and try to prevent more blunders in the rest of the session.*

I managed to pull myself together. The error was so egregious, though, that the thought kept coming back every once in a while that whole evening. Even now, it kind of hurts. That is how bridge can be sometimes. Very painful.

SYSTEM BATTLE

The Precision-based system that Peter and I play has been inspired by the system played by Eric Rodwell and Jeff Meckstroth. In general, I think the value of system is vastly overestimated by most bridge players. Bob Hamman estimated the importance of bidding system as 3% of the game and then promptly wondered whether that was too much.

The driver of success in the system sphere often lies in knowing what the partnership is doing, remembering the agreements, and being on the same wavelength. There is a greater benefit in identifying a consistent style and then having the discipline to stick to it than in perfecting auctions with remote likelihoods of occurring.

This quote from Jeff Meckstroth is featured on the first page of our system notes:

> *Conventions don't matter as much as the partnership does: the partners have to be on the same page. They each have to understand what the other means by each bid.*

The style we play has also been pioneered by Meckwell. This is characterized by light initial action and game decisions based on quantitative factors. The core philosophy runs along the lines of "Our goal is to ensure that we don't miss any 25 HCP games, adding some value for shape and control-rich hands." This approach makes the bidding choices very simple and direct. I believe that Precision is easier to play than standard methods—the decisions are simpler and purposeful.

The other systemic style, one that an elite pair like Levin–Weinstein employ, is bidding naturally. They prefer conservative initial action and base a lot of decisions on judgment factors like degree of fit rather than a brute quantitative approach. This style is much harder to play because there is a lot of scope for individual choice in many auctions. It requires a lot of work. Both partners need to invest in ongoing partnership discussion and evolution of style. This appears to be something Bobby Levin and Steve Weinstein are committed to. Their results speak for themselves. This comment from Steve on Bridge Winners sheds some light on their attitude:

Question:	*Any secrets to your partnership with Bobby?*
Steve:	*I think it takes talent, a common goal, and a great work ethic out of both partners.*

Both styles, "natural judgment" and "strong club quantitative," have their pros and cons. While one can have opinions about the superiority of their methods or style, the truth is that there is no way to demonstrate it. The list of the top ten pairs in the world features adherents of both camps.

While the long-term effectiveness might be unclear, short-term swings can be very volatile. Consider this hand against Meckwell:

WEST	**EAST**
♠ A J 9 5	♠ T 3 2
♥ Q J 2	♥ A K 5 3
♦ A	♦ Q J T
♣ A T 5 4 3	♣ 9 8 7

WEST	EAST
Gill	*Hans*
1♣ [1]	2♦ [2]
2NT [3]	3♣ [4]
3♦ [5]	3NT [6]
4♥	

1. Precision: Strong, artificial, and forcing
2. 8–10 Balanced
3. Stayman
4. 4♥
5. Asks about ♠
6. Denies 4 ♠

WEST	EAST
Weinstein	*Levin*
1♣	1♥
1♠	1NT
2♥	

We were in a game-force after the first round of bidding once 24 combined HCP were established. Peter then elected to play the Moysian fit rather than 3NT. The effectiveness of this decision to play 4♥ has a randomness element. Opposite ♦ KQx this would be a poor choice, yet opposite ♦ xxx it would be a great success. He had no way of figuring out which way to go. He just took a quantitative punt.

Contrast this to the Levin–Weinstein auction. West was able to paint an accurate picture of his 4=3=1=5 shape and show moderate extra values; a minimum hand would immediately raise the 1♥ response to 2♥, so bidding 1♠ and then

WEST	EAST
♠ A J 9 5	♠ T 3 2
♥ Q J 2	♥ A K 5 3
♦ A	♦ Q J T
♣ A T 5 4 3	♣ 9 8 7

2♥ showed extras. Armed with this wealth of knowledge, Levin had to take the critical decision. Opposite a likely small singleton diamond, he was worried that his club holding was too slow to run 9 tricks. It is impossibly hard to be objective about a decision like this in the post-mortem, but here it was certainly the losing view. Michael Rosenberg and Chris Willenken had the same auction until 2♥, after which Rosenberg elected to bid and play 2NT. The only player who bid 3NT after this start to the auction was Ron Schwartz.

On this particular hand, being in game was the winning choice. We were the lucky beneficiaries of a random swing. A couple of years ago, we had a similar hand against Meckwell in the Reisinger where adoption of their approach led to a full board swing in our favor.

No big lessons about effectiveness can be taken from such a small sample set. But it does make me wonder about how Meckstroth and Rodwell feel when a hand like this comes along. They have pioneered both the style (quantitative) and system (2NT as Stayman) which led to the successful outcome for me and Peter twice over a short span of boards. Their innovation was a cause of their own poor score. On a similar plane, I've lost two Australian national finals to pairs playing a set of Precision notes that I wrote. Bridge can be funny that way.

The third hand against the NICKELL team featured this declarer play problem:

North dealer
E-W vul.

♠ Q 6 5 4 3
♥ K J 5 2
♦ J 9 3
♣ 3

♠ A 7
♥ Q 4
♦ K Q T 8 7 6
♣ 7 6 4

West	North	East	South
Gill	*Rodwell*	*Hans*	*Meckstroth*
—	Pass	Pass	3♦
Double	4♦	Pass	Pass
Pass			

Plan the play on the lead of ♦A and another as East follows with the ♦4 and the ♦5.

Declarer has 9 tricks: 5 diamonds, 2 hearts, a spade, and a club ruff. Let's examine the opportunities for building the 10th trick.

The second round of trumps has killed the option of ruffing 2 clubs in dummy. The first candidate is establishing dummy's spades. The ♠K rates to be in the West hand. However, ♠A and another creates 4 winners for the defense, via a trick in each suit. So that is out. Playing to squeeze West in the majors is another possible approach. However, if declarer plays the ♥Q, it will be captured by the ♥A and West can return a heart. That will disrupt communications for a squeeze and limit him to the same 9 winners.

The mind should now logically progress to the deceptive possibilities. The primary candidate is playing a low spade towards the ♠Q, hoping to sneak it past the ♠K. However, West has seen his partner go low-low in trumps, which is indicative of strength in clubs. He will be able to work through declarer's

♠ Q 6 5 4 3
♥ K J 5 2
♦ J 9 3
♣ 3

♠ A 7
♥ Q 4
♦ K Q T 8 7 6
♣ 7 6 4

plot and rise ♠K. Now two rounds of clubs might lead to down 2!

Meckstroth spotted a crafty play. Instead of the ♥Q, he played a small heart. The defense does not have a clear picture of the count in the heart suit. West, who will strongly suspect a singleton in declarer's hand, might rise with the ♥A. This would increase our trick count to 10 via 3 hearts tricks.

Let's follow this possibility. Say West rises with the ♥A and sees his partner's count signal showing 3 hearts. He will now be aware both of the possible ♥ Qx trickery and the ♥ xx holding in declarer's hand where East's ♥Q is at risk of being ruffed out. The only way to counter this threat would be to play two rounds of clubs. Tapping dummy would kill the entry to the extra heart trick. The position now would be:

North dealer
E-W vul.

♠ Q 6 5 4 3
♥ K J 5
♦ —
♣ —

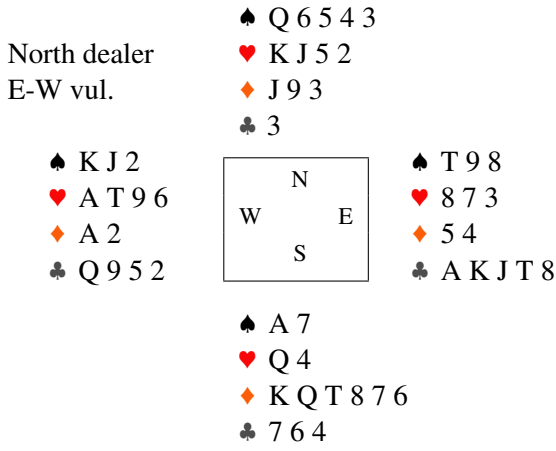
♠ A 7
♥ Q
♦ K Q T 8
♣ 7

By tapping dummy, the deep heart winner has been neutralized. However, since declarer still has communication between the two hands, a major-suit squeeze operates. Declarer crosses to the ♠A and runs his diamonds. If West has 4 hearts and the ♠K, he cannot guard both suits. Eventually either the ♠Q or the ♥5 will constitute the 10th trick.

At the table, Peter did very well not to fall for the ploy. He ducked the ♥A as Meckstroth won in dummy and continued a

heart. When declarer eventually tried a sneaky low spade, Peter rose with the ♠K and the contract was down 1.

This hand is an example of how hard it is to play against the very best card players. They know the standard maneuvers and also have a lot of tricky options in their arsenal. The slightest slip and they will mercilessly squeeze every small inch they can out of you. It's a given that if partner rose ♥A he would have ended up getting squeezed in the ending above. Jeff Meckstroth in particular is very good at creating such situations out of nothing. He plays quickly and dangerously. It is never easy defending against him. This time, we survived. The full hand was:



As we finished our three hands against the NICKELL team, it was a great relief to score 2/3. At the team score-up I referred to my silly mistake of a spade exit against Rodwell with something like, "Sorry about Board 10, I lost my mind." It is a mark of good team chemistry that when someone says something like this, the matter is not discussed any further. Instead, everyone was happy to just get on with the next round. Some hands are best left undiscussed until the day is over, and perhaps not even then. Peter and I head back to our table and I

could not help wondering whether I'd see another ♥A flashing under the screen later in the evening.

FINESSING SKILLS

One of the problems with becoming an expert is that you try to look for fancy lines when simple maneuvers may be sufficient. Taking a finesse feels a bit too simple and you start seeing ghosts in situations where others have no fear. You worry about obscure possibilities, bad splits, good defense. As your range of weapons and skills gets stronger, your nose for danger also develops. This heightened awareness is often useful, but sometimes it can be crippling.

	♠ A
South dealer	♥ Q J T 8 7 5 3 2
Both vul.	♦ 6 5 4
	♣ J
	♠ K 9 3
	♥ K 4
	♦ A Q J 7
	♣ K 9 4 2

West	North	East	South
Bramley	*Willenken*	*Stansby*	*Rosenberg*
—	—	—	1NT [1]
2♣ [2]	4♦ [3]	Pass	4♥
Pass	Pass	4♠	Pass
Pass	5♥	Pass	Pass
Pass			

1. 15–17
2. Reds or Blacks
3. Texas Transfer

Try this problem faced by Michael Rosenberg on the lead of ♠Q. What is your plan?

The first approach that comes to mind is the diamond finesse. If it wins, declarer can take 12 tricks after discarding a club on the ♠K. If it loses, he is restricted to 10 tricks as the defense can win a diamond, a club, and a heart. The alternative line involves a diamond to the ♦A, ♠K for a club discard, and now playing a heart. Declarer's goal is to lose only a heart and a diamond. While this might run into a diamond ruff, it appears to be the safest line of play to ensure 5♥ makes.

It is tempting to focus on making your contract on an auction like this. It is possible that teammates are playing the contract in 4♠ doubled. If that is down 800, the result at our table would be irrelevant. But if 4♠ goes for 200 or 500, making

5♥ would be enough to win the board. Michael Rosenberg played a diamond to his ♦A and scored his 11 tricks.

At the other table, the auction was:

West	North	East	South
Fleisher	*Gill*	*Martel*	*Hans*
—	—	—	1NT [1]
Pass	4♣ [2]	Pass	4♥
Pass	Pass	Pass	

1. 14–16
2. Transfer to ♥

I won the ♠Q lead and finessed a diamond. When that held, we had 12 tricks.

How should the post-mortem go for Rosenberg's line of play? It is very important to avoid hindsight bias when assessing a hand like this. When the play is successful it is easy to build the narrative "Well reasoned play, combining chances and playing for making the contract maximized the expected value." When it fails, an equally attractive story is available: "Weak play, the ♦K rates to be onside, thinking too much in a simple hand."

My summary of the hand is that our teammates had done well to create a problem for declarer by pushing him to 5♥. When declarer's reasonable effort did not pay off, they got their reward for getting active in the auction. Our team's edge was demonstrated not in the play (where I took a finesse) but in the bidding, where the opponents were pushed to 5♥. After that point, whether or not that edge translated into a win of the board was a matter of chance. This particular day, it was enough. None of the other declarers were in 5♥; they were all in 4♥ and took 12 tricks.

I took one more trick than Rosenberg not because of my superior BAM skills. It was because of this problem I'd faced earlier in the week in the Blue Ribbon Pairs final.

	♠ A Q 6 4
North dealer	♥ K J 5
E-W vul.	♦ 8 6 5 2
	♣ 5 3

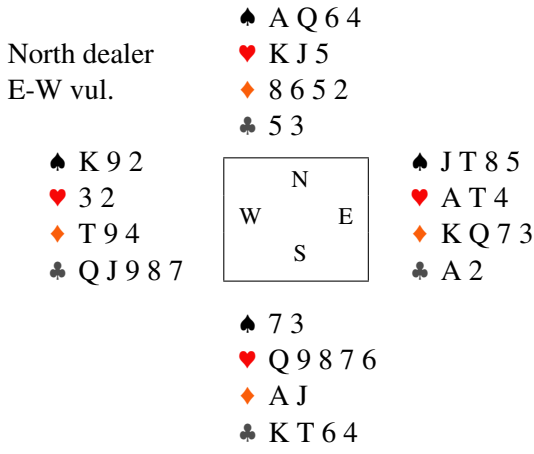
♠ 7 3
♥ Q 9 8 7 6
♦ A J
♣ K T 6 4

West	North	East	South
Sachar	*Gill*	*Sokolow*	*Hans*
—	Pass	1♦	1♥
Pass	2♦*	Pass	2♥
Pass	Pass	Pass	

The ♦T was led to the ♦Q and ♦A. A spade to the ♠Q for a club up felt like the natural choice. I tried to consider the likely development of play if the spade finesse lost. East would play a trump, which I'd win in dummy. On a club up, East will win eventually and remove dummy's trumps. All I would score are 4 heart tricks, 1 spade, 1 diamond, and a club for 7 total tricks, down 1.

An alternative struck me. What if I play a spade to the ♠A for a club up? With the ♣A onside, I'd score 4 hearts, 2 clubs, a spade, and a diamond for 8 tricks. Also, I might be able to build the ♠Q as a trick later in the play, either by leading up towards it or ruffing out East's ♠ Kxx.

Spade to the ♠A was also attractive because it is the sort of play an expert makes. He does not take a finesse, he sees deeper and evaluates on a deeper plane. Convinced, I took this path and soon discovered the full hand to be:



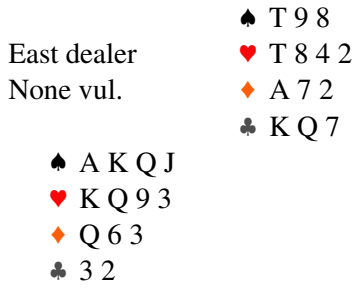
In my reasoning, I had failed to account for the trump promotions. East played diamonds at every opportunity and eventually I misguessed the ♥T. I ended up losing a spade, 2 hearts, a diamond, and a club as 5 winners for the defense.

For my creative anti-finesse, we scored a pathetic 3.5 out of 26 matchpoints. Most declarers took 9 or 10 tricks. This hand rankled pretty hard as I tried to come to terms with the gravity of the error. Taking a spade finesse is the best matchpoint play by a long margin. There are many ways to gain: the finesse might win, the defense may not play trumps, the defense may not be able to play a third round of trumps, the ♣A might be offside. A spade to the ♠A is way too committal.

After this sorry effort from a few days ago, there was no way I was going to take an "expert non-finesse" again. That is why the decision in 4♥ to take the diamond finesse was an easy one for me!

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

Back to our match, the next hand saw Lew Stansby face this defensive problem:



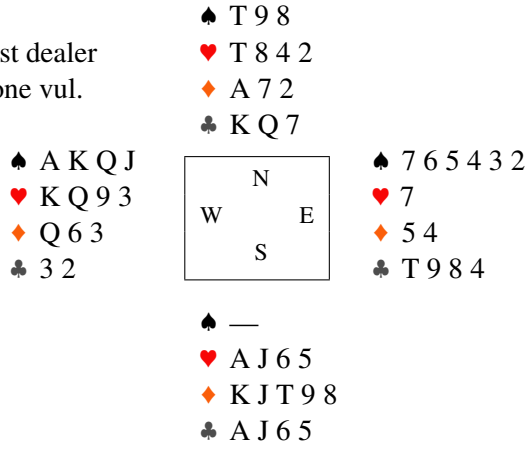
West	North	East	South
Stansby	*Rosenberg*	*Bramley*	*Willenken*
—	—	Pass	1♦
Double	Rdbl	3♠	Pass
Pass	4♦	Pass	5♦
Pass	Pass	Pass	

Declarer ruffed the opening spade lead, crossed to the ♦A and finessed a diamond to West's ♦Q as East followed with the ♦4 and ♦5. What should he play?

Continuing to tap declarer with a spade feels natural. However, Lew analyzed the situation a bit more thoroughly. The bidding and play indicated that declarer's shape was likely to be 0=4=5=4 (or possibly 0=3=5=5). South must hold the ♥A and ♣A. If he also held the ♣J, the spade exit would help him set up a dummy reversal. Declarer could ruff the spade, cross to a club, ruff another spade, cross to another club, and pull West's trump. This would help him score 3 spade ruffs, 2 high trumps in dummy, 4 clubs, and the ♥A for 10 tricks. If declarer were 0=3=5=5, he would have an extra club trick and the spade continuation would allow him to make his contract.

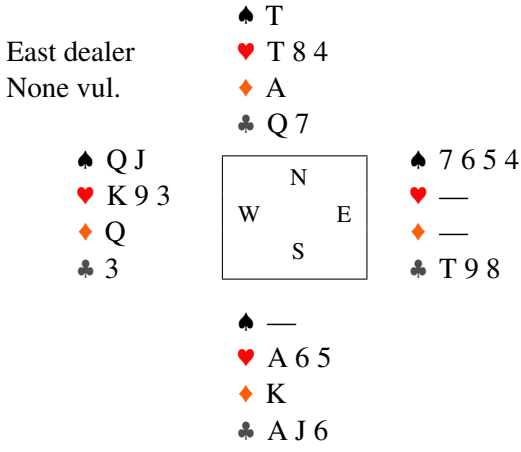
Lew chose the accurate return of a diamond. Declarer ran out of winners 1 trick sooner, scoring only 9 tricks for down 2. The full hand was:

East dealer
None vul.



The play of a diamond in a situation like this rarely makes bulletins and newspaper columns. If posed as a problem, this dummy reversal possibility is something many experts would be able to spot. Yet to do it at the table and avoid the reflexive spade tap is the mark of a world-class player.

At our table, Peter showed another aspect of trump management. He ruffed the spade and successfully ran the ♦J and the ♦T. Now he crossed to ♣K in dummy to finesse the ♥J. When the defense tapped him again (best), this was the position:



From here, he played ♥A and another to build the deep heart trick. If the defense tapped him again, he could cross to the ♣Q to pull the last trump. If they continued with a trump, heart, or club, South's hand is high. This was an elegant demonstration of technique: delaying the third round of trumps to get both remaining trumps in play and crossing to dummy for a heart to the ♥J to cater to a potential ♥Qx in East's hand.

When we also won the third hand against the strong FLEISHER team, our tally for the set had gone to 11.5/15, almost a 77% game. An air of excitement had built up. The running scores indicated that we were sitting third. We were a long way off first or second but leading a bunch of other teams competing for the next few spots. This felt totally amazing. While that completely stupid spade exit against Rodwell's 3♦ was still fresh in my mind, at least we were still alive and doing well.

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

From the next round, try this declarer play problem:

	♠ K T 2
North dealer	♥ J 9 7 5 3 2
N-S vul.	♦ Q T
	♣ 9 5
	♠ A 6 3
	♥ A Q 8 6 4
	♦ J
	♣ A K 7 2

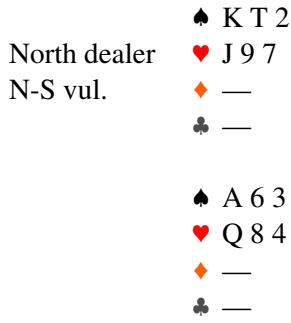
West	North	East	South
Weinstein	*Bianchedi*	*Levin*	*Madala*
Gill	*Brink*	*Hans*	*Drijver*
—	Pass	Pass	1♥
Pass	4♥	4♠	5♣
Pass	5♥	Pass	Pass
Pass			

What should declarer's plan be on the lead of the ♣Q? Should it be any different on the lead of the ♠J?

Declarer could see an obvious spade and diamond loser. Success or failure appears to depend on a winning guess in hearts. Since East is likely to be the player with short hearts, it feels natural to lay down the ♥A.

Both declarers saw deeper than that and planned instead for an endplay deep in the hand. They started by playing a diamond at trick 2.

Bas Drijver's plan (on the ♣Q lead) was to win the club return and cash the ♥A. If hearts don't split, he can continue with club ruff, diamond ruff, club ruff. The position at this point with the lead in dummy would be:

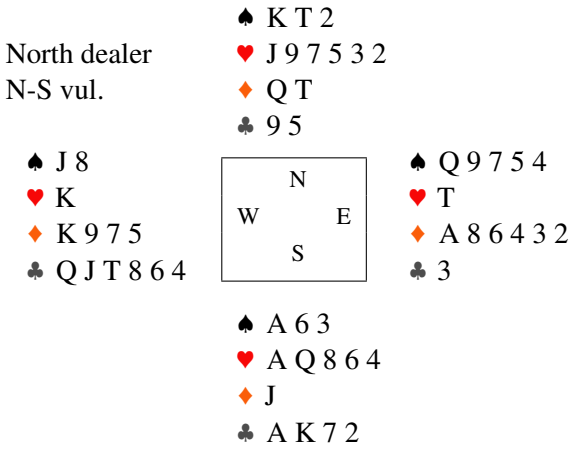


If West holds the ♥K, declarer can cash the spade honors and exit a heart. This would endplay West into providing a ruff-and-discard. Note that it is important to play diamonds immediately, preserving the ♥A. If South releases trump control prematurely, West can win the diamond, cash the heart, and exit a club. Declarer would be stuck with a spade loser.

The fear of defensive ruffs is illusory. If East ruffs West's club return at trick 3, we now have an extra club winner in hand for a spade discard. Declarer scores his 11 tricks irrespective of the heart layout. West ruffing a spade is a very remote likelihood given than East did not preempt at favorable vulnerability with attractive spades and a sharp honor in diamonds.

At Drijver's table, West won the diamond to give East a club ruff. When the spade return stood up, declarer could claim, discarding a spade on the club winner. Hearts were 1–1 after all and all the thoughtfulness had no reward. This hand is a great example of how so much beauty in bridge gets washed away in the double-dummy knowledge of the actual hand.

Madala received the ♠J lead and played on similar lines. West won the ♦K at trick 2 and played a second spade. Declarer now played the ♥A intending to effect the endplay and was perhaps a trifle disappointed when West turned up with a singleton trump. The full hand was:



Paradoxically, both declarers were rewarded with the win on the board. Both Eric Rodwell and Bart failed to find a correspondingly strong play. They played 4♥ on a club lead after West preempted in the suit and East never bid. The ♥K rated to be in the East hand on their auction. Both won the ♣A, crossed to the ♠K and took a heart finesse. When that lost, they had 10 tricks.

Compare it to the line of playing the ♦J at trick 2. If West issues a club ruff, declarer scores 11 tricks, as the spade loser gets discarded on a club winner and there is no chance of losing to the ♥K. If East wins the diamond, declarer is no worse off than his actual line.

On the next hand, my partner faced this lead problem:

East dealer
None vul.

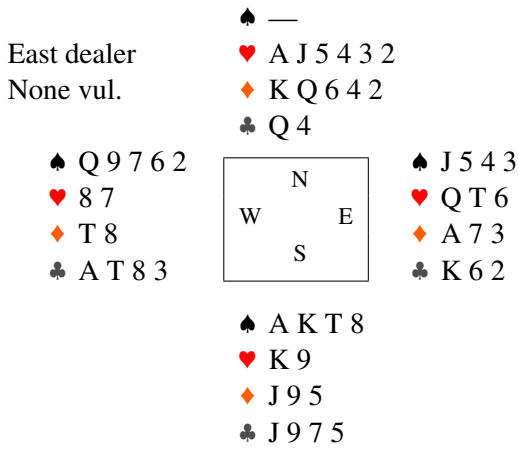
WEST
♠ Q 9 7 6 2
♥ 8 7
♦ T 8
♣ A T 8 3

West	North	East	South
Gill	*Brink*	*Hans*	*Drijver*
—	—	Pass	1NT [1]
Pass	2♦ *	Pass	2♥
Pass	3♦	Pass	3NT
Pass	4♥	Pass	Pass
Pass			

1. 12–14

What would you lead?

North's bidding has implied at least 10 and possibly 11 cards in the red suits. The introduction of a minor suit as a possible strain is suggestive of some slam interest. This does not appear to be a regular hand where the defense slowly builds tricks in one suit while declarer tries to establish his source of tricks. There is a live risk of declarer's black-suit losers being discarded on outside winners. The club trick(s) might be a now-or-never prospect, so Peter decided to go for the cash-out. The ♣A was spectacularly right, as the full hand was:



We cashed 2 clubs and I stopped to consider whether I should cash the ♦A. It was one of those situations where I knew the next card would be the ♦A, but just to avoid a reckless cash I thought it'd be worth checking anyways. It was easy to see that all the diamonds could potentially disappear on some rare layouts. Partner had done the good work on the hand and my role was not to get too clever.

This is a situation peculiar to BAM. At IMPs, cashing the ♦A would be an easy play. At matchpoints, it'd be easy to see how this guarantees a 70% score. At BAM, however, it pays to invest some extra effort. A few seconds later, the ♦A followed, and my eventual trump trick meant down 1 for a win on the board.

There was a point in my bridge-playing career when I subscribed to the narrative "I am a solid player well suited for teams bridge. It is the best test of bridge ability. I don't like matchpoints because of all the randomness it contains. IMPs is the true test." I no longer subscribe to this thesis. I think BAM is the best!

THINKING ALONG

Any time a player thinks during the play, he transmits information to the opponents. Small inferences are available from tempo and manner. A defender thinking about the lead to a 1NT – 3NT auction is unlikely to have a 5-card major. He might be picking amongst two 4-card suits or contemplating leading from a 3-card major suit. A stop to think during the play will often mark a defender with a particular ace or winner in that suit. Other times, the fact that the defender is thinking can help mark him with the lack of a particular card—declarer can infer that he would have found the successful defense if he held it.

North dealer
E-W vul.

♠ A K J 9 2
♥ J 5 4
♦ Q J
♣ Q 9 2

♠ T 4
♥ A K Q 6
♦ A 5 4 3 2
♣ A J

West	North	East	South
Volcker	*Gill*	*Bessis*	*Hans*
—	1NT [1]	Pass	2♣
Pass	2♠	Pass	3♦
Pass	3♠	Pass	5NT [2]
Pass	6♣ [3]	Pass	6♦ [4]
Pass	Pass	Pass	

1. 14–16
2. Pick a slam
3. No, you pick
4. Not the best bid of my life

The ♦T was led and dummy's ♦Q held as East followed with the ♦2. The ♦J was covered by the ♦K and ♦A. I played a third diamond, discarding a club, won by West as the suit split 3–3. Having received a lucky start, what is your plan?

The best approach involves combining chances. My plan was to play three rounds of spades, hoping to establish the suit or drop a doubleton ♠Q. If this did not work, I intended to cross to dummy's ♥J to take a club finesse. It was a solid textbook-style line with a high likelihood of success.

However, Frederic Volcker as West, on lead after the third round of diamonds, was taking a long time to think. We were running short of time and I was almost tempted to claim. But

when a strong player thinks, there is usually information to be gleaned. I started speculating about the cause of West's contemplation.

He must be worried about a cashing ace. Given that I had implied 4 hearts, it was highly unlikely that I could score 12 tricks missing the ♥A. There were many ways in which I could score 12 tricks missing the ♣A. The natural play must be a club.

Another pointer towards a club exit is East's suit-preference signal in trumps. Bessis played the ♦2 at trick 1 with a choice of spot cards. If an ace was cashing and partner was signaling for it, it rated to be the ♣A.

All logical analysis pointed towards a club exit. Yet West continued to think. The more he thought, the more certain I became that he had the ♣K. He was worried about blowing the contract with a club switch if East did not hold the ♣A.

About 5 minutes had passed. With the ♣K "marked" offside, I understood that making the contract would depend on playing spades for 4 tricks. The combination play of ruffing a spade and then a club hook was no longer a candidate.

I tried to get into West's head. If he held the ♠Q, his projection of my high cards consistent with the auction would mark me with the ♣A. His defense (lead passively and hope for the best) would be obvious. It was only on a hand *without* the ♠Q that he would fear declarer's stealing 12 tricks. His tank seemed to reveal that not only should I place him with the ♣K, but also that I should place East with the ♠Q.

Frederic was still thinking. About 8 minutes had passed. I was getting increasingly confident about my table-read. However, making a play like taking the spade ruffing finesse is a big anti-percentage action. If it fails, it will be hard to justify such a committal play on the basis of "table feel."

While I was summoning the courage to back my read, West finally exited a club and the hand was over. I couldn't help peeking at their hands as I claimed; I was right, West did have

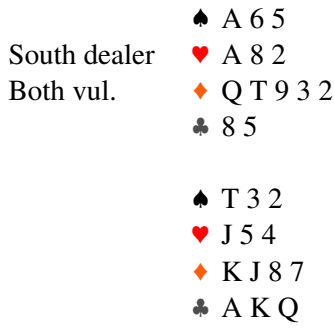
the ♣K and East held ♠ Qxxx. I'm sure I would have gotten it right, but it was a relief not to be tested.

This hand demonstrates powerfully the value of information available from defenders' tempo. And how sometimes a think can mark a defender (and his partner) with or without a particular card.

Similarly, when a strong declarer thinks about the hand, the defense knows he has some sort of a problem. Many pairs and players try to devise strategies to minimize information leaks, both unauthorized information going to partner and knowledge broadcast to the opponents. Some aspire to an enforced break at trick 1, both when defending or declaring. This helps their side prepare for the hand strategically and also sometimes helps them get ready for specific tactical situations. Others never make an opening lead instantly. They always ask questions, always lead slowly and deliberately. To each their own.

On the other side of the spectrum, I've often seen Jeff Meckstroth glance at dummy and say, "Thanks. Small," within a second. Someone like Lorenzo Lauria or Geir Helgemo might get straight to the point with, "Small." It is hard to play against declarers who play quickly. Not only do you feel some sort of pressure to play along at a quicker tempo, but the lack of time to fully absorb all aspects of the hand leads to more defensive mistakes. Larry Cohen once noted that he would much rather play against a strong declarer playing slowly than a weaker one playing quickly.

It is easy to see how declarer can take advantage of information gleaned from defenders' tempo. Very sharp defenders can similarly pounce when they smell a weakness from declarer's tempo. At the 2014 Summer Nationals in Las Vegas, a hand from our match against the CAYNE team made an impression on me. It was something like:



West	North	East	South
Lauria	*Gill*	*Versace*	*Hans*
—	—	—	1NT [1]
Pass	3NT	Pass	Pass
Pass			

1. 14–16

Lorenzo Lauria led the ♠4 (attitude) against 3NT. If the spades were 5–2, I needed to duck a spade to shut them out. However, the defense could successfully switch to hearts. This would help establish 5 tricks for them via 1 spade, 3 hearts, and a diamond.

The legitimate shot was to rise ♠A and play for spades to be 4–3. However, I was familiar with the Italian leading style: they tend to lead second lowest from 4-card suits, especially, as in the danger layout here, when the opening leader holds an honor in another suit. I was leaning heavily towards spades being 5–2 and going against the normal play.

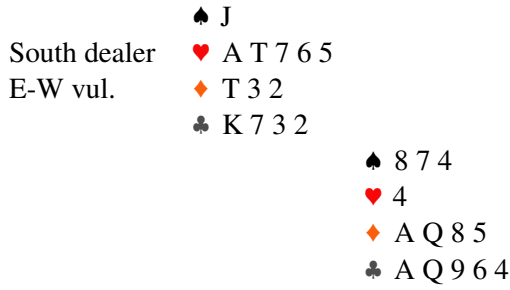
Taking such a big view that giants like Lauria–Versace will misdefend 3NT felt like a huge position. It took me a few extra seconds to convince myself. Overall, my estimate is that I took about a minute to duck at trick 1.

Two seconds later, a heart hit the table. I put up the ♥J, but it lost to the ♥K. Back came the ♠Q, as West held the ♦A and

5 spades. It was a great lesson. You just cannot mess with guys at this level.

Later on, I looked at the full hand. For his heart switch at trick 2, Versace had ♥ Q942. It was far from being an obvious play. Looking at dummy and the trick 1 play in isolation, returning partner's suit would be the normal thing to do. A heart switch might even be termed speculative. It was clear that Versace had based such a committal and brave defensive decision solely on his read of my tempo as declarer. He had inferred my heart suit weakness from my hesitation. I was very impressed and also a little bit afraid.

Back at the Reisinger, thoughts of Versace's defense returned to me as I defended this hand:



West	North	East	South
Gill	*Brink*	*Hans*	*Drijver*
—	—	—	1♥
1♠	2♠*	3♥*	Pass
3♠	4♥	Pass	Pass
Pass			

Peter led the ♠3 (3rd/5th) and declarer fairly quickly played from dummy. After I followed suit, he stopped for a while before playing from his hand. What can you deduce from his thinking?

He must be thinking about overtaking the spade. It fits with the insta-low from dummy and then delay in playing from hand. This suggests his spades are something along lines of AKxx or AQTx. The purpose of overtaking must be to discard a diamond from dummy. Partner's ♠3 suggests that it is almost certain that declarer has 4 spades.

Since he can get only 1 fast discard, declarer must have exactly 3 diamonds. With 4 diamonds there would be no need to think—he would have no clubs, so he could ruff a club to access his spade winners. If he held a doubleton diamond, nothing useful would be achieved by shedding a diamond from dummy. Those 3 diamonds are likely to be ♦ Kxx, since with ♦ KJx there is limited benefit of taking a discard.

In the trump suit, it is clear that partner has the ♥K. Otherwise, declarer would have a heart entry back to hand and there would be no need for a spade overtake.

All of this is starting to morph into a decent picture. Declarer is likely to have 4 spades, 5 hearts, 3 diamonds, and 1 club. His spades are strong, his hearts are queen high, so it's likely his diamonds are Kxx. His hand must be within the range of the two hands below:

♠ A K x x	♠ A Q T x
♥ Q J x x x	♥ Q x x x x
♦ K x x	♦ K x x
♣ x	♣ x

At the table, having worked this out, I was feeling pretty smug about my deductions. It is only now when writing that I realize that my analysis was still incomplete. The logical progression of this chain of thought would be to project partner's hands that correspond with these possibilities. These are:

♠ Q x x x x	♠ K x x x x
♥ K x	♥ K J
♦ J x x	♦ J x x
♣ J x x	♣ J x x

The first exhibit does not look like a vulnerable 1♠ overcall. Partner's hand must lean towards the latter and so should declarer's hand. The full hand, as expected, was:

South dealer
E-W vul.

	♠ J ♥ A T 7 6 5 ♦ T 3 2 ♣ K 7 3 2	
♠ K 9 6 5 3 ♥ K J ♦ J 7 4 ♣ J 8 5	N W E S	♠ 8 7 4 ♥ 4 ♦ A Q 8 5 ♣ A Q 9 6 4
	♠ A Q T 2 ♥ Q 9 8 3 2 ♦ K 9 6 ♣ T	

Nothing significant happened in the play. Declarer played low from hand and came off the board with a club to my ♣Q. I toyed with playing the ♦Q, hoping to induce a reflexive duck if declarer held ♦Kxx without the ♦9. But there was a risk that declarer might win the ♦K and get 2 discards, so I cashed the ♦A and another push board resulted when we eventually scored a heart.

While irrelevant to the outcome, the hand projection was a journey of discovery that I found immensely pleasing. An experience like this creates good motivation to try and dig deeper next time a strong declarer is thinking!

Then, I faced this lead problem:

West dealer
Both vul.

WEST
♠ 9 5 4
♥ 9 8 7 6
♦ 8 7 6
♣ T 6 3

> What would you lead against 6♦ after dummy shows a strong, unlimited, balanced hand and declarer shows long diamonds and about 5–7 points?

The situation seemed somewhat random. It is attractive to lead a spade because our relative shortness suggests that partner's hypothetical winner in this suit is likely to cash (dummy is less likely to have shortness). Against that, the heart sequence is tempting on general grounds. It also offers a higher degree of safety. When partner has holdings like KJxx or AJxx in the suit we lead, a heart is less likely to blow a trick. After some consideration, I led a heart and hit partner's ♥ AK for down 1. The hand is quickly claimed and we try to move on to the next board.

However, dummy is looking quite agitated about the outcome. He grabs the board and checks the cards, puts the board down and checks them again. It's hard to know what he is unhappy about, my fluky lead or their bidding. The energy level of the table can change dramatically when someone is very tense. As I sense this, he grabs the board again. It suddenly strikes me: my hearts were ♥ 9876, dummy had ♥ J3 and declarer had ♥ QT. Due to the blockage in hearts, 3NT makes. This unfair (in his view) possibility explains his aggravation. Finally, the board is put down and we start the next hand...

Incidentally, this hand is one of the exhibits in the cheating allegations against Fisher–Schwartz, who doubled the slam, got the heart lead, and made some lame excuses. Here is part of the

transcript from the BBO archives that captures the sentiment at the table.

Vugraphzfh: Sadek looking at Schwartz's hand. Wondering how he knew to lead a heart not a spade.

Vugraphzfh: Fisher says 9876 looks like a natural lead anyway.

Vugraphzfh: Sadek: "Keep playing like this."

Towards the end, our great run started to lose momentum as a series of mishaps hit the team. In our matches against GROMOV and STRUL we scored a total of 1/6, losing 5 boards and winning 1. The following few hands contributed...

South dealer
Both vul.

NORTH
♠ T 8 5
♥ 4
♦ A 6 3 2
♣ J 8 6 5 3

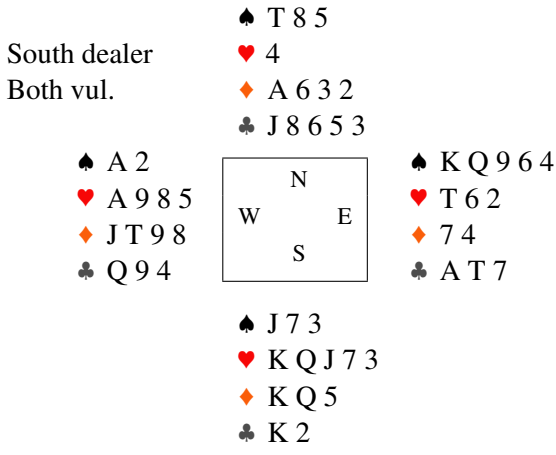
West	North	East	South
Sadek	*Hans*	*Elahmady*	*Gill*
—	—	—	1NT [1]
Pass	Pass	2♠ [2]	Pass
Pass	?		

1. 14–16
2. Natural

Would you pass or bid 2NT for the minors?

It seemed like a routine 2NT to my eyes. When we went for 1100 a few minutes later, it no longer felt quite so clear. It is easy now to appreciate the negatives of bidding: both sides vulnerable, 3 cards in their suit, playing opponents who are not shy about doubling.

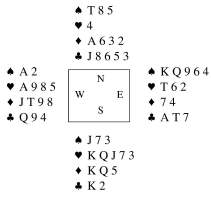
Even though high-level bridge is by its nature very aggressive, Sadek–Elhamady are particularly active. It seems when we play them that we are always defending on partscore hands. This 2♠ bid is a great exhibit of the Egyptians' hyper-aggressive style. Lotan Fisher, Marty Fleisher, Espen Lindqvist, Jeff Meckstroth, and Bart Bramley, all elite players who love bidding, passed out 1NT as East. The full hand was:



After 1NT was passed out, Steve Weinstein as South faced the ♦J lead. What would be your plan of play?

Most declarers in this situation started by playing the heart suit and eventually used the ♦A to lead a club towards the ♣K. Steve used his poker background to make a big psychological play: he led the ♣K from his hand!

The stronger the opponents, the higher the likelihood of success for this play. If the ♣A and ♣Q are split, ducking by the defense is natural, aiming to cut down declarer's access to dummy's club winners. Even if they are in the same hand, the ♣K might still hold the trick. While putting the ace on a king might be the reflexive response of any intermediate-level player, ducking the ♣K in situations like these is the almost-automatic reflex of a top player. Steve was able to exploit this



tendency. Once the ♣K held he drove out the ♥A. When the diamonds split 4–2, he cashed out for down 1. It was a nice play that did not get rewarded on the day, as the routine line of playing hearts led to the same outcome.

The board after going for the big penalty I faced this bidding decision:

East dealer
None vul.

SOUTH
♠ A Q 6 5
♥ 9 7 5
♦ K 7 2
♣ A Q 6

West	North	East	South
Elahmady	*Gill*	*Sadek*	*Hans*
—	—	4♠	Pass
Pass	5♥	Pass	?

What would you choose?

Partner's range of hands for the 5♥ bid is wide. Most distributional hands with a spade void are obligated to act; opposite some of these, even 5♥ might be in danger. On the other hand, partner has very little room to express a hand full of both high cards and shape, so those hands constitute a 5♥ bid too.

Different players took different decisions with the same information. Those of us who tried 6NT soon faced this declarer play problem:

East dealer
None vul.

♠ —
♥ K Q J T 8 2
♦ A T 9 6 3
♣ 7 5

♠ A Q 6 5
♥ 9 7 5
♦ K 7 2
♣ A Q 6

What is the best line in 6NT on a spade lead?

Establishing the hearts would lead to 10 top tricks. Needing 2 extra tricks, the first chance is for East to hold the singleton ♦Q or ♦J. With the aid of 2 finesses, declarer can score 5 hearts, 4 diamonds, 2 spades, and a club. The other option was to take a club finesse, getting up to 11 tricks, and then play for a squeeze. If East held the ♥A and the singleton or doubleton ♣K, West would be squeezed in the minors. If West held the ♥A, accurate handling of the heart suit (win the second heart in hand) would set up a double squeeze, even if East held three or more clubs.

The problem was that it was not easy to combine the two chances. If I drove out the ♥A, East could play a club and I'd have to commit to the finesse without knowing about the singleton diamond honor. If I tried a top diamond from hand first, East could return a diamond after accurately ducking the ♥A, which breaks up the communication for a squeeze.

It looked like this was going to be another one of those hands where we have to judge the likelihood of misdefense. The longer I thought about it, the higher the chances of the defense's getting it right.

Knowing that dummy's fifth diamond was useless, I discarded it at trick 1 and played hearts, East winning the second round as West followed. When East continued with a spade, I breathed a sigh of relief. What should I discard from dummy?

East dealer
None vul.

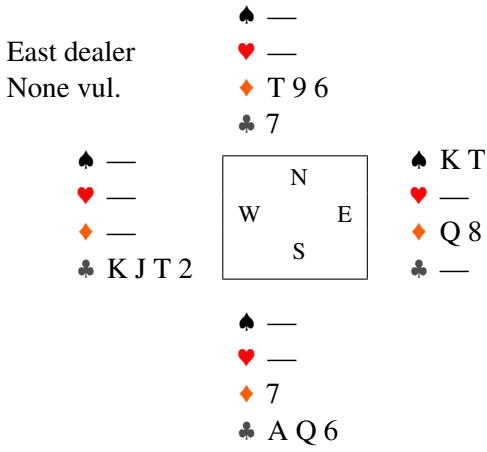
♠ —
♥ Q J T 8
♦ A T 9 6
♣ 7 5

♠ (A) 6 5
♥ 9
♦ K 7 2
♣ A Q 6

In order to retain chances in both minors, it is obviously correct to discard a club. I asked for a low club, and it was only later in the play that I realized that this was a mistake. The correct play was to discard not the ♣5 but the ♣7! Can you see why?

I finished running all my hearts, with East discarding spades and West discarding clubs. When I cashed the ♦K and the ♦A, surprisingly it was West who showed out on the second round.

It was clear now that East started with a 7=2=4=0 shape and West correspondingly was 2=2=1=8. The contract could no longer be made, as East held spade winners along with the diamond winner. The only question was whether I would be down 1 or down 2. The 4-card ending was:



The only way to score the 11th trick is to endplay West in clubs. However, on the ♣7 lead from dummy in this endgame, West can duck! By sacrificing 1 club trick, he gets 2 in return as East cashes 3 winners for down 2. Thus the importance of the ♣7 unblock. If North held the ♣5 in the same ending, South overtakes with the ♣6 and West can no longer successfully duck.

Any player who unblocked certainly deserves a huge round of applause. Perusing the vugraph records, I didn't find any.

At the table, West had not preserved the small ♣2 in his hand, coming down to ♣ KJT9, so he got endplayed anyway. Despite losing the board, it was an enjoyable hand. Needing to unblock the ♣7 from ♣ 75 is not a situation one sees often.

FINALE

While a whole bunch of teams were fighting for the 3rd to 7th spots, NICKELL and SCHWARTZ were well ahead. The last board of the tournament featured a dynamic tussle between us and SCHWARTZ.

Try this declarer play problem faced by Lew Stansby:

East dealer
None vul.

♠ K Q
♥ A 8
♦ A 6 4
♣ K J 9 8 7 4

♠ J 4 2
♥ K J 9 7 5 2
♦ J 8 7 5
♣ —

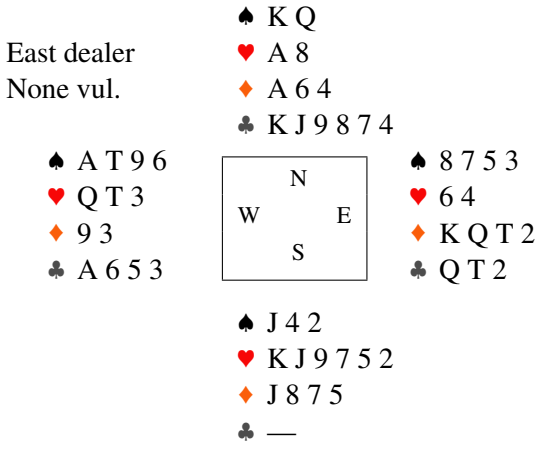
West	North	East	South
Schwartz	*Bramley*	*Fisher*	*Stansby*
—	—	Pass	2♥
Pass	4♥	Pass	Pass
Pass			

Lew received the ♦9 lead (Rusinow, from ♦QT9(x) or ♦KT9(x) or from shortness). He ducked as Lotan Fisher won the ♦K. Fisher switched to the ♠5 to the ♠A and Schwartz returned the ♦3. What now?

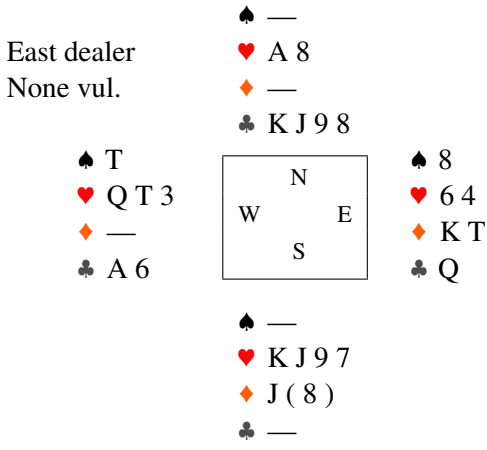
East's normal play with more than 1 diamond would be to return the suit at trick 2. It is likely that diamonds are 5–1 and

East is about to ruff this trick, so Lew elected to played low. Surprisingly, East won the ♦Q and gave West a diamond ruff!

If Fisher–Schwartz weren't tainted, this would be considered a great deceptive defense by them. As it is, it is hard to know whether such praise is deserved. They scored +50, the full hand being:



At a different table, Levin also led the Rusinow ♦9. Steve Weinstein made the help-partner play of the ♦Q. He returned a spade to the ♠A for a spade return. Chip Martel played with great accuracy. He ruffed a club, then crossed to the ♦A to ruff another club. Now he discarded dummy's diamond on the spade winner and played a diamond in this position:



West was helpless. As he pitched a club, Chip ruffed on the board, then ruffed another club to hand to play the last diamond. West was down to a 3-card trump-tight endgame and scored only 1 trick.

At our table, I led the ♠A and switched to a diamond. Boye Brogeland conducted the play with similar accuracy. He ducked the diamond, won the spade return, and made the key play of ruffing a club. He came to the same position as Chip and endplayed me in the same trumps-only ending. Since our teammates scored −50 at the other table, this board was a win for SCHWARTZ.

Boye is usually a calm, measured person. I could tell after this hand was over that he was quite excited. He hurriedly asked me whether I had 2 or 3 hearts. When I replied, "Three," I could sense his excitement and self-congratulation at his nice play.

When we heard a big Norwegian scream a couple of minutes later, we knew who that was. SCHWARTZ had managed to pull off a great win, their second US title of the year. Our personal score against their team was a sad 1.5/6 for the day. The final standing of the event were:

1.	SCHWARTZ	33.55
2.	NICKELL	30.34
3.	BOCCHI	29.84
4.	BRINK	27.56
5.	HANS	27.49
6.	GROMOV	27.43
7.	FLEISHER	26.84
8.	STRUL	26.70
9.	WOOLSEY	26.52
10.	LIU	23.50

Once the cheating allegations against Fisher–Schwartz emerged, the other members of the SCHWARTZ team (Richie Schwartz–Allan Graves, Boye Brogeland–Espen Lindqvist) renounced all titles they had won playing with the Israelis, including the 2014 Reisinger.

Fisher–Schwartz have recently been found guilty by the ACBL. Their expulsion from the League was widely welcomed and the forfeiture of their titles, including the 2014 Reisinger, seems fair. As this and other titles get vacated, I hope that bridge administrators decide to re-allocate titles to the second-place finishers.[1] This may not be the most accurate way of determining who would have been the real winner if the cheaters had not cheated, but since there is no way of truly determining that, it is the best solution available. Better to have a flawed champion than have empty titles reminding us of a sad era in competitive bridge. In that spirit, congratulations to NICKELL (Nick Nickell–Ralph Katz, Jeff Meckstroth–Eric

[1] While my feelings on this subject are strongly held, I must admit that I, like most who have competed against these cheaters for years, have something to gain by seeing their titles stripped. My team finished second in the Transnational Teams at the 2011 World Team Championships to a team of Israelis that included Fisher–Schwartz.

Rodwell, Steve Weinstein–Bobby Levin), the true winners of the 2014 Reisinger.

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

From the perspective of our team, there were many opportunities to improve our score, but that is the nature of bridge. Countless times we have finished bridge tournaments with "If only this and this. . . " The philosophical approach perhaps is to consider that for each decision we might have negotiated successfully, there were parallel opportunities for the opponents to improve their own scores. All that matters is what we deliver at the table. And our fifth place finish felt pretty good.

It was satisfying to finish in the top half of such an illustrious field. The emotional journeys involving the scoreline also added to the memory. We recovered after a shaky start in the qualifying, then almost blew our comfortable margin of safety in the semi-final and finished off with a big comeback in the final. It was a rock-and-roll ride.

It was a joy battling in the Reisinger, a unique high-level event featuring brutal BAM scoring in such a small, elite field. The excellent playing conditions in the final and the semi-final created a lasting impression. From an organizational point of view, everything ran smoothly, leaving us competitors with the sole task of trying to play our best. A big hat's off to the ACBL and its directing staff.

But what was most memorable about the week was some of the hands that came up. Many of them included positions I had never seen before, either in print or at the table. It was their richness of content that spurred me into writing this book. I hope you enjoyed them too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sartaj Hans is a world-class bridge player who has represented Australia many times in international competition. He has won or placed highly at many international competitions, including a silver medal at the 2011 World Transnational Championships and winning the NEC Cup in 2012. He is a well-regarded author and a frequent contributor to Bridge Winners.