

HAND OF THE MONTH FOR NEWER PLAYERS

February, 2016

For the last three months, we have focused on the important topic of counting out the opponent's distribution when declaring, and have emphasized that counting is ***NOT*** something strictly for the experts. The math is actually quite simple, developing the counting habit and mindset is the bigger challenge.

Just as important as counting the opponent's distribution is the matter of counting their high card points. Consider the following hand from an IMPs pairs game at an Allendale sectional:

	NORTH	
	S Q107	
	H J76	
WEST	D K653	EAST
S K84	C QJ7	S J2
H 10542		H KQ83
D J92		D A874
C 983	SOUTH	C A65
	S A9653	
Vul. NS	H A9	
Dealer: East	D Q10	
Opening lead: Diamond 2	C K1042	

Bidding

East	South	West	North
1 diamond	1 spade!	pass	2 spades
pass	3 clubs!!	pass	4 spades!!!
all pass			

The bidding was relatively straightforward, if aggressive. South would like to have a better spade suit for his overcall, but quite reasonably judged the hand was 1) too good to pass, and 2) the wrong shape for a takeout double; he would have no good option available if a double elicited the expected heart response from partner.

Trusting that partner's spade raise meant that his weakish suit would be solidified, South next made a "need help" game try in clubs, and North holding some "help" in that suit bid the vulnerable game.

In this auction, both players bid their values to the max – North’s nine HCP included mostly queens and jacks, and the 4-3-3-3 distribution was a negative – and the resulting game contract was decidedly aggressive. At IMPs scoring, however, aggressively reaching for vulnerable games is the recommended strategy.

The opening diamond lead went to East’s ace and the suit was woodenly returned, won by declarer’s queen; alert readers have no doubt already noted that a shift to the heart king at trick two would ensure that declarer would lose at least one trick in every suit. The opening lead of the diamond deuce suggested an odd number of cards in that suit – their partnership agreement was to lead third or fifth against suit contracts – so East should have recognized there was no hope for a diamond trick or ruff, and that defensive tricks needed to be developed elsewhere.

Given this opportunity, declarer now set out to shed his heart loser before touching trumps. A low club went to the jack and ace, and East – belatedly – shifted to the heart king; declarer won with the ace, crossed to the club queen and discarded his losing heart on the diamond king.

Finally it was time to work on the trump suit. A low spade was led to the ace and a low one back toward dummy. When West smoothly played low, declarer paused to consider what was now known. East had already shown up with 13 HCP, the ace of clubs (KNOWN), the ace of diamonds (KNOWN), and the king and queen of hearts (QUEEN INFERRED FROM THE LEAD OF THE KING). If that hand also held the king of spades, she would have 16 HCP and would undoubtedly have opened one notrump instead of one diamond.

Having thus reasoned, declarer rose with dummy’s queen of spades and was rewarded by the drop of the jack.

Four spades bid and made, thanks to 1) a defensive slip, i.e. the failure to lead hearts at trick two, 2) careful planning, i.e. setting up the heart discard before turning to trumps, and 3) sound inferences drawn from a counting of the opponent’s high card points.

MORAL: Develop the counting habit. Not only will your results improve, but so will your enjoyment of, and appreciation for the game.