

HAND OF THE MONTH FOR NEWER PLAYERS

September, 2015

This month we continue with the subject of safety plays, i.e. declarer plays intended to guard against adverse distributions. When things look rosy, that is the time for declarer to pause to consider what might go wrong.

Refusing to take a trump finesse to prevent the opponents from gaining a ruff is another kind of example of a safety play. Consider the following:

	NORTH	
	S J86	
WEST	H K72	EAST
S K7	D QJ103	S 32
H 108	C AK4	H QJ963
D 64		D A9752
C QJ109653	SOUTH	C 2
	S AQ10954	
Vulnerable: EW	H A54	
Dealer: South	D K8	
Opening lead CQ	C 87	

South	West	North	East
1 spade	3 clubs (weak)	3 notrump	pass
4 spades	all pass		

West's vulnerable preempt was dicey. Had NS decided to double, three clubs would probably fail by two tricks for a 500 point penalty, more than the value of a nonvulnerable NS game. Remember to weigh the vulnerability in a competitive auction.

After the opening lead of the queen of clubs, declarer followed the general rule for planning the play in a suit contract by counting losers. Initially, there appear to be a maximum of three, the ace of diamonds, a heart, and a spade if the king of spades is offside. When the contract looks cold, prudence dictates a pause to consider what could go wrong; here, declarer remembered the weak jump overcall in clubs and recognized the risk of a club ruff.

That sense of risk intensified as declarer won the first club trick and looked nervously at East's play of the deuce. Assuming standard carding, declarer knew East would start a high-low signal if holding two clubs; the play of the deuce suggested an odd number -- either one or three -- more probably just one given the bidding. East had made a vulnerable three level overcall on a suit missing the ace and king, strongly suggesting a seven card suit.

Given this, a losing spade finesse could mean an East ruff of a club continuation. To defend against this possibility, declarer gave up the idea of the normal spade finesse, and rather led to the ace and returned a small trump. West won, but could now make no return that would hurt. If instead East had held the king, that hand also could make no lead to jeopardize the contract.

Note that the safety play of refusing the trump finesse gave up the possibility of an overtrick had East held the king, but ensured the contract against any distribution of the opponent's cards. Note also the inferences declarer drew from the bidding, and from the opponents play at trick one.

QUERY #1: If there was no opposing bidding, and the scoring was matchpoints - where overtricks are important - would you play the hand differently? If so, how and why?

QUERY #2: If there was no opposing bidding, and the game was IMPs pairs, a team game, or rubber bridge - where overtricks are unimportant - would you play the hand differently? If so, how and why?

MORAL #1: When things look good, pause to consider what could go wrong, and what you can do to protect yourself against adversity.

MORAL #2: Consider the vulnerability when considering preemptive bids.

MORAL #3: Consider the form of scoring when considering safety plays that give up the possibility of overtricks.