

## CHANCES -- No. 14

by Richard Cowan

When this deal was played in the Lindfield Christmas Teams, some declarers committed themselves too early in the play.

**North**  
♠AQJ  
♥9876  
♦J86  
♣874

After the standard auction 1D-1H <> 2NT-3NT, South received the ♣5 lead. The leading convention was "4<sup>th</sup> highest from length". East played the ♣K.

**South**  
♠K932  
♥KQ2  
♦AK105  
♣AJ

There appear to be two distinct lines of play. One of these, Line A, is the play of the diamond suit, hoping to derive 4 tricks from the suit. The other line, Line B, tackles the heart suit first – low toward ♥KQ2 – with a fall-back

on the finesse against the ♦Q should West have the ♥A. This line relies on the clubs breaking 4-4 and West not having both the ♦Q and ♥A. In both lines, sensible management of the spades to provide entries to dummy, without blocking the suit, is achievable.

Which of these lines is better? In the absence of other information, the chance that a suit where the defenders have 8 cards splits 4-4 is 32.7%. But after trick 1, declarer knows (or assumes) that:

- the ♣5 was West's 4<sup>th</sup> highest;
- East was dealt the ♣K;
- West has the ♣Q;
- West does not have Q1095, Q1095x or Q109532, because he would have led the 10.

With this added information, the chances of the various club splits are now:

- 28.9% for 4-4;
- 52.1% for West to have 5;
- 18.9% for West to have 6.

Armed with these new facts, which of the two lines would you choose and, if you elect for Line A, how do you play the diamonds to optimise the chance of 4 tricks? Decide now before reading on.

**Preliminary answer:** The best play of the diamonds is low to the 10 first, then when this wins (as it must for us to succeed) proceed as follows.

- If the 9 fell from West, run the J.
- If East played the Q, claim.
- Otherwise, play the A and then:
  - if 97 has fallen from West, run the J;
  - if Q has fallen from East, claim;
  - otherwise, play the K and hope that the suit is 3-3.

You make four diamond tricks whenever East has Qxx, Qx, Q, Q432 or Q7432. The chance of this, given the information gleaned from trick one, is 28.3%. Therefore, the chance of success for Line A is 28.3%.

On the other hand, the chance that the clubs are 4-4 and West does not have both the ♥A and ♦Q – the conditions for Line B to succeed -- is 22.1%. Therefore Line B is inferior to Line A.

**The real answer:** When this deal was conveyed to me for probabilistic analysis, the question posed was: *which is better – Line A or Line B?*

I have answered that question above, using information gleaned from trick 1. Importantly though, the figures given above assume that declarer wins trick 1 with his ♣A.

Normally the reason for holding up on trick 1 is the hope that communication between the defenders will be broken. That aim would be achieved here if East were dealt only 2 clubs. On this deal, however, the major gain that comes from the hold-up is *information!* It is important to hold-up for one additional round because then you see the club card that East plays on trick 2!

If East were dealt K10, K9, K103, K102, K93 or K92, he would exit with the 10 or 9. Should he hold K1032 or K932, the only 4-card holdings he might have, he would choose the 2.

So a new line of play, a hybrid of A and B, emerges. If East plays the 2, you play Line B. If he plays the 10 or 9, you play Line A -- with some added provision should East have the *long* Q-rich diamond holdings which prevent declarer from making 4 tricks (namely Q9432, Q97xx, Q9xx, Q7xx or Q97x).

When East has such a holding, declarer makes only 3 diamond tricks but can still make 3NT if East has the ♥A and only 2 clubs. The traditional value of the hold-up play emerges here – East would have no communication with West.

Overall this hybrid line, involving the hold-up play and information gathering, succeeds with probability 46.9% -- a clear winner over Line A or Line B.

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