

CHANCES -- No. 16

by Richard Cowan

The deal below is a simplified version of one that occurred between Brazil and Australia during the recent Bermuda Bowl. The contract is 7H by South. West leads the ♥3 and East follows.

North
♠A2
♥AJ97
♦AK652
♣74

My “generic” form of the deal has solid trumps (having no risk of over-ruff) and no lower honours nor high pips in the side-suits.

South
♠7
♥KQ1086
♦84
♣AK653

So one’s resources are limited to the 9 trumps, the 5 outside high tricks and potential long tricks in the minor suits. What is the best line of play?

Analysis: There has been no bidding by East/West. So let us say that neither defender has 8+ spades or two suits totalling 12+ cards. The worst spade break is therefore 7-3. Assume also that East doesn’t have an outside void, because he didn’t double.

I initially present five lines of play.

- A. Draw trumps to eliminate possible ruffs of your aces and kings. Then play clubs, ruffing the 3rd round and hoping for a satisfactory break. Play on diamonds if the club break is bad. If trumps are 2-2, the contract will only fail if both minor suits are worse than 4-2. If trumps do not break 2-2, 7H fails only if both minors split worse than 3-3.
- B. A classic cross-ruff. Play the 5 tricks in side-suits and, if no cards are ruffed, cross-ruff the rest of the hand. This line works if any defender dealt more than one trump was also dealt 2+ cards in each minor.
- C. Play ♣AKx, ruffing the 3rd round¹. If clubs are 3-3, we draw trumps and claim. If not, we cash the 3 remaining top tricks and cross-ruff. The line has a small danger: a hand with 2 clubs and 2 diamonds can shorten diamonds on the 3rd round of clubs.
- D. Draw just one more round of trumps, leaving some ruffing risk if trumps are not 2-2. Proceed as in Line A in the 2-2 case. Otherwise, play ♣AKx ruffing the 3rd round. If 3-3, draw the last trump and claim. If 4-2,

¹ If the clubs are 5-1 and the hand with 1 also has 1 trump, then we are still alive and will succeed if his partner has 2+ diamonds (i.e. if the short-club hand is 7141).

re-enter South’s hand with a diamond ruff hoping that the danger hand still has 2+ diamonds (and so started with 3+ if it was he who had 2 clubs). Then ruff another club. Re-enter South with a spade ruff. If clubs are 5-1 or 6-0 and the hand with long clubs has the outstanding trump, switch the focus to development of the D suit, succeeding if this suit breaks 3-3².

- E. Play as in Line C except if clubs are shown to be 4-2. In that case we return to South’s hand with a trump (and claim if trumps are 2-2). If trumps are 3-1, we also can claim, citing another club ruff, back to hand with a spade ruff, then draw the last trump. This line doesn’t risk a diamond ruff!

We assume in all of the above lines that entries in trumps are kept fluid. We also note that, for lines A, C and D, there are “dual” lines of play (A*, C*, D*) whereby the diamond suit is tackled first with clubs used as the fall-back.

For E, entry shortages (when trumps are not 2-2 and diamonds not 3-3) rule out a ♦-first line which does not open up the club suit before trumps are drawn. So there is no dual of Line E.

Results: The chance of success in the first 4 lines of play, given the play to trick one, is as follows.

- A. 76.25% (and same for A*)
- B. 76.96%
- C. 77.33% (and same for C*)
- D. 79.08% (and same for D*)

Amazingly, these 7 lines (4 ♣-first and 3 ♦-first duals) have very similar chances to each other, within 3%. The seemingly innocuous Line E, however, is in a class of its own – at 87.04%. Avoiding the ruffing risk for one suit gives us a tangible reward.

So, it is best to play Line E – which implies the play of clubs before diamonds.

Finally we note that, given the bidding alone (and my assumptions on how this constrains the shapes of the defenders’ hands), the probability that each player has at least one trump is 91.14%.

² So success would come if one defender has 2335 or 1336 shape, but we see that this is ruled out by our assumption that the worst split of spades is 7-3.

If West has 4 trumps (4.52%): Line E succeeds with chance 81.53% when West leads a trump and East shows out.

If East has 4 trumps (4.33%): Against any side-suit lead (ignoring inferences that might be made on West's shape by his choice of lead), the Line E chance is 82.98%.

Overall, considering all trump breaks, the chance that 7H undoubled succeeds is 86.61%, using our best line of play.

The actual deal.

North	Brazil's North <i>Gabriel Chargas</i>
♠AQ	was declarer at one table. East led
♥AQ86	the ♥2 and West contributed the
♦AK1087	♥4. Chargas cashed ♦A then ♦K,
♣J10	then ruffed a diamond high. When
	the suit broke 3-3, he drew trumps
	and claimed.
South	
♠3	
♥KJ1073	
♦96	Australia's South <i>Tony Nunn</i> was
♣AK732	declarer at the other table.

The lead against him was ♠10, on which Nunn played the ♠A. He played the ♥A and then desisted with trumps. Nunn tried the club suit first, ♣A then ♣K. Alas, clubs were 1-5 and the suit was ruffed by West.

West's actual shape was 7-2-3-1.

Was Nunn planning to follow Line E or Line C? We don't know because the contract failed before the two lines diverge. If he planned E, which is probably³ superior to Chargas' play of the ♦-first C*, he was unlucky.

³ I haven't analysed the impact of the pips in the ♦ suit compared to the J10 in the ♣ suit, but I doubt that this issue alters the superiority of E over C*. Nor does the fall-back option of a spade finesse seem material to the comparison. But without a full analysis, my criticism of the Chargas line cannot be too confident.