

May 2015

Most players will be able to tell you whether it is better to play for a finesse or a drop for a particular combination of cards when for example the Queen is missing, but odds change as the hand evolves. Here is a simple example

N
K J x x x

S
A x x x

We all know that the chances of East holding the Queen is 50%, but if on playing the Ace West discards, this percentage increases to 100%. And for the real mathematicians out there, should West follow low on the second round, what are the odds that East holds the Queen now? Statisticians will argue that as West now holds only 11 unknown cards whilst East holds 12, the odds are slightly in favour of East holding the Queen.

Here is a more complicated combination.

N
K Q 10 7 x x

S
9 8

With plenty of entries in South's hand, what is the best way of playing this suit for the loss of only one trick? A resounding majority of players will tell you that the superior play is to play a Spade towards the King and if this holds return to hand and play towards table a second time. This is not true. There are 32 different ways we can distribute the missing 5 cards between East and West. This particular line of play will gain over an initial finesse whenever West started with Ax in the suit (3 occurrences) or East started with a singleton J (1 occurrence). Finessing West for the Jack from trick one gains whenever West started with 4 cards in the suit including the J (4 occurrences). Both lines then are equally good, the advantage of the first line of play is that at club level many defenders in the East seat will jump up with the Ace holding Ace doubleton, Declarer now finessing West for the Jack on the second round. If you can count on your opposition doing this then the number of occurrences where playing a small card to the King succeeds over the finesse at trick 1 now increases to 7. However if you are playing in an international match and this happens then I strongly suggest you cash the Queen on the second round as either East started with Ace singleton in which case it doesn't matter what you do, or he started with AJ doubleton.

The above combination of cards features in this month's hand. You have been invited to join a team match on BBO only to discover that everyone but you is an Italian expert. Your Italian doesn't stretch much pass ciao, their English seems to be non existent. The

match bumbles along in Italian and with the last board to play you see that your team is trailing by 6 imps. Can this hand provide the swing you need? You're sitting South and the bidding proceeds as follows

Bidding

All vulnerable Dealer N

South	W	N	E	S
♠ KQ10752		1D	pass	1S
♥ 762	3C	pass	pass	3S(1)
♦ Q5	pass	4S(2)	all pass	
♣ K6				

- (1) I'm not happy with this bid given my KC seems badly placed, but I am even less happy to let them play in 3C.
- (2) It seems my partner has his eye on the score too as we shall see, as he pushes on to game with minimal values

Dummy goes down with the following hand

N

♠ 98
♥ AKJ4
♦ KJ872
♣ 73

The contract looks hopeless but things look up when West leads the ♣A on which his partner drops the ♣J, then follows with the ♣2 on which his partner plays the ♣4.
Plan your play.

Initial Analysis

Everything seems to hinge on playing the Spades for just one loser. My gut feel is I should play East for ♠J, but is this right? What do we know about this hand so far? We know for certain that West started with seven Clubs to the AQ. His ♣2 at trick 2 strongly suggests he holds the ♦A, a suit preference signal to his partner as to how to get back to his hand if he ruffs the second Club. Perhaps he's void in this suit in which case my chances of making this contract are close to zero. Can he also hold the ♠A? That seems highly unlikely as with a hand this good he would have surely found a stronger bid than 3C. It occurs to me that 3NT is cold their way but I doubt our partners have bid it. What is West's distribution? His aggressive lead of Clubs suggests he doesn't hold a singleton Heart, nor did he start with AD singleton or he would surely have cashed this at trick 2 before leading another Club. That leaves him with at most two Spades in his hand. I need him to have at least one Spade to make this contract. Forgetting about the placement of Aces for the moment, if West holds at most two Spades in his hand then with a doubleton the chances of him holding the J are 40% whilst with a singleton this reduces to 20% .

Which holding is more likely? I know that 7-3-2-1 distributions are four times more likely to occur than 7-2-2-2 distributions. But if one specifically needs the singleton to be a Spade, do these ratios still apply? I don't know the answer to that so for simplicity's sake I'm going to assume on this hand there is an equal chance that West holds a singleton or doubleton, so the chances of a deep finesse in Spades has a 70% chance of success. However if I'm right in thinking that East holds the ♠A, then these odds change dramatically. Now playing up to the King and then again up to the Queen will win 100% of the time when West started with a doubleton and 25% of the time when he started with a singleton. Put another way, even if the chances of West holding a singleton is twice as likely as him holding a doubleton the chances of the deep finesse being the winning line has now been reduced to 50%. I have a second problem. If West started with two or three Hearts in his hand, unless one of these is the Queen I need to set up a discard for my losing Heart. If I decide to play East for JS then I can afford to cross to the AH and play a trump. This will work well unless against my best expectations West turns up with the ♠A and continues Hearts. Is there a better line of play? Yes, I think there is. All this analysis has taken me time, and I notice the natives are getting restless. Messages in Italian are buzzing across the screen like bees. I lead a small Diamond up to the King – if this loses to the Ace then it's back to the drawing board, but I'm happy to see West following with the ♦3 and his partner with the ♦4. I make a habit of watching how my opposition defends and these guys have been very consistent with giving standard count when following suit. I am sure that the Diamonds are breaking 3-3 and so West holds a singleton Spade. East surely holds four Spades to the Ace so the deep finesse has a 75% chance of success. I lead the ♠9 and let it run

Here is the full deal

	N	
	♠ 98	
	♥ AKJ4	
	♦ KJ872	
	♣ 73	
W		E
♠ J		♠ A642
♥ Q8		♥ 10953
♦ A103		♦ 964
♣ AQ109852		♣ J4
	S	
	♠ KQ10752	
	♥ 762	
	♦ Q5	
	♣ K6	

Conclusion

The contract wanders off, as do the Italians. I see in the other room that South stopped in 3S and made 4. In the words of one of my all time favourite partners, the late Bertie Broer, the operation was a success but the patient died. He would have a good laugh over this hand. Maybe he is.