

December 2015

I am logged on to BBO minding my own business when I get a message from Susina 8. Do you want to play she asks? Now for those who are not familiar with BBO let me explain that Susy (nom de plume Susina 8) is the lady who sets up all the major team matches on BBO, Benito Garozzo and Dano deFalco being amongst her favourites. The rest of her chosen players are almost exclusively international stars. So why is she asking me to play? She's never watched me playing (a good thing), so perhaps she's confused me with Hugh Grant? More likely someone has pulled out at the last minute and rummaging around the site she's decided I'm the best of a bad lot. No matter, before she changes her mind I send back a nonchalant "sure".

Before I know what's happening I've joined a table where on my left I have a USA international and on my right a German international. I don't recognize my partner but I see he's American and if his profile is anything to go by he's no slouch either. There are already more than two hundred kibitzers lining up for this afternoon's entertainment which is two hundred more than I'm used to. I don't know who's playing in the other room but I'm pretty sure I'm the only South African on the team. I hope I don't let us down.

We get off to a good start; we win a few and lose a few but our opponents aren't getting it all their own way.

Then this hand comes along.

Bidding

All vun. N dealer

South	N	E	S	W
♠ A1053	1D	1S	pass(1)2H	
♥ 4	3D	4H	5D(2)	pass
♦ K8	pass	dbl(3)	all pass	
♣ Q98753				

- (1) I was expecting East to overcall 1H over which I had an easy double, but the 1S bid has caught me off guard. 2C is no doubt the popular choice but who has the hearts? I suspect they are distributed around the table 4-4-4-1 in which case my partner could have a minimum opener with a 3-4-4-2 distribution or perhaps 3-4-5-1. If this is the case then 2C will surely propel us to an unmakeable contract in which case I think I would rather defend. Perhaps this is a Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon hand (for those of you who don't speak Chinese it means I am adopting a wait and see attitude). Perhaps if West passes my partner might re-open with a double and then I can think up some amazing bid to make. Perhaps if I pass I will be better placed to know what to do when the bidding reverts to me. Perhaps...
- (2) Well so much for passing – the kibitzers are probably having a field day. What have I learnt? I now know the opponents have lots of hearts between them and

that my partner was able to bid 3D even though I may be holding a Yarborough. My hand has grown in stature; on a good day we might be missing a slam. As I am sitting with the ♦K my partner must have a really good holding in that suit. Given that the opponents are bidding spades and hearts there is a very good chance that my partner is holding some very useful cards in clubs. Should I double? Can I introduce the clubs now? Should I try 4NT suggesting I can play in either of the minors? But does this bid show 2-6? And will my partner understand this bid in the first place? It's bids like this that ruin the friendship. Should I take a flyer and simply bid 6C? But no, I think I'll play this safe. Game in diamonds must be a good bet.

- (3) This is a surprise, perhaps game in diamonds wasn't a good bet? East may simply be doubling on the bidding or maybe not. I'm glad I didn't bid the slam.

North

♠ 4
♥ A8
♦ AJ76532
♣ A42

South

♠ A1053
♥ 4
♦ K8
♣ Q98753

When I see my partner's hand three things occur to me

- 1) 5C is a better contract
- 2) 4H had no chance
- 3) 5D is not too shabby.

A Christmas Bonus

Christmas is just around the corner so I'm going to treat you to a bumper edition. Let's pretend I managed to steer us to a contract of 5C played by South and you get a heart lead. Here are some clues to help you on your way - neither opponent is sitting with a void in a minor and each holds at least three cards in the minor suits.

Plan your play.

Initial Analysis

Clearly if one or both of the minors break 2-2 this hand presents no problems, but what if they both break 3-1? If we start with the ♣A followed by a small club to hand and East shows out we will now go down unless the diamonds are 2-2. Even if East goes up with the ♣K and West shows out everything is now down to us getting the diamonds right. Perhaps a small club from dummy at trick 2 works better? We run this to our queen and it loses to the king and a spade comes back. We win this with the ace and play a small club

to the ace only to find once again that the trumps don't break. Again we are going to have to get the diamonds right to make this contract. Even if East jumps up with the ♣K at trick 2 and plays a spade we are no better off. We win this and play a club towards the ace only to find that the suit doesn't break. Once again it's all down to getting the diamonds right. Is there a better way of playing this hand? Well of course there is or this wouldn't be a quiz would it?

Let's play a small diamond to the king at trick 2 followed by a diamond towards table. Only one of two things can happen now, West follows or he doesn't. If he doesn't follow can he afford to ruff? No he can't because by doing so he reduces his trump holding to a doubleton or singleton while at the same time setting up the diamond suit. If he ruffs, when you regain the lead you will simply cross to dummy with the ♣A and start running your master diamonds conceding one more trump and making your contract. So West discards letting you win the diamond with the ace. Now you play a third diamond and ruff in your hand. Can West afford to overruff now? No he can't. If he does on regaining the lead you will simply return to dummy with the ♣A and start cashing your master diamonds as before. So he holds off again, but now you simply go to dummy with the ♣A and start running the diamonds anyway, the opponents can take their two club tricks whenever they like but can't stop you making the contract.

So now what if West follows to the second diamond? You play the ace and only two things can happen, East follows or he doesn't. If he follows then you will play a small club from table to the queen. If the clubs are 2-2 or East started with the king you will make 12 tricks. If East cannot follow should he ruff? If he doesn't you will simply ruff the third diamond yourself to establish that suit and return to dummy with the ♣A. As before you will start cashing your master diamonds, the opponents can take their club tricks when they want but can't beat the contract. If East ruffs, on regaining the lead you return to dummy with a club and ruff a third diamond. The defence still holds a master trump but again cannot stop you making the contract. It's rather neat don't you think? Here is a hand where you leave the trump suit alone initially and instead try to establish your long side suit on the basis that if the opposition ruff at any stage they do so with what might well prove to be a natural trump trick.

But this is the real world - thanks to me we never got to play in 5C, instead we are playing in 5D and this contract is far from safe. Here are the hands again.

South

♠ A1053
♥ 4
♦ K8
♣ Q98753

North

♠ 4
♥ A8
♦ AJ76532
♣ A42

East leads the ♠K which you win in dummy with the ace West dropping the 9. They are playing upside down carding so the 9 promises an odd number. Plan your play.

Initial Analysis

I know what you're thinking – this hand almost plays itself. Win the spade lead, cross to hand with a heart, ruff a heart, cash the ♦K, ruff a spade, cash the ♦A then play ♣A followed by a small club to the queen. This line will win whenever diamonds break 2-2 or the queen falls singleton, or clubs break 2-2 or the king drops singleton, or whenever East holds the ♣K. The odds must be highly stacked in your favour and they would be too if the opponents had failed to bid, but they have been bidding and doing a lot of it.

Final Analysis

The first rule before playing a card is to think through what line of action you want to take, but here is an exception. On this hand go up with the ace and see what card West plays. The great thing about playing against really good players is how honest they are about telling you their distribution and preferences. West is no exception, when he drops the ♠9 he is telling his partner and the rest of the world he started with an odd number of spades, in this case most certainly three. As an aside when I play with one of my favourite partners Tony Truluck we have a system of discards where we throw away losers and keep winners. This has the disadvantage that often we are clueless about what is going on but that is often par for the course anyway. The big advantage is that when we play against really good players who carefully take note of our discards they are also clueless about what is going on, so it levels the playing fields as it were. But back to this hand. We already know the spade distribution. East started with 5 and his partner 3. What about East's heart holding? Could he have started with 5? No, for two reasons – first of all if he were 5-5 in the majors he would have surely bid Michaels over my partner's 1D showing this holding, secondly what is West doing introducing a 5 card heart suit when he has perfectly good support for his partner's 1S overcall? Could East have started with 3 hearts? No again. With only 3 hearts there is practically no holding that could justify a leap to the 4 level (just keep in mind that these two have only 18 points between them). It also means that West started with 7 hearts and will surely not stand the double, so East quite clearly started with exactly four hearts. So now we know East also started with four cards in the minor suits. If East started with a void in a minor suit then you are going down. Could East be 2-2 in the minors? No way. When experts bid game with only 18 points between them they are relying on their distribution to make the contract so we are going to hope that East is 3-1. It's possible that East is 5-4-1-3 in which case he certainly holds the ♣K, but the double suggests a holding of 5-4-3-1 where the diamonds will be headed by the queen. On the other hand as is often the case I may have this hand entirely wrong and one of the minor suits does break 2-2. But as it's Christmas I'm going to give you some clues - neither opponent holds a void and each has at least 3 cards in the minor suits.

Plan your play again.

Final Analysis (cont.)

Strangely enough whether you were clever enough to work out East's actual holding or not, the problem is identical to the one you faced when trying to make 5C. You want to make the contract if either the clubs or diamonds break, but at the same time give yourself the best chance if both suits break 3-1.

The bidding on this hand should alert you to the best line of play here, but I suspect that even with no bidding from the opposition the line I now propose gives you the best chance of making this contract. This is a mirror image of our play in 5C in the sense that we must not start by playing trumps but rather by establishing tricks in our side suit. We are going to play East for a singleton honour in clubs or three to the king so at trick two lead a spade from table ruffing in hand followed by the ♣4 towards dummy. Why a spade and not a heart you ask, and why the ♣4 and not the ♣2? I'll answer those questions in another article one day. If East plays the king our contract is ensured, if he plays the jack or 10 we will cover this with the queen and finesse clubs on the way back from dummy after cashing the ♦K and ruffing a heart.

This line only loses when East started with exactly ♠J10 or West started with the singleton king and East failed to cover your ♣4 sitting with ♠J10x

Here is the full hand

	South	
	♠ A1053	
	♥ 4	
	♦ K8	
	♣ Q98753	
East		West
♠ KQJ76		♠982
♥ KJ52		♥Q109763
♦ Q94		♦ 10
♣ 10		♣ KJ6
	North	
	♠ 4	
	♥ A8	
	♦ AJ76532	
	♣ A42	

Conclusion

My partner ruffed a heart then played for the diamond break. When that didn't happen he hoped for something good to happen in clubs and went one off. That was the start of our decline. I wonder if I will ever get invited back by Susy?

I know people read my column as they have told me so. So I would like to take this opportunity to wish you both Merry Christmas or chag Chanukah sameach or simply Happy Holidays whichever is appropriate.