

Improve your bridge with me

By Migry Zur Campanile

When you get ready to leave your home to play a tournament at your favorite club do you always remember to take along your Sherlock Holmes hat?

No? That's too bad, because often enough his thorough approach is exactly what we need to follow to make hands which at first glance appear completely hopeless. Do you remember how his most difficult cases could always be solved by "taking out the impossible and dealing with whatever is left however improbable"? In bridge terms that could mean: before giving up, picture the least unlikely layout where your contract makes and play for it!

For example take this 3NT contract:

Neither side vulnerable

Dealer South

♠ KJ5							
♥ Q764							
♦ K76							
♣ J108							
<table style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="padding: 2px;">W</td><td style="padding: 2px;">N</td><td style="padding: 2px;">E</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px;">S</td><td style="padding: 2px;"></td><td style="padding: 2px;"></td></tr> </table>		W	N	E	S		
W	N	E					
S							
♠ Q107							
♥ A982							
♦ AQ52							
♣ A3							

After South opened 1NT, North decided not to bother with Stayman holding a 3-4-3-3 hand pattern with honors in each suit and closed the auction in 3NT.

West leads the ♣4 and, when dummy comes down, we can see that 4♥ needs a friendly trump position since we must inevitably concede a spade and a club and cannot afford to lose two hearts.

3NT seems to offer better chances with several possibilities to gather nine tricks. First we need to decide what to play from dummy: the ♣4 looks very much like a fourth best lead from a suit headed by a honor, therefore the correct play is to rise with the ♣J or the ♣10 as that loses only when both ♣K and ♣Q are with East, a very unlikely event given the lead.

Dummy wins the first trick, East playing the ♣2, standard count, so it looks like clubs are 5-3.

What next? Which major should we start on?

Should we start with hearts? Even if we guess the suit and we collect three heart tricks, we still need diamonds 3-3 to make our contract (three hearts, four diamonds and two clubs), since we cannot afford to drive out the ♠A.

What happens if we play on spades first? If diamonds break 3-3 we also have nine tricks, but if they don't, we have more chances since missing a king (♥K) as opposed to an ace (♠A) gives us a little extra options in the play.

So it is decided: we play a spade to the ♠Q, West takes his ♠A and returns, predictably enough, the ♣K driving out our last stopper.

Looks like that the only residual chance is to play for diamonds 3-3, however when we cash our three top diamonds, West shows out on the third round. Not our lucky day.

What now? Should we just give up and rue the unfriendly distribution?

It seems that we have no winning option since we can't try and set up the spades: whichever opponent wins the trick, the next thing you will see is three winning clubs hitting the table to set the contract one off. This is the position we have just reached after cashing our three top diamonds:

♠ KJ							
♥ Q764							
♦ -							
♣ J							
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W	N	E					
S							
♠ 7							
♥ KJ10							
♦ -							
♣ Q73							
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W	N	E					
S							
♠ 107							
♥ A982							
♦ 2							
♣							

What should we do?

This is the time to put our Sherlock Holmes hat on and analyze once again the situation. If we cannot play on hearts and diamonds do not help us, let us consider the improbable: what happens if we send back a club? Well, if West happens to have the ♥K he will be endplayed and forced to give us a second trick in the suit, assuming that he has no exit after he cashes his club winners. Let us plan this carefully: first we need to cash our spades, hoping that West does not have four of them, as that would leave him with four winners: three clubs and a spade. Luckily, he pitches a heart on the third round of spades. When we exit with a club, West, who is now known to have started with a 2-4-2-5 shape, can cash his three winners but must lead away from his ♥K to give us the ninth trick. Naturally there is a tiny chance that East holds the singleton ♥K, but if that is the case then you would be really entitled to feel unlucky!

This is the complete hand:

♠ KJ5							
♥ Q764							
♦ K76							
♣ J108							
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W	N	E					
S							
♠ A7							
♥ KJ105							
♦ 83							
♣ KQ743							
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W	N	E					
S							
♠ Q107							
♥ A982							
♦ AQ52							
♣ A3							

Difficult? Maybe, but once you realize that all the alternatives are losing ones I believe that quite a few players would be able to recognize the need for such a play.

The basic idea is that when playing NT and when we cannot set up enough tricks in a side-suit for our contract without conceding the lead to the opponents, who have too many winners, it is sometimes best to let them cash the winners and force them to break open the critical sidesuit to our advantage.

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As most of my readers know all too well, one of the most frustratingly difficult areas of the game is defense and I often get asked how best to approach it. While there is no easy fix, I do believe that by far the best way is to try and figure out declarer's hand in order to guess and successfully counter what he is up to.

How do we do that?

Well...would you be all that surprised if I answered... we count!!

The job of reconstructing declarer's hand begins with the bidding, which will usually provide at least a general indication of his distribution. More tassles of the puzzle will slot into place when dummy comes down and the play proceeds: various suits are led and players continue to follow suit or begin to show out making it possible for the defense to complete their picture of the entire deal. Very simple, in principle, and done easily enough if you can make yourself count to thirteen. The biggest problem is that you may well have a crucial decision to make very early in the play or, at least, before you have enough information about declarer's distribution to be sure of what to do. In that case, your only chance will be to deduce his pattern, based only on what has happened in the bidding and play so far.

Let us see how that works.

The opponents have bid 1NT-3NT, your partner (West) has led the ♠2, declarer plays the ♠10 from dummy and you see these cards from the East seat:

♠ Q109	
♥ 108	
♦ KQ8642	
♣ K7	
	♠ K83
	♥ 96
	♦ A1053
	♣ Q1043

At trick one you should be able to figure out the distribution of all four hands!

Try and give it a go by yourself and, if you find it too difficult an undertaking, read on and let us do it together.

Partner's two of spades indicates he led

from a four card suit, so declarer has **THREE SPADES**. But partner would surely have preferred to lead from a five-card heart suit on this auction, so declarer should have **FIVE HEARTS**. Likewise, partner would have started a club with as many as five cards in that suit, so declarer must have at least **THREE CLUBS**. But declarer can hold no less than **TWO DIAMONDS** for his 1 NT opening. Put it all together, and you can see declarer's pattern must be 3-5-2-3! It follows that partner's shape is 4-4-1-4.

Easy, isn't it?

The next step is to use this information to plan our defense: we can see that declarer will probably need to rely on the diamonds to drive his contract home. However we know that the suit is not splitting kindly for him.

Looks like partner led from a four card suit headed by the ♠A, the ♠J or both, and because of dummy's spade holding we cannot prevent declarer from taking at least one spade trick. What should we play on the ♠9? Some will play low arguing that Kings are meant to capture Queens, some will play high following the "third hand high" maxim.

I always prefer to stop and think: playing the ♠K will prove disastrous if declarer has the ♠A.

Is that likely though?

Partner's 4-4-1-4 shape means that he had a choice of three four-card suits to choose from, two of them being majors. Since he can be credited with 4-5 points, one can assume that it is unlikely that his best four card suit would be Jxxx.

Assuming that he led from Axxx or AJxx, what is our best chance to defeat 3NT? Playing low will ensure that we collect all three of our spade tricks when we come in with the ♦A. However partner will then be forced to exit with a heart or a club, which can very well give away the contract. If we play the ♠K and send back the ♠8, partner should hopefully be able to read the position and duck. Declarer will start playing on diamonds, probably starting with the ♦J from hand.

We will take the second round of the suit to disrupt his communications and send back the ♥9, reducing the chances of a defensive misunderstanding.

Here is the whole hand:

	♠ Q109	
	♥ 108	
	♦ KQ8642	
	♣ K7	
♠ AJ72		♠ K83
♥ J743		♥ 96
♦ 7		♦ A1053
♣ 9652		♣ Q1043
	♠ 654	
	♥ AKQ52	
	♦ J9	
	♣ AJ8	

Another example:

Dealer West, Vul East-West - Matchpoints

	♠ 742	
	♥ 864	
	♦ A73	
	♣ KJ92	
♠ AK85		♠ Q1063
♥ J95		♥ Q103
♦ Q4		♦ J9
♣ A1063		♣ Q875
	♠ J9	
	♥ AK72	
	♦ K108652	
	♣ 4	

West	North	East	South
1♣	Pass	1♠	2♦
2♠	3♦	All Pass	

West cashed the Ace and King of spades, and led a third spade which got ruffed. Declarer played the ♦AK, bringing down the ♦Q and ♦J. Next, he led the ♣4 from hand, and put up the King when West ducked, trying to keep declarer guessing. Eventually declarer conceded a heart and claimed an overtrick. E-W didn't score a bottom for their -130, but -110 would have been an excellent matchpoint result.

Could they have done better?

West missed a subtle inference. East was known to have only four spades, and with four hearts as well, he would have responded "up-the-line" with 1♥. So declarer was marked with four hearts in addition to his two spades and six diamonds, and the club could hardly be anything other than a singleton.

Would you have made the same mistake? After reading this article..surely not!