

Thoughts at trick 1

If you have read much about declarer play techniques it is likely that you have come across this advice: *after the opening lead think hard before you play from dummy*. It is not that the card to be played from dummy itself is necessarily crucial but *this* is the time to think, *not* at trick two. Consider the following hand:

Contract 4♠ by West; lead T♣

♠ A J 9 8 3

♥ 8

♦ A Q T 5 3

♣ K 4

♠ K 5 4 2

♥ Q J 7 4 3

♦ 6

♣ A 6 5

In the bidding, North opened 2♥ which showed a 6-10 HCP hand with exactly 5 hearts and at least 4 cards in some minor suit. There were two passes round to you, and you overcalled 2♠; your partner then raised to 4♠.

What are your thoughts? You ought to reflect first on why North has not led a top heart: surely it must be because she doesn't have both the Ace and King. What do you think her minor suit is? There is no certainty but it is more likely to be clubs than diamonds (as you and dummy have more diamonds than clubs). Next you inquire into the opponent's lead styles and are informed that the lead of a ten promises 0 or 2 higher cards. That is a great help because you feel sure this must mean

So here are some instances of where they are definitely minor keycard.

(a) 1♠ - 2♣ - 4♣

(b) 1♠ - 2♥ - 3♦ - 4♦

(c) 1♦ - 4♦

(d) 2NT - 4♣ (whether or not 2NT is a strong balanced hand or a weak hand with both minors!).

Here's an example:

♠ K Q 3

♥ A

♦ A Q 9 6 4 3

♣ A T 9

♠ A 7 4

♥ 4 3

♦ K J 7 5

♣ J 8 6 3

If West is the dealer the auction can go (no competition)

1♦ - 2♦

4♦ - 4NT (2 key cards, no queen of diamonds)

6♦ - pass

Before reading on, you might like to think about the play (Hint - the contract is cold).

Win the opening lead in your hand, and draw trumps while eliminating hearts. Then play three rounds of spades ending in dummy. Finally play a club and cover South's card. If North wins she is endplayed.

Next month I'll wrap up this useful convention by showing how you how to incorporate King asks and inquiries about the queen of trumps.

Minor keycard Blackwood revisited

Last month I promised to write more about this ace-asking convention. The basic idea is easy: 4♣ and 4♦ are keycard asking bids in that suit inquiring about the aces and king (and sometimes queen) of trumps. The responses are:

First step: 0 or 3 keycards

Second step: 1 or 4 keycards

Third step: 2 keycards without the trump queen

Fourth step: 2 keycards with the trump queen

Where a partnership can easily come unstuck is in recognising whether or not 4♣ or 4♦ is a keycard ask. I shall suggest some basic rules but, be aware, they are merely my own proposals and you might want to vary them with your own partner. These rules apply to uncontested auctions only (for in contested auctions you are simply competing).

1. If a major suit fit has been agreed then 4♣ and 4♦ are cuebids
2. In sequences like 1♠ - 4♣ the 4♣ bid is a splinter
3. If partner has opened a gambling 3NT then 4♣ is pass or correct
4. In all other situations 4♣ or 4♦ is minor keycard; in particular these bids are never invitational.

zero high cards (surely from ♣QJT.. the lead would be the queen).

Now, counting the points in North's hand, it is certain that she has either the Q♠, or the K♦ so you shouldn't try to take finesses in both diamonds and spades. Which should you try? It may appear not to matter but it does. Take the spade finesse (playing the K♠ first) for two reasons: if it loses then trumps are 2-2 and you can safely take 2 diamond ruffs in dummy, and if it wins then you know where the K♦ is and you can probably ruff it out to establish your Q♦ as a winner.

What else? It would be nice to know which heart honour is held by North and there is a way to tell this. If you play your singleton heart towards dummy what will happen? If North holds only K♥ she will surely play it (after all you might hold A x in hearts) but if she holds only the A♥ she will duck (since either you have the K♥ or her partner has it).

After all this thought you are now ready to play from dummy! Play low and win the K♣ so that you can play a heart. Let's imagine that North plays the K♥ and continues with another club. You win and, as planned, play K♠ and then finesse in spades. The finesse wins and now 12 tricks are there. You play A♦, ruff a diamond, ruff a heart, ruff another

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Sinclair and the Curse of Scotland

Did you know that the ♦9 is known as the "Curse of Scotland"? It is not certain why it has this name but the two most popular explanations are

1. It was the playing card used by Sir John Dalrymple, the Earl of Stair, to cryptically authorise the Glencoe Massacre. Certainly there is a resemblance between the ♦9 and his coat of arms.

2. The Duke of Cumberland is supposed to have scribbled the order for "no quarter" to be given after the Battle of Culloden on a ♦9 playing card. Whatever the reason it was a crucial card when Mr Sinclair Whitlands declared 6♥ as West (see the deal opposite) after he and Miss Minnie van Driver had bid as follows:

Sinclair	Minnie
1♥	3♥
3S	4♣
5♥	6♥

(The Editor writes: the bidding was well-judged. After Minnie's limit raise the next two bids were cue bids, and Sinclair's 5♥ asked Minnie to bid 6♥ if her trump holding was good).

North led Q♣ and Sinclair contemplated a dummy that, for once in Minnie's bridge life, resembled the hand she had described in her bidding. As was his wont Sinclair gravely complimented his partner

"Expertly bid, dear lady". Minnie flushed becomingly, her heart palpitating like the heroine in a Victorian drama.

♠ A K 4	♠ T 6	♠ 5 3 2
♥ K 7 5 3 2	♥ T	♥ A Q 9 4
♦ A J T 6	♦ K 8 4 3	♦ 9 7 2
♣ 9	♣ Q J T 7 3 2	♣ A 8 6
	♠ Q J 9 8 7	
	♥ J 8 6	
	♦ Q 5	
	♣ K 5 4	

Sinclair won in dummy and immediately ran the all-important 9♦ to North's K♦. North continued with another club. Sinclair drew trumps in three rounds ending in dummy. Now he played another diamond intending to finesse but when South played Q♦ he was able to win with the A♦, discard a losing spade on the fourth diamond and ruff a diamond in dummy. Notice that this line would have failed if the 9♦ and 8♦ had been exchanged. But Sinclair knew he had been lucky and that the opponents had misdefended. Do you see what they should have done?