

Last weekend I was one of many Canberra Bridge Club members who headed to Sydney to play in the annual Spring National Open Teams. At the conclusion of the event, there is a pairs event as a kind of “consolation” for those of us who didn’t make the finals. As usual with bridge, there were many exciting hands and many exciting opportunities to shine....or to get things spectacularly wrong. My most memorable hand of the event came in round four, just after lunch on the first day. It set a new personal record as my most costly mistake ever.

The opponents were vulnerable and we weren’t and I found myself dealer with the following hand:

♠ JT8654
♥ 6
♦ AK
♣ AQT2

We open all ten counts and many nine counts when favourably vulnerable. This is a nice fourteen count and has the added advantage of the spade suit (granted not a very good one). Great. I opened One Spade, my Left Hand Opponent bid Two Hearts, William passed and my Right Hand Opponent bid Two No Trumps. It seemed to me that William didn’t have very much and that defending Two No Trumps or Three Hearts was not going to get us a very good score. I figured I’d get three or maybe four tricks and that Will will probably contribute one more at best.

Our general approach with hands like this is to double. That basically means “Partner, I have more than I’ve shown so far. I have shortage in the opponent’s suit and I have tolerance for anything you choose to bid. I don’t know what to do, but I think we should do something...”

My Left Hand Opponent passed, William bid Three Clubs and then my Right Hand Opponent and I both passed. Left Hand Opponent found another bid of Three Hearts and this was passed around to me. Now I had my next choice. Many would say I’d well and truly shown my hand already, but I’ve always been something of an optimist in the auction. Why bid a hand twice when you can bid it three times?

I expect that Right Hand Opponent has a couple of hearts (she would have raised with three) and yet they are probably going to make this and collect 140 or better. I now know that our side has a fit in clubs, so I can always go back there, but what do I think is going to happen to Three Spades? I’ll lose a heart, a few spades and potentially nothing else. Maybe a club as well, but giving them 50 is much better than letting them have a free run at their heart contract.

With this plan, I bid Three Spades and my Left Hand Opponent, obviously with a similarly optimistic view to mine, bid Four Hearts. William promptly doubled (which was a surprise! I thought he had a bad hand). This was passed out and he led the Nine of Diamonds. Here’s what I saw in dummy:

Opening Lead: Nine of Diamonds

♠ KQ93
♥ A4
♦ T86
♣ J987

♠ JT8654
♥ 6
♦ AK
♣ AQT2

I can’t really explain what happened next – my reasoning is pretty shoddy. But it was at the end of a week of bridge playing sixty boards a day, so perhaps I was just tired. Here’s how I proceeded to think about the defence:

“I’ve got 14HCPs, Dummy has 10. Declarer overcalled and then bid game on their own with only minimal encouragement from his partner. I suspect he has at least 13 HCPs. That leaves about 2 or 3 in William’s hand. He *might* have some heart tricks, but I don’t really think so. What tricks are we going to get?”

I have the Ace and King of Diamonds, we can get at most one Club trick before Declarer can ruff them and William can contribute....Not much. He *did* double, so he has something. Maybe he has the Ace of Spades? I know he doesn't have many spades or he would have raised, but if he's going to have a singleton, that would be a great one to have and I need him to contribute SOMETHING to this defence.

So my tally of potential defensive tricks is now two pretty sure tricks in diamonds, maybe one club and maybe one spade. How can we get more? By getting a diamond ruff, of course! I can cash my two diamonds and then underlead my ace of clubs to William's hoped for King of Clubs. He'll win that, give me a diamond ruff and then if we're lucky he'll also score the Ace of Spades for two off, but we'll at least beat it by one and we've doubled it. Fingers crossed!"

Having completed all that thinking, I proceeded to win the first diamond, cash the second and then underlead my Ace of Clubs.....which Declarer promptly ruffed. He then showed us his hand and claimed the rest of the tricks. Four Hearts Doubled making eleven giving a score of 990 to the bad guys.

This was the full hand:

♠ void
♥ J82
♦ J9732
♣ K6543

♠ A72
♥ KQT9753
♦ Q54
♣ void

♠ KQ93
♥ A4
♦ T86
♣ J987

♠ JT8654
♥ 6
♦ AK
♣ AQT2

Here's how the defence would have gone if William had been in both seats and didn't have to rely on me. Diamond to the King, Spade back, ruffed by North. Diamond to the Ace, Spade back ruffed again. Diamond back, ruffed by South. Spade back ruffed by North. We could take the first six tricks for three off, doubled and plus 800. That single mistake at trick two cost us 1790 points!

The lesson is pretty clear – I had all the clues needed to get this defence right. First of all, William doubled. He obviously has a weak hand and yet he was sending a very clear message that he thought they were going down. Given the overcaller bid Two, Three and then Four Hearts on his own and that Dummy has the Ace doubleton heart, it can hardly have been based on a heart holding. There also just aren't enough points left for William to have useful defensive cards. That alone should have pointed me towards a spade ruff at trick two. But his choice of the Nine of Diamonds as opening lead should have alerted me to the situation as well. We've bid Clubs and Spades and William has opted to avoid both those suits and lead the unbid suit (quite possibly Dummy's best suit, on the auction!) The Nine is clearly not from an honour, so why would he take this risk? Clearly he wants me on lead, is wary about leading a club which might get ruffed and is therefore hoping that I've got at least *one* ace for all my enthusiasm in the auction.

Winning the Diamond lead and playing a spade back is an obvious defence and thinking back it is hard to tell why I didn't do just that. In passing, in situations like this where you are about to win and give your partner a ruff, it is very important to win with the *King* on the opening lead and not the Ace. Once they have got their first Spade ruff, your partner will know you have the Ace of diamonds left (since otherwise why didn't declarer put it on your king the first time?) and so they will be able to get to your hand to collect a second ruff.

There's a further lesson in the aftermath of this disaster, this time about partnership management. William's immediate reaction to watching his carefully crafted top board get turned into a very clear bottom involved no

frowning, no scolding and no eye rolling. Just a simple, smiling “That didn’t go how I’d hoped” and we moved on to the next board. Defence is hard. When your partner begins beating themselves up for doing something stupid, resist the temptation to join in!