

Learning Points – Slim Game in a Minor

By Steve Moese (Mike Purcell, ed.)

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Bidding Level: Basic

East Deals
EW Vul
MPs

♠ A873
♥ 93
♦ K102
♣ QJ82
Mike

♠ KJ10
♥ AQJ75
♦ 85
♣ K75

N
W 6 E
S

♠ Q96542
♥ 1064
♦ Q73
♣ 4

♠
♥ K82
♦ AJ964
♣ A10963
Steve

East	South	West	North
Pass	1♦	1♥	Double ¹
2♠	3♣	3♠	3N
Pass	4♣	Pass	5♣

1= Negative Double (4♠ and 6+ HCP)

West leads the ♠J

Tuesday Evening Club Game, July 20, 2010 Mr. Mike Lipp,
Director. Cincinnati Bridge Association Bridge Center, 2860
Cooper Road, Cincinnati, OH 45241 (513) 631-8070.
My partner is Dr. Mike Ma. We play 2/1 Game Force.

Severe distribution can compensate for the lack of strength as long as there's a good fit, the strength in the combined hands is working in the long suits, and transportation between dummy and declarer's hand is fluid. 0=3=5=5 hands don't happen very often.

The Bidding

East shows good discipline by passing in 1st seat. If you would open a weak 2 on this hand please see the recent Learning Point on Opening Bid Preempts and the Rule of 2-3-4. (see http://www.cincybridge.com/Lessons/20100117_Opening_Bid_Preempts.pdf). Playing disciplined preempts, East has 1 loser too many and too poor a suit to open East's hand with a weak 2 bid.

South has a standard 1♦ opening bid (start with the higher ranking of 2 equal-length long suits). West has a standard overcall. North has invitational values and 4♠s, enough to deploy a negative

double (one of the most useful and widespread competitive bidding conventions available). East now announces a 6 card ♠ preempt, made safer because of the tolerance for ♥s, partner's suit. (Shorter than 6♠s would be risky with North showing 4 ♠s). South completes the pattern of the hand by freely bidding the 2nd suit (a free bid is a new strain mentioned where the bidder could have passed but didn't).

A free bid usually shows extra values, extra distribution (as in this case), or both. West showed the ♠ fit and North offered 3N as a possibility. Yes, North has only invitational values, but opposite a free bid 3N is a sound try. 3N promises a ♠ stopper but is vague about a ♥ stopper.

South expresses doubt about 3NT given the strong distribution and poor position of the ♥K. The ♥K is no longer likely to take a trick once East is on lead, and East will have the opening lead against 3NT. North carries on to the game knowing that North's honors are working (North holds 4 cover cards for South).

The Losing Trick Count (LTC) is a decades old technique for estimating the number of tricks your side can take once a trump fit has been found. A trump fit is presumed to be at least 8 cards. From the LTC perspective, South has 5.5 losers (0♠, 2♥, 1.5♦, 2♣) and North has 8 losers (2♠, 2♥, 2♦, 2♣). LTC presumes 24 losers between both hands when a fit has been confirmed (8 cards or longer). Thus 24-13.5 = 10.5 tricks appear available, projecting the minor suit game is at worst on a finesse.

Taken together, the North South hands show (0♠, 1.5♥, 0.5♦, 0.5♣) or 2.5 losers and should make 10.5 tricks. We need 11 for a minor suit game.

The Play

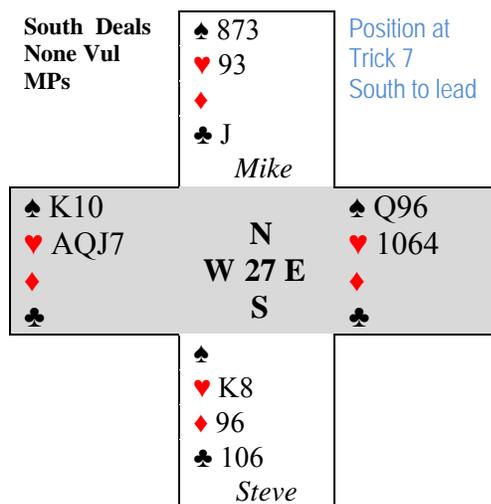
South must play to keep East off lead to avoid 2 immediate ♥ losers. The opening ♠ lead let's North win the ♠A and South discard a little ♥. The ♣Q is passed to West's ♣K and West continues a small ♣. We should appreciate West's problem after winning the ♣K. Leading either red suit likely gives up the position and might hand declarer the game on a silver platter. A passive trump return will cause declarer

to work for the contract. Tricks 4 and 5 clear the trumps with Declarer ending in hand. Declarer must bring the ♦ suit in without a loss. While there's no sure fire reason why West won't have the ♦Q, there is a simple play to improve declarer's odds of success. Declarer leads the ♦J from hand toward the ♦K102.

If West has the ♦Q, they are likely to cover. When West plays low, declarer spurns the finesse, winning the ♦K on the board. The ♦10 now finesses East and the ♦Q falls in the 3rd round of the suit. Importantly declarer can now play the 4th and 5th ♦s from hand, discarding the 2 losing ♥s from dummy →

Yes, declarer can only ruff 1 of the losing ♥s from hand with dummy's remaining trump, but that one ruff is the game-going trick.

Notice that the ♦ finesse taken through East serves an additional purpose. If wrong, the opponents cannot take more than one ♥ trick. This is an avoidance play that limits losses - if the contract fails it fails only 1 trick, not 2. Declarer benefits from finessing East. West cannot attack ♥s without establishing the ♥K as a trick for South.



Making 5 ♣s for +400 was worth 6.25 of 8 match points on this hand. 3 other pairs matched our result. Here's what the field did on this board:

Pair	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
MPs		6.25		1.19	6.25	1.19	1.19	6.25	3.44	6.25
Score		400		130	400	130	130	400	150	400

Post Mortem

High card points are more useful at the start of an auction than towards the auction's end. Remember, bidding's goal is to accurately determine how many tricks our side can take, not how many HCPs we hold. Evaluation techniques like Losing Trick Count are invaluable to help identify game opportunities.

Avoidance is not only a declarer play tactic, avoidance is also a bidding tactic. Don't choose the contract that puts the wrong opponent on lead when that will set your contract. 3N by North had no hope, while 5♣ by South was touchy but findable.

As the auction progresses, some honor cards increase and others decrease in value as we learn where the opponents have their strength. For example on this hand, the ♥K was not worth a full trick once West made the ♥ overcall. Note however by making South the Declarer, West was on lead. South played to keep the lead in West whenever the opponents gained control of the next trick, making an otherwise valueless ♥K guard losers. Then South established the ♦ suit to eliminate the ♥ losers from dummy. This scored the game-going trick. Notice also how the 2=3 split in ♦s combined with the 3=1 split in ♣s means that Declarer has to draw all West's ♣s before running the ♦s. Trying for 2 ♥ ruffs in dummy is an illusion that is justly punished

Learning Points

1. Rely on HCP for initial bids and responses, and estimate tricks once you've found a fit. The Losing Trick Count is simple, reasonably accurate, and easy to use at the table.
2. In a competitive auction (opponents are bidding) be sure to actively reevaluate your hand. Honors in opponent's suits positioned before expected strength cannot be counted at full value, and might not be working at all. These wasted honors mean your points are not working well for partner.

Keywords: Losing Trick Count, Avoidance in Bidding and Play, Free Bids in competition