

Learning Points – Avoid the Danger Hand

By Steve Moese. Edited by Mike Purcell

May 24, 2011

Declarer Play Level: Basic / Intermediate

North Deals NS Vul MPs	♠ K962 ♥ KJ62 ♦ J7 ♣ A42	Steve																
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	N																	
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♣		♣																
	♠ J107 ♥ - ♦ AQ9532 ♣ K763	Pat																

North	East	South	West
1♣	1♥	2♦	2♥
2N	Pass	3N	All Pass
West leads ♥5			

Tuesday Night Club Game, May 24, 2011 Mr. Michael Lipp, Director. Cincinnati Bridge Association Bridge Center, 2860 Cooper Road, Cincinnati, OH 45241 (513) 631-8070. Pat Dutson is my partner. We play 2/1 Game Force Hardy Style.

Sometimes optimistic bidding lands you in a thin game. No reason to panic. Keep the dangerous defender off lead and play for the cards to be where you need them.

The Bidding

Without East's 1♥ overcall, partner would have been content to bid 1♦ at the 1st turn. The overcall forced a choice between pass and a 1 round forcing 2♦ freebid. Most experts play a 2-level freebid as forcing to the next level of opener's suit. With a distributional minimum many would be content to settle in a part score.

North faces a question at the 2nd turn. West's raise to 2♥ offers a penalty possibility. However a vulnerable game will pay off more than down 3, doubled. North chose 2N to keep game hopes alive, to

compete, and to warn partner of possible wasted values in ♥s. Never one to be shy, partner accepted the invitation. While you might quibble about HCP, South has tricks to burn if ♦s come in. NT is worth more than ♦s in Match Point scoring.

The Play

The 4th best ♥ lead says West held 3 higher cards than the ♥5 (Rule of 11). ♥s are breaking 6=3 or 5=4. Declarer counts 1♥, 1♦ and 2♣ tricks. 9 tricks will be a top board – we have 22 HCP combined. The 5 extra tricks must come from ♠s and ♦s, while managing to keep a 2nd stopper in ♥s. *Think avoidance*. Avoidance means playing to a trick so that the harmless hand wins (if we don't win the trick).

West wins the ♥A and promptly returns the ♥10, hoping to retain the lead for a finesse of North's ♥ stopper. (Normally we return 4th best in partner's suit, unless we want to retain the lead). The ♥Q is likely with West, but even if not, the ♥Jx is a stopper so long as declarer keeps East on lead – West is the danger hand for this deal. West wants to

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continue ♥s. If West does, declarer's 2nd ♥ stopper vanishes. Declarer wins the ♥K and plays the ♦J (a finesse of the ♦10 might also be necessary). When East covers with the ♦K it looks like the ♦10 is there too. East is likely 3532 or 2542. Winning the ♦A, declarer returns to hand with the ♣A (too early to start on ♠s. East must hold the ♠A for the overcall, but we need ♦s established 1st). The ♦7 draws the ♦8 from East and the ♦9 wins the trick as West drops the ♥3. Two more rounds of ♦s (declarer pitching ♣&♠) end-plays East. East cashes the ♥Q and returns a ♥ to declarer's ♥J. The dummy discards 2 ♣s. A ♣ to the ♣K allows declarer to cash 2 more ♦s, forcing East to discard a ♥. 2♥s, 2♣s, and 5♦s make 9 tricks and the vulnerable game – a tie for top!

Contract	Scores		Matchpoints	
	N-S	E-W	N-S	E-W
3 NT N	600		5.50	0.50
3 NT N	600		5.50	0.50
3 ♥ x E	100		3.00	3.00
4 ♥ E	100		3.00	3.00
3 ♥ E	100		3.00	3.00
3 NT N		100	1.00	5.00
3 NT N		200	0.00	6.00

Post Mortem

This is far from a sound game. Switch major suit aces and North will struggle to come to 8 tricks. A 2-level freebid is a 1-round force, promising a rebid unless partner rebids the suit they opened (or bids NT below their opening strain). A new suit rebid by the free-bidder is then game forcing.

Negative freebids are popular. These natural non-forcing constructive bids show constructive/invitational strength and a real suit. Negative Freebids burden the negative double with all game forcing hands, and opens practitioners to **preempts by the intervenors** (← defensive tip).

Say you open 1♦ in the sequence: 1♦-1♠-Double*-3♠ to you. (* Alerted as Negative or Positive).

Playing negative freebids, partner's double does not promise ♥s if partner holds a game force.

- If partner is weaker and has 4 ♥s you might not want to be at the 4-level.
- If partner is strong and has ♥ you might not be sure what the best strain is. If you hold a ♠ stopper and 4 ♥, which do you show at this point in the auction? Remember partner could be weak with hearts or strong with anything.
- If partner has a strong hand but not ♥s, and you have ♥s but no ♠ stopper you will likely bid ♥s, bypassing 3N which might be your last chance at a plus score.

True, negative freebids gives responder many more hands to bid with. Sometimes these bids preempt your opponents by taking space out of their auction. There are real trade-offs. (Many hands suitable for negative freebids can be bid effectively by a combination of negative doubles and balancing bidding).

Every convention introduces its own complexity. Be sure you check out what else a convention changes before you decide to adopt it.

North's 2NT is forward going but does not show extras. With extras 3NT would be automatic. South might be better to bid 3♦ to clarify the meaning of the earlier freebid. Bidding 3♣ instead would overstate the value of the hand and the quality of the ♣ suit. 3N was in part an attempt to steal a game based on a long minor with the ♦K in a favorable spot. Even after a ♣ opening lead (?!!) Declarer can force a ♠ entry for the 2nd ♦ finesse. Delaying ♥s does not help the defense. When North declares, 3N can't fail.

Note that if East does not cash the ♥Q but switches to a black suit, declarer will run ♦s then finesse ♠s. East is again on lead unable to attack ♥s, but now declarer has developed ♠ tricks to make game.

Many play a jump raise in competition as weak 0-5 / 6 HCP. West's hand values to 10 Support Points in ♥s, too strong for a preemptive jump raise or a simple raise. 3♦ showing a limit raise in ♥s is better.

Learning Points

1. When in a thin or hopeless contract imagine the layout you need and play as if the cards are where you need them to be. Any chance is better than no chance.
2. Sometimes knowing the missing honor is to your right is enough to justify an aggressive bid. Be sure to congratulate partner (when your intuition is right!)
3. During the course of play, identify the danger hand. The danger hand is the hand who will attack a suit or a guard that cannot be attacked effectively from the other side. Here West was the danger hand, so North end-plays East, preserving the ♥Jx as a stopper.
4. Be sure to develop your source of tricks before testing a side suit where either opponent could hold a sure entry. Trying ♠s before completing ♦s will allow East to score 3 ♥ tricks. Try it!
5. Bidding close games will improve your declarer play. Making close games will encourage partner to be optimistic more often – a virtuous (or vicious) cycle!

Keywords: Avoid the Danger Hand, End Play, freebids in competition, thin game