

The background of the entire cover is a teal color with a pattern of faint, overlapping playing cards. Visible cards include the Ace of Diamonds, Six of Clubs, Eight of Spades, Ten of Hearts, Seven of Spades, Ten of Diamonds, and Ace of Spades.

AN HONORS EBOOK FROM MASTER POINT PRESS

IT'S A KNOCKOUT!

A Match Play Book by
Ben Norton

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Contents

- 1. Set One
 - a. Problems.....5
 - b. Comparison.....21
 - c. Scorecard.....29
- 2. Set Two
 - a. Problems.....31
 - b. Comparison.....47
 - c. Scorecard.....55
- 3. Set Three
 - a. Problems.....57
 - b. Comparison.....73
 - c. Scorecard.....81
- 4. Set Four
 - a. Problems.....83
 - b. Comparison.....99
 - c. Scorecard.....107
- 5. Set Five
 - a. Problems.....109
 - b. Comparison.....125
 - c. Scorecard.....133
- 6. Set Six
 - a. Problems.....135
 - b. Comparison.....151
 - c. Scorecard.....159
- 7. Set Seven
 - a. Problems.....161
 - b. Comparison.....177
 - c. Scorecard.....185
- 8. Set Eight
 - a. Problems.....187
 - b. Comparison.....204
 - c. Scorecard.....212

Introduction

After receiving positive feedback about my first attempt, *Why I Lose At Bridge*, from friends and colleagues in the bridge world, I've written another book. Specifically, a problem book set in a 64-board knockout teams match. I've spent many hours enjoying such works in the past, whether they be by Lawrence, Tait, Falk, or part of The Bridge World's Swiss Match segment, but the mainstay of this genre is undoubtedly Hugh Kelsey's series of four (*Test Your Match Play*, *The Tough Game*, *The Needle Match*, *Challenge Match*). I 'grew up' in a bridge sense with these books, and I've taken inspiration from Kelsey's structure. The title is also Kelsey-esque, being a reference to a line in his classic 'Adventures in Cardplay'. I'm told it's the title of an old TV show too – pure coincidence.

You will be up against your fiercest rivals, in the final of your country's most prestigious event. After attempting each problem, you can turn the page to see the solution, then there's a summary of what happened at the other table later in the chapter. You'll be scoring up with fictional but strong teammates after each set of eight boards, and will have a scorecard to compare with in order to keep a running total, if you wish. The goal is of course to win the match, but appreciating the thought process behind the solution is vastly more important than getting it right.

Rather than being a collection of my own real-life idiocies as my previous book was, unfiltered and unadulterated, these deals come from far and wide. Some I played myself (featuring more recent mistakes), some were handled by my opponents or teammates, while others I heard about on the grapevine. I have at times taken the liberty of changing a few cards around to demonstrate a point, or to make the bidding more palatable. I have also had to alter the vulnerability and dealership on occasion.

You will be seated South on each board, as per tradition, but never fear – your poor partner will not get his hands on the dummy. After a brief discussion on the bidding and, on occasion, some preliminary questions about the early play, you'll be thrown into the problem at hand.

Every pair is playing a straightforward five-card major, better minor, 15-17 1NT and 2/1 game-forcing system, with three weak twos and standard carding (fourth-highest from an honour, low from Hxx, second from bad suits, top of a doubleton, third and fifth in partner's suit). If an unexpected treatment crops up, it will be explained. You can expect your opponents to play accurately, but within human capacity. Everyone makes mistakes.

If you want to score up, you can either use the scorecards provided which detail the IMP gain or loss depending on whether you found the solution, or you can calculate it yourself. In that case, you might find this helpful:

Score difference	IMPs	Score difference	IMPs	Score difference	IMPs
0-10	0	220-260	6	600-740	12
20-40	1	270-310	7	750-890	13
50-80	2	320-360	8	900-1090	14
90-120	3	370-420	9	1100-1290	15
130-160	4	430-490	10	1300-1490	16
170-210	5	500-590	11	1500-1740	17

The full IMP table goes up to 24 IMPs, but it's rare to see a swing of more than 17 (the total for a vulnerable slam swing), particularly in this book.

In terms of notation, 4-4-3-2 refers to any shape with two four-card suits, a tripleton and a doubleton, while 4=4=3=2 means four spades, four hearts, three diamonds and two clubs. 'RHO' and 'LHO' refer to your right-hand and left-hand opponent respectively. A 'H' in such as 'H9x' stands for any honour card – the ace, king, queen or jack.

In real-life matches, the captains toss a coin to decide who has choice of opponents. While I've tried to keep the atmosphere true to life, I have dispensed with seating rights for the purpose of this book, together with the other administrative annoyances which come with private matches.

One last thing. A lot of these problems are tough, but far from impossible if you work through all the inferences available. Don't lose heart if you get them wrong. Now, off to the open room with you.

It's A Knockout!

Set One

Boards 1-8

Board 1 – Love all, dealer North

You hope to strike an early blow on the first board of the match:

♠ A95 ♥ 74 ♦ J1083 ♣ AK95

The auction starts with two passes. What is your call?

The usual bid with 4-4 in the minors is 1♦, but as this may be the opponents' hand, you'd rather suggest a lead to partner. You open 1♣ instead. West overcalls 1NT, partner passes and East transfers to hearts before jumping to 3NT, where the matter rests. The bidding has been:

West	North	East	South
	Pass	Pass	1♣
1NT	Pass	2♦	Pass
2♥	Pass	3NT	All Pass

Partner leads the ♠8 and this is what you see:

♠ 4 3
♥ A K J 10 9
♦ 7 5 4 2
♣ 10 4

♠ A 9 5
♥ 7 4
♦ J 10 8 3
♣ A K 9 5

For a start, *what do you play at trick one?*

The ♠8 cannot be fourth-highest as partner would have a sequence to lead from. It must be second-highest from the ♠10, so as there is no urgency to switch, you play low lest you make declarer's life easy when he has KQJx.

Declarer wins the ♠K, crosses to the ♥A and plays a spade to his ♠Q. Then comes the ♠7 to your ace as partner offers the ♠6 and ♠2. Over to you.

	♠ 10 8 6 2	
	♥ 8 5 3 2	
	♦ A 9 6	
	♣ 7 6	
♠ K Q J 7		♠ 4 3
♥ Q 6		♥ A K J 10 9
♦ K Q		♦ 7 5 4 2
♣ Q J 8 3 2		♣ 10 4
	♠ A 9 5	
	♥ 7 4	
	♦ J 10 8 3	
	♣ A K 9 5	

The hearts are surely running. It would be strange for declarer not to take a first-round finesse if he had a small doubleton in hand, unless he felt confident of establishing enough tricks elsewhere. In that case, you can count eight tricks for him in the majors (partner wouldn't lead the ♠8 from 862, so declarer doesn't have five spades). If West had the ♦A, your only chance would be to take four club tricks, but that's not happening. Declarer surely holds the ♣Q, or ♣Jxxx, for his 1NT overcall. Even if he has Qxx and you switch to a low club, declarer won't go wrong. He wasn't born yesterday and will see that you could have led the ♣J from the likes of AJ9x or KJ9x, to surround dummy's ten.

You need partner to hold the ♦A, but then declarer will have the rest to make up his 1NT overcall, and can easily establish a ninth trick in diamonds or clubs, right? Well, he will if you shift to a minor.

If you can't beat the hand by brute force, apply more subtle measures. Put a fly in the ointment by attacking declarer's communications with a heart return. This will cut the link with dummy, forcing declarer to run the heart suit right away and compelling a series of awkward discards from his hand. If West runs all the hearts, the last one squeezes his hand (provided you keep hold of at least one of your low clubs). If instead he takes only four rounds then works on clubs, you can set up diamonds to good effect.

Maybe this reminds you of a famous Benito Garozzo hand...

Board 2 – NS vulnerable, dealer East

Second in hand, you pick up:

♠ A5 ♥ A98 ♦ 109876 ♣ K105

Would you open the bidding? In marginal cases, it often pays to look at the quality of your primary suit, but some hands are just worth an opening even when the suit is poor, and this looks like one. All of your points are made up of ‘hard’ values – aces and kings (undervalued in the typical Milton Work point count) – and you have plenty of spot cards to boot.

You open 1♦ and the next hand overcalls 1♠. Partner chimes in with 2♣ and East bids 2♠. You issue a sporting raise to 3♣ (no backing out now!) and partner cue-bids 3♠. Your 3NT call ends the auction.

West tables the ♠J and this is what you see:

♠ Q 6 4
♥ Q 6 2
♦ Q J
♣ A J 9 7 6

♠ A 5
♥ A 9 8
♦ 10 9 8 7 6
♣ K 10 5

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

Over to you.

	♠ Q 6 4	
	♥ Q 6 2	
	♦ Q J	
	♣ A J 9 7 6	
♠ K J 10 8 3		♠ 9 7 2
♥ K 10 7 3		♥ J 5 4
♦ K 4 3		♦ A 5 2
♣ 2		♣ Q 8 4 3
	♠ A 5	
	♥ A 9 8	
	♦ 10 9 8 7 6	
	♣ K 10 5	

You don't have time to set up and cash diamonds; you'll need to bring the clubs in without loss, probably along with two tricks in each major. That means both major-suit kings will have to be onside. The matter remains of how to tackle the clubs.

The a priori odds suggest cashing the ♣K then running the ♣10 to pick up Qxxx onside while also catering for a singleton queen offside. Here, however, you've already placed West with seven points in the major suits (♠K, ♠J, ♥K), and he rates to have a diamond top too, since the honours are odds-on to be divided. That makes East a favourite to hold the ♣Q, not just to make up the point-count for his raise, but also because you are already hoping that West has a certain card in hearts, supposing length in that hand to go with a five-card spade suit. You can cater for Qxxx clubs in the East hand (four times as likely as xxxx) by running the jack on the first round.

If you were to take trick one with the ♠A and play a heart to the queen, you might be in trouble on a 4-1 club break for want of entries if the defenders stay off the spade suit. Best put the ♠Q up and lead the ♣J. A club to the ten comes next, followed by the ♣K and a heart towards the queen. With the ♥K well placed, the game is yours.

TAKE YOUR SEAT

You have reached the final of your country's most prestigious knockout teams event, but the toughest test is yet to come. You are up against the usual suspects, a top-class side with whom you have done battle on multiple occasions. Sixty-four hands are all that separate your squad from national glory.

In a format popularized by his betters before him, Norton presents a simulation of a knockout teams match. You will have teammates to compare with, allowing you to keep a running score as if you were starring at the green baize yourself.

Win or lose, you are bound to enjoy these problems, while hopefully benefiting from the thought processes behind their solutions.



BEN NORTON was afflicted with an incurable passion for bridge back in his early teens. Now 28, he plays and writes about the game for a living, and is a frequent member of the England open team. This is his second book, having published *Why I Lose At Bridge* in 2023.

