The Bridge World's

TEST YOUR PLAY

Jeff Rubens

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INTRODUCTION

Declarer play has always held a special appeal, even among those enthusiasts who find fascination in every aspect of bridge. When you are in sole control of your side's destiny, there is no partner to impinge on your decision-making (or, for that matter, to mess up your nicely laid plans). Then, too, as declarer you are under the maximum pressure to perform, for there is also no partner on whom to shunt the blame. You stand or fall by your own achievements or failures.

Having control over the dummy provides another advantage: when you are right, you are right. No unlucky lie of the cards can deprive you of the status conferred by having found the correct play, not even if an evil lie of the cards deprives you of the thrill of making the contract (or, worse, taunts you by provoking the realization that you would have come home through adopting an inferior approach — the Great Dealer will do that to you sometimes). This benefit accrues through the very frequent possibility of post-mortem analysis, in which you can abstractly justify your actions independent of the distribution of the opponents' cards. In contrast, a bidding decision that goes wrong is hard to defend after the fact. You may 'know' that you did the right thing, but...

Is your 'score' on these deals relevant? Not really. If you can understand the solutions, the exact number that you get right is unimportant. What matters is that you will have, first, faced the problems and exercised and expanded your brain trying to solve them, which will improve not only your at-the-table performance but very likely your mental health as well (yes, it's true; there is an increasing body of medical evidence supporting that conclusion); and, second, in each case you will have become familiar with a theme of card play or a line of reasoning that will expand your technical horizons and make you more alert to what to be looking for or thinking about when you play. Among the many wonderful aspects of bridge, two are that there will always be something new to learn and there will always be the possibilities of improving performance and deepening understanding. One of the best ways to enjoy this inexhaustible fascination is to challenge yourself on problems that were designed to present new and unfamiliar ideas. So take your time, enjoy, and don't bother to keep score.

Do not despair if you are interested in declarer play but, after trying a few exercises and reading the solutions, find that the problems are too difficult for you — which will be indicated not by your failure to find the best answers, but by the discussions' not matching your level of understanding. Do not discard the book; simply put it aside for later and for the moment search out an easier collection. No one ever became an expert declarer in a short period of time, and although it is good to challenge yourself, you don't want to jump ahead too fast. These are tough

problems. If you can get the right idea (even without all the supporting details) on as many as half of them, you are one of the strongest declarers in the world. Obviously, a lesser score is nothing to be ashamed of.

These problems originally appeared in *The Bridge World* magazine (for information: www.bridgeworld.com), from 1986 to 1990. Some of the solutions have been augmented. You, the reader, and I, the author, are both indebted to the thousands of keen readers who improved the problems by pointing out additions to or improvements in the original analyses. (And I do mean keen. Even small slips in this column result in an avalanche of mail, both postal and, nowadays especially, electronic. Sometimes, it's a wonder that the world's circuits aren't jammed with the excess traffic.)

Happy solving.

Jeff Rubens
Scarsdale, NY
May 2001

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TEST YOUR PLAY

PROBLEM 1

Rubber bridge
Neither vulnerable

North
♠ 5 4
♥ K Q 10
♦ K 5 2
♣ A K 8 5 4

South
♠ 7 3 2
♥ A J 7
♦ A Q 9 8 6 4
♣ 3

W	N	E	S
			1♦
1♠	2♣	2♠	pass
pass	3♠	pass	4♦
pass	5♦	all pass	

Trick 1: ♠K, ♠4, ♠10, ♠2. Trick 2: ♠A, ♠5, ♠8, ♠3. Trick 3: ♠Q, ♦5, ♠6, ♠7. Trick 4: ♦4, ♥2, ♦K, ♦3. Plan the play. To Solution

PROBLEM 2

Rubber bridge
North-South vulnerable

North
♠ 4 2
♥ A K 5
♦ J 9 7
♣ J 7 6 3 2

South
♠ A K Q 9
♥ Q 10
♦ A K Q 4
♣ A 5 4

W	N	E	S
			2♣
pass	2♦	pass	2NT
pass	4NT	pass	6NT
all pass			

West leads the ♠J. Plan the play. To Solution

PROBLEM 3

Rubber bridge
Both vulnerable

North
♠ A K
♥ A Q J 10
♦ Q J 10 9
♣ 9 5 4

South
♠ —
♥ 9 8
♦ A 4 3
♣ A K Q J 10 8 7 6

W	N	E	S
			1♣
pass	1♥	pass	3♣
pass	4NT	pass	7♣
all pass			

West leads the ♠Q. Plan the play. To Solution

PROBLEM 4

Rubber bridge
Neither vulnerable

North
♠ Q 7
♥ Q 8 2
♦ A J 9 6
♣ A K Q 2

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

W	N	E	S
			1♣
1♥	2♥	pass	2NT
pass	6♣	all pass	

West leads the ♦2.
(a) Plan the play.
(b) Plan the play at 6NT. To Solution

PROBLEM 5

Rubber bridge
North-South vulnerable

North
♠ 7 6 5
♥ 8 6 5
♦ 7 6 4
♣ A K J 3

South
♠ A Q J 8 4 2
♥ A Q J
♦ A K
♣ 8 7

W	N	E	S
			2♣
pass	2♦	pass	2♠
pass	3♠	pass	4♦
pass	5♣	pass	5♥
pass	6♣	pass	6♠
all pass			

West leads the ♣2. Plan the play. To Solution

PROBLEM 6

Rubber bridge
Both vulnerable

North
♠ 3
♥ A K
♦ K 10 8 3
♣ A K 8 6 4 3

South
♠ K 8 7 6 5 4
♥ Q
♦ A Q J 9
♣ 7 5

W	N	E	S
			1♠
pass	2♣	pass	2♦
pass	4NT	pass	5♦
pass	6♦	all pass	

Trick 1: ♠Q, ♠3, ♠A, ♠4. Trick 2: ♦2, ?. Plan the play. To Solution

PROBLEM 7

Rubber bridge
Neither vulnerable

North
♠ 3
♥ K Q 6
♦ 8 6 4 3
♣ A K 6 5 2

South
♠ Q 7
♥ A J 10 4
♦ A K 7
♣ 9 8 7 3

W	N	E	S
pass	1♣	pass	1♥
1♠	2♥	pass	4♥
all pass			

Trick 1: ♠K, ♠3, ♠2, ♠7. Trick 2: ♦Q, ♦3, ♦10, ?.
Plan the play. To Solution

PROBLEM 8

IMPs
North-South vulnerable

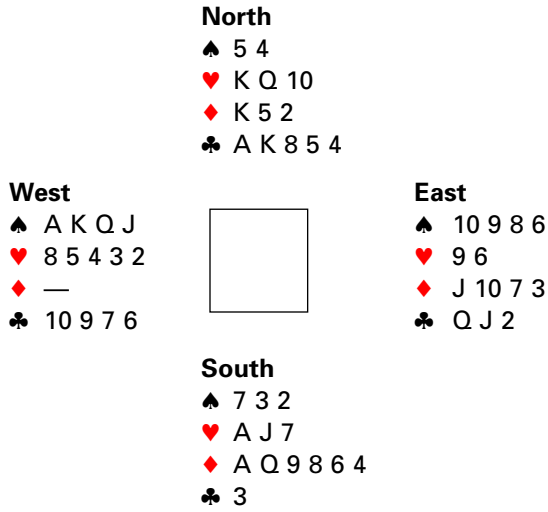
North
♠ A Q 10
♥ J 8 7
♦ K 5 3 2
♣ A 5 3

South
♠ K J 6
♥ A K 9
♦ A J 9 8 4
♣ K 6

W	N	E	S
			1♦
pass	2♦	pass	3NT
pass	4NT	pass	6♦
all pass			

West leads the ♣J. Plan the play. To Solution

SOLUTION 1

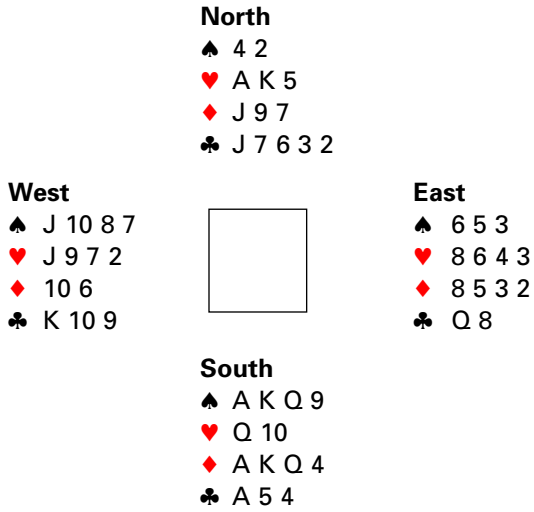


5♦ by South
Lead: ♠K

Declarer must ruff twice in his hand to reduce to trump parity with East, then wind up in dummy with a major tenace in trumps in the South hand. The entries to do this are available: you can lead a trump now to create the major tenace in diamonds; one club and two hearts can be used for the two ruffs and late re-entry. The play should go: diamond to the ten and queen; club king; club ruff; heart to dummy; club ruff; heart to dummy. If all this succeeds, declarer is home. He plays a winning club from dummy, intending to discard the ace of hearts, and end in a coup position if East does not ruff.

There are some trump reduction situations in which winners must be cashed early to avoid their being ruffed later, stranding declarer with losers in his long trump hand. This is the reverse situation. Cashing dummy's second club winner early is unnecessary (because declarer will end up with a side-suit winner in the ace of hearts) and fails in the distribution shown in the diagram because East discards his second heart on the fourth round of clubs. To see the difference, replay the contract with ace-king-third of hearts in dummy opposite three small in declarer's hand. To Problem

SOLUTION 2



6NT by South
Lead: ♠J

This solution may raise more questions than it settles, but some situations are like that. With problems existing in only the black suits, things seem simple enough, but... First of all, declarer must choose between two basic approaches: an endplay against West, and a black-suit squeeze. This in itself is a difficult decision.

We like the squeeze possibility because it will (usually) lead to success when West has led from jack-ten-third of spades; to us, jack-ten-fourth is a less comfortable lead against the given auction. Assuming declarer prefers to look for the squeeze, what declarer would like to do is lose a club trick early; later on he will cash the ace of clubs, run diamonds, and then cash the hearts (to end in dummy); finally, if the jack of clubs is not high, try to run spades. This will succeed if declarer is lucky in spades, and finds the ten dropping early, or if he is very lucky in clubs, or if he squeezes West in the black suits. For the squeeze to work, West must be long in clubs and the club trick must be lost to West, because if East gets the lead in clubs he can return a spade to destroy the squeeze position.

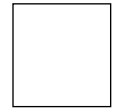
Assuming West has, say, three clubs, what is the best way to lose a club trick to West? Low towards dummy works against East's holding ten-nine, ten-eight or nine-eight. Low from dummy works against East's holding king-eight, queen-eight, nine-eight, and also against a sleepy East holding ten-eight. Low from dummy also allows South to preserve the chance that East was dealt singleton king or queen. However, there are some little traps along the way. Suppose East plays an honor on the lead

from dummy. In theory, declarer should win the ace and lead to dummy's jack, to preserve all his chances. However, East might fool declarer by playing an honor from king-queen-ten or the like, inducing declarer to go down by playing on clubs when the spades were dropping all along. What is declarer supposed to do about that? We don't rightly know. But we suspect that the best way to start the play is to win the spade, play a diamond to the jack (you need to use dummy's heart entry last to work the squeeze), play a low club, and cross any further bridges when you come to them. To Problem

SOLUTION 3

North
♠ A K
♥ A Q J 10
♦ Q J 10 9
♣ 9 5 4

West
♠ Q J 9 8 6
♥ K 7 4 2
♦ K 2
♣ 3 2



East
♠ 10 7 5 4 3 2
♥ 6 5 3
♦ 8 7 6 5
♣ —

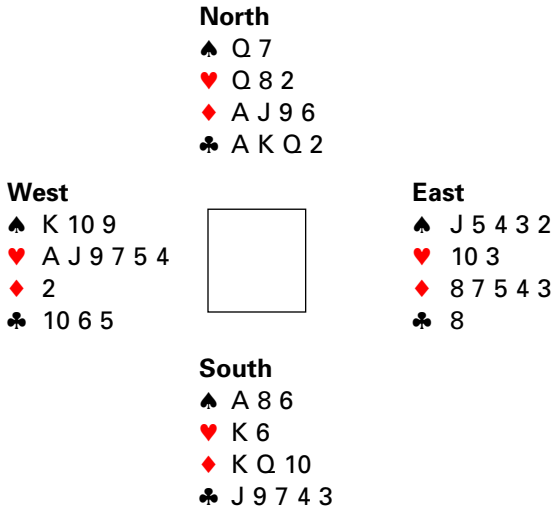
South
♠ —
♥ 9 8
♦ A 4 3
♣ A K Q J 10 8 7 6

7♣ by South
Lead: ♠Q

Declarer can maneuver to ruff a card in one red suit or the other, trying to drop a king-doubleton of that suit, then fall back on a finesse in the other red suit. To ruff a heart, declarer wins two spades in dummy, pitching hearts, ruffs a heart high, draws trumps ending in dummy, cashes the ace of hearts, and, if dummy's hearts are not good, finesses in diamonds. To ruff a diamond, declarer pitches a diamond at Trick 1, draws trumps from the South hand, unblocks the ace of diamonds, enters dummy with the club nine, pitches his remaining diamond on dummy's second high spade, and ruffs a diamond. If dummy's diamonds are not good, South falls back on a heart finesse.

Which plan is better? The plan in which declarer ruffs a diamond is more likely to succeed because the king is more likely to drop doubleton in the red suit where the opponents have fewer cards. To Problem

SOLUTION 4



6♣ by South
Lead: ♦2

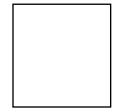
A. Declarer should play on the presumption that West has the heart ace and spade king for his overcall. He should win the opening lead and draw trumps. Assuming trumps are not 4-0, declarer should win the third trump in the South hand, to lead the six of hearts. If West goes up with his ace, it's all over. If the heart queen wins, declarer can finish the diamonds to pitch the king of hearts, and later ruff a spade in dummy. If either opponent is void of trumps, the simplest thing for declarer to do is draw trumps and continue as in part B.

B. In notrump, you have to do a bit more work. Well, that's only fair if you expect to get the top score (at matchpoints, perhaps). After winning the opening lead, declarer should lead his six of hearts at once. West may get panicky (especially at matchpoints) and take his ace immediately, which would end the problem. If West lets the heart queen win in dummy, South should run the minors. Then, if West has kept the king of spades protected, he can be thrown in with his ace of hearts; alternatively, if West blanks the spade king, declarer can drop it. South has to guess West's distribution — that's the extra work. To Problem

SOLUTION 5

North
♠ 7 6 5
♥ 8 6 5
♦ 7 6 4
♣ A K J 3

West
♠ K 10 9
♥ 4 2
♦ J 8 5 3 2
♣ 10 6 2



East
♠ 3
♥ K 10 9 7 3
♦ Q 10 9
♣ Q 9 5 4

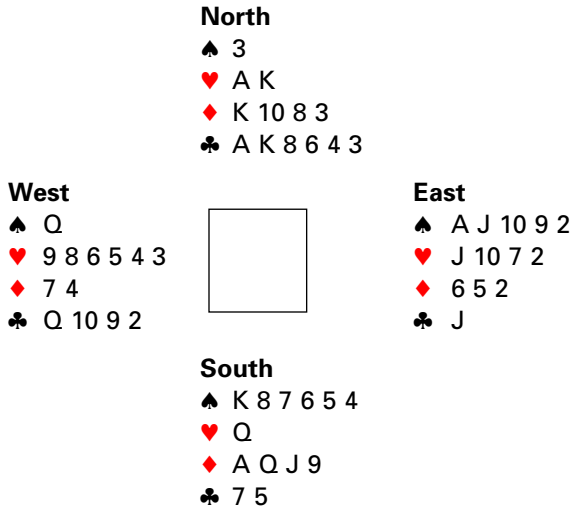
South
♠ A Q J 8 4 2
♥ A Q J
♦ A K
♣ 8 7

6♠ by South
Lead: ♣2

South's problem is how best to use his two club entries to dummy. The simplest and best plan is to take two heart finesses. Declarer wins Trick 1 in dummy, and finesses in hearts. If the finesse wins, he plays ace, queen of spades; later, he uses dummy's remaining club honor to repeat the heart finesse. This approach has several advantages over taking a trump finesse. First, the heart finesse, if successful, will almost certainly land the contract; the spade finesse, if successful, still has to overcome the peril of a singleton club in one hand or the other — West's lead need not be honest. Second, speaking of being honest, it will be very difficult for West to fool declarer by holding up his heart king at Trick 2 (when East has, say, king-doubleton of spades).

West cannot be sure declarer has a second heart finesse available when South leads a heart to his queen. In contrast, West would be fairly safe (considering the bidding) to hold up his spade king, from three to the king, if declarer took a trump finesse. This might mislead declarer into repeating the trump finesse instead of catching the doubleton king of hearts in the East hand. Finally, even if one assumes no deception by West, the extra chance of East's holding the heart king singleton or doubleton is small compared to his chance of holding the short king of spades if declarer does his finessing in hearts. To Problem

SOLUTION 6



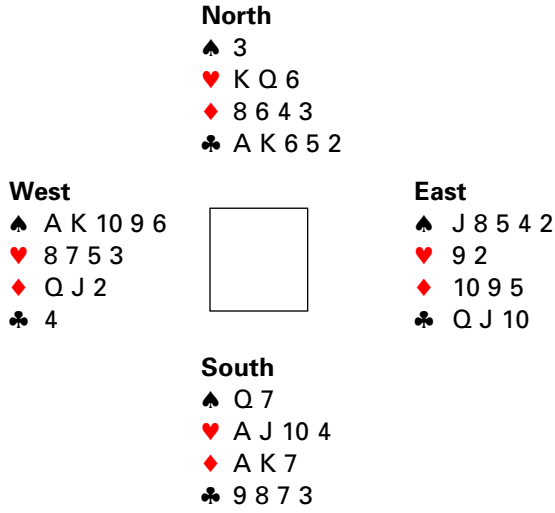
6♦ by South
Lead: ♠Q

One possible plan is to try to establish spades: diamond nine, spade ruff, diamond to the jack, spade ruff, heart and a heart ruff, last trump. This will succeed if spades are 3-3 or 4-2 and trumps are splitting well. That plan can be improved upon by cashing (or trying to cash — the opening lead is a bit suspicious, considering the auction) the spade king early. If spades break, declarer learns about it in time to save himself a ruffing entry back to the closed hand; he can survive if trumps are 4-1. A cross-ruff might work, but it depends on getting the king of spades through, and on an even club break (needed to allow declarer to cash all his side-suit winners).

If clubs are going to break (and as long as diamonds are not five-zero), declarer might as well win the trump and play three rounds of clubs, hoping to avoid the risk of playing the king of spades. However, if declarer decides to stake his fortunes on the club suit, he can improve his chances further. The best play is to win the diamond queen, and, if West follows, lead a club to the ace, cash the two top hearts throwing a club, then ruff a club with the diamond ace. If clubs break 3-2, declarer can draw trumps from dummy and claim. If clubs turn out to be 4-1, declarer can continue with the diamond nine to dummy's ten, another club ruff, a spade ruff, and the last trump, succeeding if diamonds break. Essentially, this line allows a make if either minor suit splits 3-2.

To Problem

SOLUTION 7

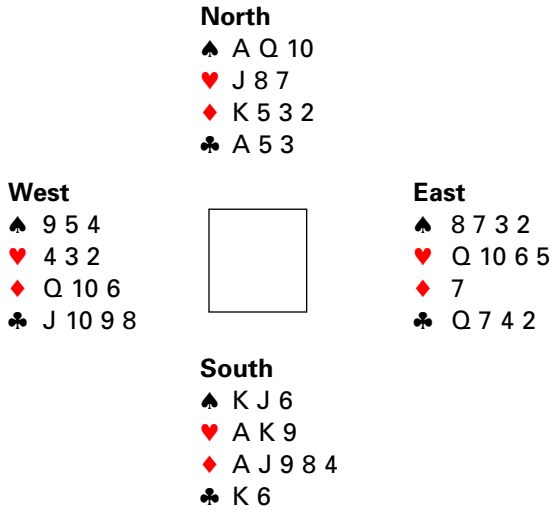


4♥ by South
Lead: ♠K

Extreme splits that might affect declarer's choice of play, such as a 5-1 break in either red suit, are strongly contra-indicated by the line of defense, and by East-West's relative inactivity during the auction. Thus, it is fairly safe for declarer to concentrate on guarding against common distributions. He cannot afford to draw trumps before clubs are cleared, lest a 4-2 heart split leave him without trump control. But he also cannot afford to crash out the ace-king of clubs lest the second honor be ruffed; the defense would have time to expose declarer's diamond loser before clubs are established.

Leading towards the second club honor is an improvement, but the entry position is awkward and, anyway, it may be East who ruffs. Declarer can guard against most situations by planning to lose a club trick early. He should lead a high spot (to start unblocking the suit) and lose the trick. (If West covers, declarer can win and return a low club, again unblocking from the closed hand.) In order for this play to fail, an opponent must have a red-suit singleton, or there must be a 4-0 club break. To Problem

SOLUTION 8



6♦ by South
Lead: ♣J

The main question is whether declarer should take the safety play to avoid losing two trump tricks in the event of a 4-0 trump break. Unfortunately, losing only one trump trick is of limited utility to declarer if he cannot endplay the opponents with that one trump trick, because he will still be an underdog in the heart suit. In contrast, declarer will never be worse than about 50-50 if he can force the opponents to lead hearts. Therefore, South should give up on the possibility that West has queen-ten-seven-six of diamonds in exchange for the chance of picking up trumps with no losers when East has all four.

With that in mind, and in view of the fact that the diamond four is declarer's only possible late entry to dummy if his attempted endplay fails, the play should go: club king; diamond eight to dummy's king (if West shows out, declarer plays to pick up trumps); diamond deuce to the ace (if the queen has fallen, declarer draws trumps); club ace; club ruff with the nine; spades (if it is East who has a trump trick, declarer interposes a lead to his heart ace); if no one ruffs, the diamond three and jack to throw in the defender with the diamond queen. If East wins and leads a heart, declarer has little choice but to play East for the heart queen. However, if it is West who is thrown in, declarer takes his best guess on West's heart exit. If that does not work out well, declarer wins and gets to dummy by leading the four of diamonds to the five, in order to take a heart finesse. This succeeds when East was dealt both heart honors (and in a few other unlikely cases, including defensive error). To Problem

ADVANCED

A workout for the mind!

North America's oldest and most prestigious bridge magazine, *The Bridge World*, features a monthly column entitled 'Test Your Play', which presents difficult problems in declarer play for readers to solve. In this book, *The Bridge World* editor Jeff Rubens has collected some of his favorite hands from this column, and presents them as a compendium for those who like a serious intellectual challenge. These are tough problems. If you can get the right idea (even without all the supporting details) on as many as half of them, you are one of the strongest declarers in the world. Obviously, a lesser score is nothing to be ashamed of.

JEFF RUBENS, a mathematician by training, was a college professor for over thirty years; but he has been a bridge writer and editor for more than forty. He co-founded and edited ***The Bridge Journal*** and has been editing ***The Bridge World*** since 1967. A highly successful player, Jeff won national championships during the sixties and seventies, and represented the United States in the 1973 Bermuda Bowl. He gave up tournament bridge in 1975 to spend more time with his family but has continued to be a prolific author of books and articles about the game.

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