

Mark Horton

LAST BOARD

EVERYTHING DEPENDS ON IT



An Honors eBook from Master Point Press

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Foreword

Towards the end of the swinging sixties, I read a compilation of chess stories entitled *The Treasury of Chess Lore* by Fred Reinfeld. It contained a story about an aging chess player written by Ron Klinger entitled *The Old Master*. It describes how, near the end of his battle for the World Championship, he wins a brilliant final game.

Some years later, I came across a bridge story entitled *Last Board*, also written by Ron Klinger, which recounts how the Old Master wins a Bermuda Bowl.

Ever since then I have been itching to write a book about some of the countless dramatic final deals that have ended bridge events.

Mark Horton
Sutton Benger
September 2017

Acknowledgements

Many people assisted me in my efforts to track down missing information. Those stone turners were Richard Fleet, Richard Granville, Phil Bailey, Maureen Hiron, Eitan Levy, Paul Linxwiler, Tracy Yarboro, Barry Capal and the incomparable Wolff Klewe. The legendary Eric Kokish made many helpful suggestions.

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Introduction

Here is the masterpiece that was the inspiration behind this work:

Last Board

The Bridgerama commentator's voice boomed across the audience. Bermuda Bowl as good as over . . . three boards left . . . Challengers 33 IMPs down . . . even the Old Master's magic can't help now.

The Old Master looked down at his cards, though their pasteboard patterns were indelibly etched in his mind. Three boards. He glanced across at his partner. Zettner's brow was furrowed too. Despite some good pick-ups in this last session, they must still be at least 30 or more IMPs down. The champions, Frawley-Kinston, were silent – they knew the title was once again theirs.

Five years they had held the world crown, and the sixth was merely minutes away. Fifty-six IMPs up – 16 boards to play. No team in the Bowl could recover that ground. Even counting some sure losses, they had to be well ahead.

As the Old Master waited for the next hand, the old question rose once more. Could this be the one, the perfect hand, the work of art? What was the perfect hand? Was Culbertson right? Was it nothing more than success stemming from opponents' errors? What was beauty in bridge anyway? Was it nine top tricks in 3NT? Though he couldn't pin it down, he felt that there had to be something more, some intangible combination of power in the cards.

Suddenly, he felt very tired, recalling the dilemma in which he constantly found himself in his 40 years' playing. Percentages or elegance? Play to win or play for perfection? Before him rose the shades of games and tournaments

lost because he could never quite resolve which he wanted. He remembered the hand that had cost him the Olympiad because he played for the squeeze rather than the finesse.

Frawley's pass woke him from his reverie. The dream of the perfect hand faded. His partner opened 1♦ and Kinston interposed 2♥, a weak bid based on long hearts. The Old Master looked at his hand: ♠J764 ♥— ♦9 ♣AKQJ9764

A straightforward 3♣? 4♣ to emphasize their solidity? The scientists would know – they would get to the cold grand slam or avoid the unmakeable small slam, but their tortuous approach repelled him – too often it pointed the way to astute defenders. Neither side was vulnerable.

“6♣.”

He smiled wryly, imagining what the commentators would be saying. A leap into the unknown. It could be disastrous, but it was no time to be dainty: The likely heart lead might give him time to work on the diamonds.

Frawley looked up quickly, paused slightly, and passed. Zettner passed and Kinston doubled. Lightner. A diamond lead. A bad sign. All passed, and the two of diamonds was led.

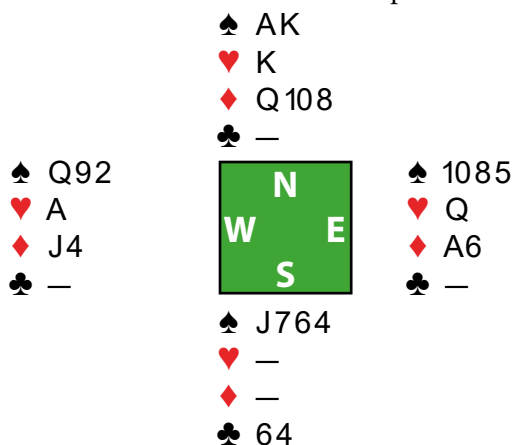
	♠ AK3										
	♥ KJ85										
	♦ Q10875										
	♣ 8										
♠ Q92	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block; text-align: center;"> <table style="border-collapse: collapse; margin: 0;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table> </div>		N		W		E		S		♠ 1085
	N										
W		E									
	S										
♥ A62		♥ Q109743									
♦ J432		♦ AK6									
♣ 1053		♣ 2									
	♠ J764										
	♥ —										
	♦ 9										
	♣ AKQJ9764										

The Old Master called for a low diamond and the king of diamonds won. In the Closed Room, North-South reached 3NT and made 10 tricks, the commentator told the audience. If 6♣ is made, the challengers will gain

12 IMPs, but unless East makes the fatal ace of diamonds continuation, South will have to lose a spade ultimately. I predict East will exit with the two of clubs.

East thought for some time, then the trump appeared. The Old Master won and drew two more rounds of trumps, discarding two hearts from dummy. East discarded the seven-four of hearts. The Old Master stopped to think. East began with the ace-king of diamonds. Not the ace of hearts – that would be too strong for a weak jump-interpose. Six hearts headed by the queen. Kinston was strict about suit quality. With seven, he would have bid 3♥, without the queen the suit would have been too poor. Probably he was 3-6-3-1 with 9 points. That must be all, for the queen of spades would also make the hand too strong for a “weak” 2♥. So West held the queen of spades, ace of hearts and the jack of diamonds. That might be just too much to manage.

Suddenly, the Old Master was no longer tired. As he pieced the play together, conviction refreshed him. He played three more rounds of clubs, pitching a spade, a diamond, and the jack of hearts. West threw a diamond and two hearts; East discarded hearts. This was the position:



The Old Master played another club and watched West writhe. If West discarded a spade the ace-king would drop the queen, while a diamond discard would allow the jack to be pinned. West studied for a long time and finally ditched the ace of hearts. But the hand was an open book. A spade to dummy, and the king of hearts put West in the vice again. He threw the four of diamonds; the Old Master reached across and touched the queen

of diamonds, murmuring softly, “The pin is mightier than the sword.” As East covered and West dropped the jack, the hand was over.

A triple squeeze . . . brilliancy . . . Old Master still has spark of genius ... 10 years since he played internationally . . . included in Challengers team as sentimental gesture . . . long career . . . now proved back at best . . . assured of second in world . . . 12 IMPs to Challengers . . . not enough to stave off defeat...

In the Open Room, Frawley growled bitterly at Kinston.

“A spade return at trick two beats it. Takes out his entry prematurely.”

“Sure. And I also knew South didn't have jack-nine-fourth in spades, didn't I?”

The Old Master looked at them sorrowfully. Why was there always so much rancour at the top? He looked as Frawley sat, tight-lipped, stubborn – Frawley, contemptuous of opponents and partners alike – acknowledged as the world's best, yet unable to brook losing a game or a match.

These thoughts were brushed aside as the Old Master picked up the cards. Second-last hand. At least they had made a fight of it. They were vulnerable against not. His partner, dealer, passed. So did Kinston. He looked at

♠A ♥AK62 ♦KJ1092 ♣K43

and opened 1♦.

Frawley cleared his throat. “3♠.”

Pass from Zettner, pass from Kinston, what now? “4♥.”

“4♠.”

The Old Master looked at Frawley curiously. A bead of perspiration rested on Frawley's brow. Was he shaken, that fine bridge mind, the leading theorist in the world? Frawley, who had expounded, “pre-empt what you are worth,” breaking his own tenets? 3♠, then 4♠. Why not 4♠ at once? The Old Master noticed a slight tremble in Frawley's left hand.

Zettner, patting his hair nervously, tugging at a loose strand, pondered, then bid 5♥. Kinston's double was loud and crisp, and everyone passed. Frawley pulled out the king of spades, and dummy came down:

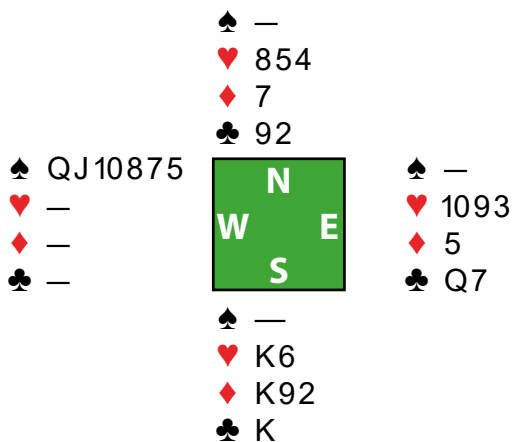
	♠ 63	
	♥ J854	
	♦ AQ7	
	♣ J1092	
♠ KQJ108752	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;"> N </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;"> W S E </div>	♠ 94
♥ 7		♥ Q1093
♦ 86		♦ 543
♣ 85		♣ AQ76
	♠ A	
	♥ AK62	
	♦ KJ1092	
	♣ K43	

Closed Room . . . four spades doubled . . . two down . . . plus 300 to Champions . . . headed for big swing . . . South must lose two hearts and a club at least . . . five diamonds a chance . . . five hearts hopeless . . . bad split. . .

The Old Master surveyed the two hands. East would obviously have four trumps at least, maybe five. Prospects were not good. Winning the ace of spades, he played the jack of diamonds. Frawley played the eight of diamonds as a matter of doubleton reflex, then pulled his hand away as if burnt. The Old Master suddenly saw a glimmer of hope as dummy's seven of diamonds became a third entry. Could West have a key singleton in trumps?

Dummy's ace of diamonds won, and the jack of hearts was played. The Old Master felt his heart pounding . . . was there a chance after all? If East held Q1097 of hearts, all was lost. The queen topped the jack, the Old Master played his ace and looked at Frawley's card. The seven of hearts.

The first hurdle was over. Would the other cards behave also? The Old Master moved into the strange world of bridge intuition. Lines of play ran through his mind, the cards swirled into patterns, disappeared, regrouped, blended into a position six tricks away. The Old Master, satisfied with his plan, played the ten of diamonds to the queen and called for dummy's jack of clubs. Kinston played low. So did the others. Another club from dummy. This time Kinston took his ace and forced South with a spade return. The Old Master ruffed with the two of hearts and reviewed the situation:



No, there was no flaw. It had to be right. He played the king of clubs and crossed to dummy's seven of diamonds with his well-preserved deuce. The Old Master carefully picked over the end position he had seen before. There was no escape.

A small trump was played from dummy. East sat there thinking. He would have to split the ten-nine, thought the Old Master; if not, I win with the six of hearts, cash the king of hearts, and play a diamond, discarding my losing club from dummy.

Kinston thought interminably; finally, the nine of hearts. Declarer played the king of hearts, and then, luxuriously, treasuring the touch, the Old Master played a diamond and put the eight of hearts on from dummy.

Brilliant timing and end-play, the 'Rama commentator shrieked shrilly. If East overruffs and plays a club, South ruffs in hand and ruffs the last diamond in dummy. If East overruffs and plays a trump, South wins and his hand is high. And if East discards his club, dummy's club promotes South's six of trumps en passant...

In the Open Room, the Old Master wondered what was happening. Had the commentators seen the position as he had? Was there any chance of snatching victory from the jaws of defeat? The last two hands had to be gains, but how close was the fight? He could not hear the commentator.

. . . Plus 850 to Challengers ... 11 IMPs . . . exciting finish . . . Champions still 10 IMPs up . . . additional drama . . . youth versus age ... fantastic finale ...

The audience hushed as the lights on the Bridgerama board flickered, then lit up the last hand.

♠ 10854	♠ AQ7	♠ K9						
♥ J753	♥ AK106	♥ 982						
♦ 7	♦ 86	♦ K942						
♣ 10972	♣ AKJ4	♣ Q653						
	<div style="border: 2px solid green; padding: 5px; display: inline-block; text-align: center;"> <table style="border-collapse: collapse; margin: 0;"> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">W</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">N</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">E</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 10px;"></td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">S</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;"></td></tr> </table> </div>	W	N	E		S		
W	N	E						
	S							
	♠ J632							
	♥ Q4							
	♦ AQJ1053							
	♣ 8							

The commentator broke into an excited jabber. Closed Room . . . Champions overboard . . . reached Seven No-trump . . . trying to duplicate probable gamble in Open Room . . . two down . . . Challengers have chance . . . must stay out of slam . . . game gives them 11 IMPs and victory . . . slam doomed . . . bad diamond break . . . spade finesse loses ...

In the Open Room, the silence was almost unbearable. The Old Master knew what the others were thinking. Last board. How small was the margin? Was there a chance or was the match already over? The audience already knew, but the players had to gauge the results for themselves. He looked at his hand. Six diamonds and four spades. The opposition was vulnerable, they were not. He was second to speak. The age-old question arose, to pre-empt or not to pre-empt? The “authorities” all said not to pre-empt with a side four-card major, also that a second-hand pre-empt was less desirable since one opponent had already passed. He made up his mind. The thought of the perfect hand casually flitted across his mind. He dismissed it as Kinston passed quickly.

“3♦.”

Pass from Frawley, nervously. Zettner sat for an eternity. The Old Master knew he must be thinking about slam chances, and was pleased his diamond suit was respectable. Pre-empts at favourable vulnerability can often be filthy.

As the minutes toiled on, the audience became restless.

Three No-trump . . . why doesn't he bid Three No-trump? . . . how can he think of a slam with nothing in diamonds? ... Five Diamonds is all right too ...

“6♦.”

The audience groaned.

Three passes followed quickly. Frawley sat for some time considering his lead, then the ten of clubs hit the table. The Old Master surveyed the dummy and his own hand.

The slam was reasonable. Had they reached it in the other room? If he didn't lose a diamond trick, the slam was home. With a diamond loser, he still had chances – the jack of hearts might fall in three rounds, the spade finesse was there, and the queen of clubs might appear. He looked at the lead. The ten of clubs. Had Frawley led away from the queen? Would the club finesse work at trick one? Not a tempting lead against a small slam. The Old Master played the king of clubs and took the diamond finesse. The queen of diamonds held. He played the four of hearts to the king and played another diamond to the jack. Frawley showed out.

If he makes the slam, Challengers win by 4 IMPs . . . if he goes down, Champions have lucky escape ...

The Old Master searched his mind. It was merely a matter of taking all the chances in the right order. One of them would probably succeed. But the quest for perfection tortured him. Painfully, he scanned dummy again. Once more he searched the position, wondering why he was hesitating, why he did not continue.

Suddenly he saw it, and everything else faded except the patterns of force generated by the cards as they glided into their predestined place. Again the testing of each play, racked by the error of his original analysis, soothed by what he could see unfolding before him. Finally, he played the ace of diamonds, discarding dummy's low spade. Then the queen of hearts, dropping dummy's six on it.

♠ AQ
♥ A 10
♦ —
♣ AJ4

♠ J632
♥ —
♦ 1053
♣ —

The Old Master considered the final position cherishingly. The aces . . . the master cards . . . one in each suit in dummy . . . each supported by a different lower honour, side by side . . . each tenace agape waiting for East to yield up the twelfth trick . . . each suit having a finesse available in it ... but the only finesse taken successfully turning out not to gain a trick . . . the suits blending together, in harmony and unison, to succeed no matter where the enemy cards lay.

The victory was his. He had but to take it. With trembling fingers he took the ten of diamonds, putting East on lead, softly asked for dummy's four of clubs, and whispered gently to the opposition a single word.

“Checkmate.”

Preface

In bridge, as in all competitive endeavours, winning the most important events represents the pinnacle of achievement; the final moments of these majors so often create a unique psychological dynamic; spectators know they are not just watching a contest, but something historic; the players know that success or failure in these tournaments will contribute to defining their legacy.

Although these events do not always involve prize money, they matter for an intangible reason: they are implicitly accepted as the ultimate tests, which create the emotional stakes that to which even the coolest competitors are exposed.

Did Scott Hoch ever get over missing from two feet to lose the 1989 Masters playoff against Sir Nick Faldo?

When, more than 20 years after the event Doug Sanders was asked if he ever reflected on missing a 20-inch put on the last green to lose the British Open in 1970 his laconic reply was 'Only every five minutes.'

Losing a bridge event is bad enough, but to do it in a major on the last board can be psychologically debilitating; although it is undeniably illogical to ignore all the other deals on which points were surrendered, it is undeniable that too often those results somehow magically pale into insignificance and the loser cannot shake the memory of those last fateful moments.

Most of the deals you will find in this book report took place at the end of major championships and will be etched in the memories of the players and their supporters forever. How often do you think Lorenzo Lauria, whose mental toughness is undeniable, thinks about the seven of spades on the last board of the 2003 Bermuda Bowl? A reasonable estimate would be 'every five minutes!'

1957 Golden Opportunity

The Gold Cup is the most prestigious Open Teams event in the United Kingdom and is organised by Bridge Great Britain. It is knock-out throughout; prior to the semi-finals all matches are played privately. At one point, it regularly attracted more than 600 teams. The original trophy, still awarded today, was presented by Bridge Magazine to the first winners in 1932. At the time it cost 100 guineas (around £5350 today). When Joe Amsbury dropped it in 1979 it cost more than £1000 to have the dent removed.

In 1957 the entry was much smaller: you only had to win three matches to reach the quarter-finals and that was the prize on offer when Ewart Kempson's squad (Graham Mathieson, Geoffrey Fell, Eric Harvey, Joseph Hochwald and Douglas Smerdon) took on Rixi Markus, Kath Richard, Joan Durran and Marjorie Whitaker in a second round match. This team had already sprung a surprise by defeating Messrs Flint, Priday, Swinnerton-Dyer, Beale, North & Triefus in Round 1.

As the match drew to a close, Kempson trailed by 18 points (IMPs had not yet been created). He attributed some of the deficit to his making a present of a game to Rixi and the decision of two of his teammates to attempt 4♥ with a trump suit of ♥KQ opposite ♥753.

With four deals to go, a good grand slam recovered 7 points and when the last board arrived the margin was down to 3.

Dealer East. N/S Vul.

♠ KQ10653	♠ J72	♠ A94
♥ KQ	♥ 1054	♥ A86
♦ 83	♦ Q107654	♦ KJ92
♣ Q96	♣ 8	♣ A103
	<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 40px; height: 40px; margin: 0 auto; display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: center; justify-content: center;"> <div style="width: 100%; height: 100%; background-color: #4CAF50; color: white; display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: center; justify-content: center;"> N W E S </div> </div>	
	♠ 8	
	♥ J9732	
	♦ A	
	♣ KJ7542	

In the Open Room E/W quickly reached 4♠; North led the eight of clubs. Declarer went up with dummy's ace, played a spade to the king, unblocked the hearts, drew trumps ending in dummy, pitched a diamond on the ace of hearts and played a club towards the queen for eleven tricks.

Closed Room

West	North	East	South
<i>Kempson</i>	<i>Durran</i>	<i>Mathieson</i>	<i>Whitaker</i>
–	–	1NT	2♣
Double	2♦	Double	2♥
Pass	Pass	Double	Pass
3NT	All Pass		

Declarer took ten tricks, but there was no swing.


As Kempson pointed out, all he had to do was pass his partner's double of two hearts and lead the king of hearts; after cashing two tricks in the suit West switches to a low spade and East wins and plays a third heart followed by a spade, which ensures five down.

It was not all doom and gloom, for as Kempson noted in those days reaching the quarter-finals required the payment of an additional entry fee and at least he had avoided that.

1962 Over the Border

In the final of the 1962-63 Scottish Cup, Albert Benjamin's team (Louis Mitchell, Sam Leckie & Victor Goldberg) faced George Jesner, John Maclaren, Sol & Harry Barnett over 100 deals; by the time the last of them hit the table Benjamin trailed by 4 IMPs.

Dealer West. Both Vul.

	♠ J95		
	♥ AQ752		
	♦ K6		
	♣ J54		
♠ AK32 ♥ 96 ♦ QJ1073 ♣ A8		♠ 106 ♥ K43 ♦ 852 ♣ Q7632	
	♠ Q874		
	♥ J108		
	♦ A94		
	♣ K109		

West	North	East	South
<i>Mitchell</i>	<i>Jesner</i>	<i>Benjamin</i>	<i>Maclaren</i>
1♦	Pass	1NT	Pass
2♦	All Pass		

When Jesner, according to Benjamin, ‘the most courageous bidder between Camlachie and Auchenshuggle’ declined to overcall E/W had stolen the part-score.

Reporting the deal in Bridge Magazine, Benjamin, who possessed an impish sense of humour, wrote ‘I held the East hand and adopted a confident air and moved my lips as if I were counting a multitude of points. My strategy worked.’ As you will have guessed, his tongue was firmly in his cheek.

North led the five of spades and declarer played three rounds of the suit, ruffing, followed by a club to the ace and a fourth spade, which resulted in nine tricks, +110.

To defeat 2♦ North has to find the difficult lead of the king of diamonds, so the defenders can play three rounds of the suit, preventing a spade ruff.

West	North	East	South
<i>Barnett</i>	<i>Leckie</i>	<i>Barnett</i>	<i>Goldberg</i>
1♦	1♥	Pass	2♥
All Pass			

There was no way to defeat 2♥, and when East started with a trump declarer could play three rounds of the suit after which the favourable situations in the black suits resulted in nine tricks, +140 and 6 IMPs to Benjamin.

It did not take the losers long to get over their defeat – the following season it was they who lifted the trophy aloft.

1966 The UnDutchables

The UnDutchables is a term originally coined by Colin White and Laurie Boucke, who wrote a book with the same title in which they subject the Dutch to an irreverent and unmerciful scrutiny. It has been a best-seller in the Netherlands since 1990 and is updated every 2-4 years. The book overlooks one of many areas in which the Dutch excel – the hosting of major bridge events.

In 1966, the World Bridge Federation staged the second World Olympiad Pairs in Amsterdam.

On the last day, Italy's Benito Garozzo and Federico Mayer scored well on the first eight deals to lead the 36 pair final by the slender margin of 25 matchpoints, but with 34 points available for a top, eight boards later the USA's James Jacoby and Dr. John Fisher had taken the lead, just three points ahead of the Italians. With only four deals to go, the lead was up to four points, but the Italians and the Netherlands' Hans Kreijns and Bob Slavenburg were in hot pursuit. A good result for the Americans extended their lead to 17 points, but the Italians effectively fell out of range when they doubled their opponents into game. A tremendous result on the penultimate board meant that with a single deal to go the Dutchmen were five ahead.

Dealer West. N/S Vul.

♠ Q4	♠ 963	♠ AJ2
♥ J109	♥ 765	♥ Q832
♦ QJ108532	♦ A7	♦ K4
♣ 9	♣ KJ652	♣ AQ107
	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block; text-align: center;"> N W E S </div>	
	♠ K10875	
	♥ AK4	
	♦ 96	
	♣ 843	

West	North	East	South
<i>Garozzo</i>	<i>Desrousseaux</i>	<i>Mayer</i>	<i>Theron</i>
3♦	Pass	3NT	Pass
4♦	Pass	4♠	All Pass

On this layout 3NT is bound to fail after a spade lead (and South can afford to lead a top heart and then switch to a spade) so Garozzo did remarkably well to bid 4♦ (although it is hard to imagine his motivation) which can be made unless North finds a spade lead. However, Mayer fell from grace by bidding 4♠ (which he intended as a slam try); when Garozzo, who assumed he was being offered an alternative to 5♦, passed 4♠ the Italians were out of the running.

West	North	East	South
<i>Parianté</i>	<i>Jacoby</i>	<i>Roudinesco</i>	<i>Fisher</i>
3♦	Pass	3NT	Pass
4♦	All Pass		

Here too West surprisingly took inspiration from the biblical proverb, ‘the wicked flee when no man pursueth’ and ran from the no-trump game. North led a spade and declarer had to lose four tricks, giving N/S 27 of the 34 matchpoints available.

West	North	East	South
<i>Fjellström</i>	<i>Slavenburg</i>	<i>Rehlin</i>	<i>Kreijns</i>
Pass	Pass	1NT	Pass
2♣*	Double	2♥	Pass
3♦	Pass	3♠	Pass
5♦	All Pass		

One must not forget that bidding was not quite so sophisticated back in 1966. The Swedish pair lost their way and when North found the spade lead the Dutchmen were +100. The 30 matchpoints they recorded left them eight ahead of the Americans.

Elsewhere B.J. Becker and Dorothy Hayden doubled Denmark's Axel Voigt and Johannes Hulgaard in 3NT and +300 proved to be a complete top for the Americans, enough for them to deprive the Italians of the bronze medals.

TRIUMPH & TRAGEDY AGONY & ECSTASY

Over 100 years of bridge history, it is not surprising that one can find many matches and events that came down to the last board, or even the last card, played. And of course, there is an added poignancy in these situations that derives from the fact that bridge is a unique sport in one aspect — the players do not know the score. In this book, the author has collected dozens of fascinating deals, each of which is that last board — the one that decided a world title or represented an individual triumph or tragedy.



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