

A Respectful Suit Combination

by
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As a defender, it's easy to get paranoid. There are so many ways to mess things up, even with a seemingly simple suit combination. Here's one I survived, even though I got it "wrong".

Try it along with me. Playing IMPS, I as West held ♠ J62 ♥ 875 ♦ K75 ♣ QJ64. The bidding was brief. South opened a 15-17 point 1NT, and North raised to 3NT. For the problem to be meaningful, you'll have to put up with my opening lead of the eight of hearts.

The lead didn't look so good when dummy appeared. Don't these guys know Stayman?

- ♠ Q85
- ♥ KJ106
- ♦ 1086
- ♣ K85

Partner covered the ten with the queen, and declarer scooped up the ace, cashed the heart nine and then played a third heart to dummy. I had the feeling I might have done better. Next came the diamond ten. Partner played the nine, and I let the ten hold. Another diamond followed, to partner's deuce and declarer's jack. What now?

It was pretty obvious to win this trick and shift back to a black suit. Surely we had to beat the hand now or never. Since partner needed a lot less in clubs than in spades to produce a set, I shifted to the club queen. That held the trick. It looked like I had guessed successfully. The next problem, the theme of this note, concerns the proper club combination.

I reasoned that declarer could have the doubleton ten, so I needed to spear that card by leading the jack. The worry was that I might thereby

block the suit if partner had been dealt A10x. I tried to think about how partner's club spot might resolve my dilemma, but soon realised that no certainty was available through that route.

The proper resolution calls for empathy. Let's look at the problem from declarer's perspective. South should assume that a great player like me would always shift to a club, and would always lead an honour because the defence is kaput if a low club is won by East. The important case is when I have been dealt AQxx. Declarer cannot surrender the 50% chance that I have the club ace in favour of any less likely combination involving guessing. So South's proper play is to rise with the king no matter which club I play next. Therefore the correct continuation is a low one, which compared to the jack shows a profit whenever East has three clubs. Sometimes its hard to keep in mind the crucial fact that declarer can't see the defenders hands.

As it happened, I could not have blown the defence no matter which card I tried. No wonder they get on me for slow play, finding problems where none exist.

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| ♠ Q85 | |
| ♥ KJ106 | |
| ♦ 1086 | |
| ♣ K85 | |
| ♠ J62 | ♠ K943 |
| ♥ 875 | ♥ Q32 |
| ♦ K75 | ♦ 92 |
| ♣ QJ64 | ♣ A1032 |
| ♠ A107 | |
| ♥ A94 | |
| ♦ AQJ43 | |
| ♣ 97 | |