

Tricks, Shticks

by David Weiss

The late Sonny Moyses used the sneering phrase 'Points, Schmoints' to decry what he saw as a slavish approach to hand evaluation. I, on the other hand, have always wondered how players can employ trick count as a basis for bidding. I never know how many tricks I have until dummy appears; even then my estimate is often tinged with uncertainty.

Consider this powerhouse dealt in the 1996 World Championship:

North

♠ AKQJ103

♥ AKJ107

♦ 104

♣ -

As you decide upon your third-seat opening bid, how many losers would you anticipate? Partner does not have a hopeless hand, but it turns out to be worthless to you:

South

♠ 84

♥ 82

♦ Q63

♣ KQ10872

Sadly, 4♠ goes down; you could not make it even if you were shown the opponents' cards:

West

♠ 75

♥ Q96543

♦ K2

♣ 964



East

♠ 962

♥ -

♦ AJ9875

♣ AJ53

Not to worry, though. 4♠-1 gains 14 IMPs, as your counterparts went four light in 6♠^x (in a World Championship!!)

In a more practical vein, let us turn to a hand that arose in a recent Swiss teams match. I held - no, wait, let me give you partner's hand and pose it as a problem. You hold:

North

♠ A763

♥ -

♦ KJ52

♣ KJ964

With both sides vulnerable, partner opens 4♣, showing solid hearts and nine tricks.

(Some folks play this call to show a 'good' suit rather than a solid one, but your kindly correspondent is making your task easier with a more rigid definition.)

What is your move?

It seems to me that this problem is insoluble. If opener has:

♠ x

♥ AKQJxxxx

♦ Ax

♣ xx

you should play 6♥, claiming on the lead of a minor. On a blind auction, your slam chances are reasonable even if partner has a doubleton spade and a (small) minor suit singleton. But if partner has the hand that was actually dealt, namely:

South

♠ 42

♥ AKQ1095432

♦ -

♣ 53

the four-level is as high as you would like to be.

The moral is that all tricks are not created equal. The combining power of the ace gives it a different value than the ninth trump, even though each takes one trick. The bidding theorist must distinguish the two types of nine-trick hands.

At the table, this deal generated a surprisingly large swing. I bravely opened 4♥, reserving my 4♣ openings for hands with a solid suit and an outside ace or king. I managed to secure ten tricks, one fewer than my counterpart. But he had learned that a nine-trick hand calls for a 2♣ opener, and eventually careened to 7♥ (in a Los Angeles sectional!!).