

The ward was buzzing and the inmates were nodding. Another team of outside experts had accepted my invitation. The Valley Vultures, a tough group indeed, came soaring in. The visitors took a small lead on the first deal, and it was my fault.

North/South Game. Dealer South.

♠ 964
♥ 94
♦ KQ75
♣ J853

♠ 53
♥ K8753
♦ 643
♣ A72

N
W
E
S

West	North	East	South
—	—	—	1♠
Pass	2♠	Pass	4♠
All Pass			

For our side, Rick, as West, led a low heart. Andrew won it with the ace and returned the heart ten. Declarer played the heart deuce on the first trick and the jack on the second. Now Rick thought for a while. Commenting on VuGraph, I remarked that East could well have the diamond ace, the club king, or a doubleton heart, any of which might suffice to beat the contract. Rick found a play I had shown him in several versions. He cashed the club ace! When Andrew followed with the four and declarer the queen, Rick had the information he had sought. He reverted to hearts, and Andrew ruffed for down one, the full hand being:

♠ 964
♥ 94
♦ KQ75
♣ J853

♠ 53
♥ K8753
♦ 643
♣ A72

N
W
E
S

♠ 1072
♥ A10
♦ J82
♣ K10964

♠ AKQJ8
♥ QJ62
♦ A109
♣ Q

Andrew, too, had been required to make a thoughtful play. He produced the club four without an unethical hesitation.

My boys had made me proud, but the Vultures were even better. The opening lead and return were the same, but Ann played a third heart immediately, for down two. I raised an eyebrow at this lucky defence but their captain enlightened me. Ann knew, he said slowly, that Richard must have a doubleton heart and a trump higher than the nine. "Otherwise," he intoned, "a club return would have been marked."

My defensive bulwarks missed a chance after an unusual auction:

Game All. Dealer North.

♠ 874
♥ Q
♦ AQ92
♣ AKQ76

♠ AJ1093
♥ K862
♦ 1065
♣ 10

N
W
E
S

West	North	East	South
—	2NT*	Pass	3♣
Pass	Pass	3♥	Pass
4♥	5♣	Dble	All Pass

* both minors, opening bid

At the other table, the Vulture East/West pair scored up a routine game. But here, North took a bizarre unilateral save. Would my guys punish him for it? Rick led a heart to Andrew's ace, and the spade queen was returned. When that held, Andrew played the spade king next. Rick rose to the occasion (literally!) and then cashed the spade jack, on which Andrew pitched the heart three. After some thought, Rick found a brilliancy. He played a fourth spade, offering a ruff-and-discard in order to promote partner's J-x-x of trumps. Unfortunately, this brilliancy allowed South to throw his diamond loser and escape for -500, the full hand being:

♠ 874
♥ Q
♦ AQ92
♣ AKQ76

♠ AJ1093
♥ K862
♦ 1065
♣ 10

N
W
E
S

♠ KQ
♥ AJ973
♦ KJ43
♣ 83

♠ 652
♥ 1054
♦ 87
♣ J9542

I tried not to let it show, but this effort really disappointed me. I had drilled incessantly on the dangers of offering ruff-and-discards, and I thought Rick had simply miscounted the spade suit. Probing gently during the interval, I found Rick genuinely puzzled. "I didn't miscount, Dr Weiss, but why didn't Andrew play a high diamond if he had the king? I thought he had more hearts and no diamond king, and so our only chance was a trump promotion."

This reasoning satisfied me, and I was ready to chalk up the IMPs lost to the bad luck of East's not having a diamond spot which would allow a forthright signal. Andrew made a good point though, "If I had wanted a fourth spade played, Rick, I would have pitched a useless heart honour. Remember when the doc taught us suit-preference?"

The biggest adverse swing came from an expected source, the superior declarer technique of our expert opponents. Both Souths reached six spades after North had opened one diamond, and both received a small club lead:

♠ J64
♥ AK
♦ AQ762
♣ AJ4

N
W
E
S

♠ AK973
♥ 1085
♦ 104
♣ K106

The Valley Vultures visit the Slow Lane

For our side, Marshall analysed the hand swiftly. He basically needed either the spade queen to drop or the diamond finesse to succeed. The club ten won the first trick and the second round of spades felled East's queen. After drawing the last trump, Marshall returned to the club king and took a diamond finesse. It lost, and the contract failed. Why it failed can be seen if we examine the slight, but so significant, improvement afforded by Vulture Jill's line.

Jill won the club jack and replicated Marshall's successful negotiation of the trump suit. Then she cashed the diamond ace before returning to the club king. The diamond ten was led toward the queen, but when West showed out, Jill was able to pass the ten. She had paid attention to the diamond spots. The contract would make easily on 3-3 or 4-2 breaks, or whenever West had the king, but what about 5-1 splits? Jill's play picked up West's actual singleton eight, but would also have served against singleton jack or nine, as well as against a singleton king in East's hand. The full hand was:

♠ 1052	♠ J64	♠ Q8
♥ J9732	♥ AK	♥ Q64
♦ 8	♦ AQ762	♦ KJ953
♣ Q985	♣ AJ4	♣ 732
	W	E
	N	S
	♠ AK973	
	♥ 1085	
	♦ 104	
	♣ K106	

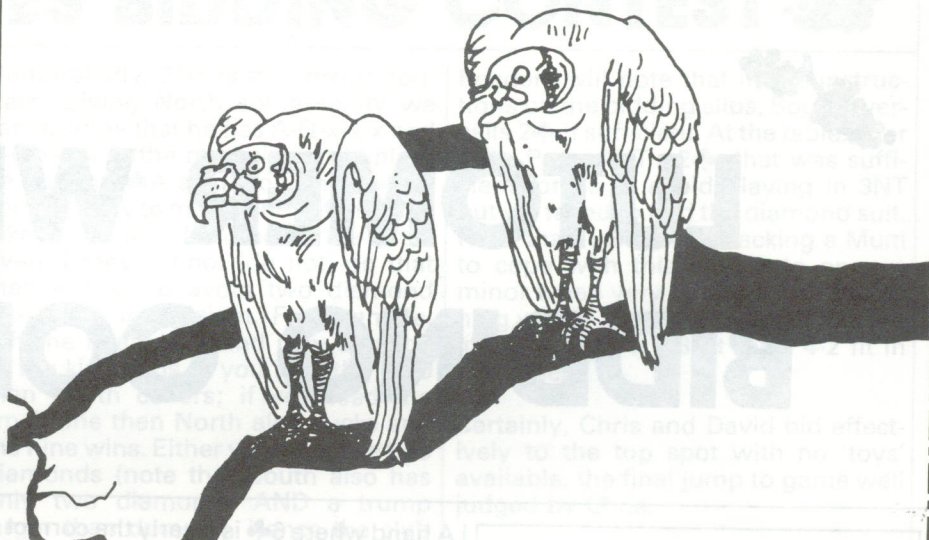
We struck back in the second half with a slam swing of our own:

East/West Game. Dealer North.

♠ QJ		
♥ AJ9		
♦ K105		
♣ KQ754		
W	N	E
S		
♠ A10		
♥ K864		
♦ AQ7		
♣ A1093		

South	North
—	1NT
2♣	2♦
3♣	3♥
3♠	5♣
5♦	6♣

Both Norths opened one no-trump, and the Vulture South bounced to six no-trumps when North denied



holding four hearts. Six no-trumps was a fine contract, but it failed on a spade lead when declarer elected to finesse in both majors.

Rick got to six clubs from the South seat, so a spade lead would have allowed him to claim. Unfortunately, the Vulture led a diamond. When both defenders followed to the first trump, I made a prediction to the VuGraph audience. I thought Rick would draw trumps, strip diamonds, and play ace and another spade. This would bring the contract home whenever East has the spade king, and if West had it his obligatory heart return would yield the contract unless East had both queen and ten of that suit. The Vulture's captain, having observed Rick throughout the match, thought he might choose quite a different line. After drawing trumps, South might lead a heart to the jack. If that were to lose and a spade come through, declarer must choose between the spade finesse and the heart ten dropping cum major-suit squeeze.

Seeing all four hands, we knew that none of these lines would work. West had the spade king, and East Q-10-x-x of hearts. But Rick showed us that the contract was 100% if one has studied the Slow Lane Guide to Suit Combinations. He drew trumps, stripped diamonds, and played the ace of hearts followed by the jack. We commentators sheepishly had to admit that no lie of the cards could resist this strange-looking finesse.

Despite this triumph for our side, the Vultures were flying high. Only a slam swing on the last board could save us. But luck gave us a chance, because there was a slam in the cards. Unfortunately, it looked pretty routine, and Marshall, as North, claimed very early. At the other table, though, South was the declarer.

Love All. Dealer North.

♠ AKQJ10542	
♥ AJ	
♦ —	
♣ K94	
N	E
W	S
♠ 9	
♥ Q1082	
♦ AK972	
♣ 875	

West	North	East	South
—	1♣(i)	Pass	1♠(ii)
2♣	3♠	Pass	4♦
Pass	4♥	Pass	5♠
Pass	6♠	All Pass	

- (i) Strong
- (ii) 3 controls

A trump was led, and Ed won in hand. He decided to pitch clubs on the high diamonds and take the heart finesse, which failed. Down one! We won!

The Vultures' captain was berating Ed as they left. "Why didn't you pitch a club and a heart, and then lead to the club king? Surely West is more likely to have the club ace than the heart king."

Ed's answer made sense to me. "I was afraid he'd win the ace and give his partner a ruff. It was a guess."

But it wasn't. The captain explained it to me later, as we discussed a rematch. Ed couldn't lose IMPs by leading towards the club, although he might fail to win them. If East had a singleton club, he would have led it against North's slam, and the contract would fail instantly. The system got the hand played from the strange side. In isolation Ed might have had a guess, but in the context of a match about to be won, he found the only way to lose