

Roasting a Chestnut

David J. Weiss

Playing IMPs, you are on defence after a routine auction of 1NT (15-17)-P-3NT -All pass. Partner leads an ambiguous heart 10, covered by dummy's jack, and you see:

NORTH

♠KQ5
♥KJ6
♦87
♣QJ986

EAST

♠AJ42
♥A52
♦1096
♣752

Experienced players have seen this position before. Counting dummy's points makes it apparent that the only chance is for partner's three or four HCP to include a club trick, so there is no point in returning partner's lead. Instead, hope that partner has the spade ten in addition to the hypothesized club card. It's now or never. A low spade return yields the three tricks needed to set the contract.

NORTH

♠KQ5
♥KJ6
♦87
♣QJ986

WEST

♠1073
♥10972
♦5432
♣K3

EAST

♠AJ42
♥A52
♦1096
♣752

SOUTH

♠986
♥Q83
♦AKQJ
♣A104

But what if the spade layout is less favourable? Suppose we trade the spade nine and ten. For the remainder of our discussion, I'll show only the spade suit.

NORTH

	♠KQ5	
WEST		EAST
♠973		♠AJ42
	SOUTH	
	♠1086	

Now our plan doesn't work, because South can put up *his* ten and quash our strategy.

However, putting up the ten is not guaranteed to be successful. Suppose we make another swap, this time giving West the spade jack. Now the layout in the critical suit is:

	NORTH	
	♠KQ5	
WEST		EAST
♠J73		♠A942
	SOUTH	
	♠1086	

In this case, South survives only by inserting the eight when the spade deuce is returned.

When the distribution of the suit is largely unknown, as is the case with the present brief auction, other considerations arise. For example, if West has only three spades, defensive blockage can be a problem.

	NORTH	
	♠KQ5	
WEST		EAST
♠J98		♠A742
	SOUTH	
	♠1063	

Even though the defenders have South outspotted, the suit is not certain to yield three tricks. But of course, East should return a spade from any four-card holding headed by the ace, because partner might be clever enough to also have been dealt four spades.

A declarer who holds three spades has other issues to consider as well. For example, the defence's spades might be divided 2-5.

	NORTH	
	♠KQ5	
WEST		EAST

♠J7

♠A9432

SOUTH

♠1086

After misguessing by popping the ten, South gets home by ducking West's jack. Omniscient defenders could capitalize on the propensity to duck if the distribution were:

NORTH

♠KQ5

WEST

♠AJ42

EAST

♠973

SOUTH

♠1086

but East is not likely to divine the position when holding nothing in spades, and so will forego the devastating low spade return in favor of a mundane heart. With three to the ace, though, pressure is possible:

NORTH

♠KQ5

WEST

♠J942

EAST

♠A73

SOUTH

♠1086

What can we conclude from roasting this old chestnut (other than the claim that card-play has been all worked out is premature)? When the distribution is unknown, East should return the suit when holding anywhere from three to six spades headed by the ace, so long as the possibility of avoiding blockage exists in the most favorable case.

South's best move on the return is likely to be playing the highest card, on the grounds that the shift will be more clearcut to East the stronger his holding. If West can cover South's card, declarer should let that defender hold the trick. It seems to me too difficult to judge when blocking the suit is the best tactic. Ducking is likely to cost only when West holds the length and East has found an inspired defence.