

North

S—3

H—J95

D—85

C—AJ107653

South

S—J9

H—A72

D—AK104

C—K984

East

S—AQ876

H—K63

D—QJ72

C—2

West

S—KI0542

H—Q1084

D—963

C—Q

E-W vulnerable, match points

South

INT (15-17)

Pass

West

Pass

Pass

North

3NT

East

Pass

(15-17)

TRICK 1: S4, 3, Q, 9.

TRICK 2: S7, J, K, H5.

TRICK 3: H4, 9, K, A.

Declarer had ten "top" tricks, and the defenders had words. Who gets the charge?

Steve Evans: "West is 90% at fault. Playing declarer to have AJ98 of spades and to have ducked the first round is somewhat incomprehensible. That, however, is what West was playing for. His switch to a heart also figured to cost a trick more than half the time. East gets a little blame because fooling his partner by leading the 6 back (original 5th best rather than 4th) would have made sure his idiot partner wouldn't screw up."

Marshall Miles: "East and West should share the blame equally since both made very bad plays. East's play of the queen of spades only makes sense when he has AQx and thinks his partner has Jxxxx with no entry. In order to set the hand (from East's point of view), either the spades must run or South must have a club guess (Kxx, Qxx, AKxx, Kxx). In neither case will it help to play the queen of spades rather than the ace, and nothing can go wrong if East wins the ace and returns the seven.

When the queen won the first trick and South dropped the nine, East could still recover by playing the ace. Instead, he defended in such a way as to cause confusion.

Despite East's plays, West should have continued spades. Apparently he played his partner for Q76 of spades, leaving South with AJ98. With that spade holding—especially with no heart stopper—South wouldn't duck the first spade trick. And if South had AJ98 of spades and a heart stopper, he would easily have nine tricks unless his clubs were two or three small.

After the first spade trick, both defenders should realize that declarer had no spade stopper. He would win if he could and start running the clubs."

I think Marshall is completely wrong, and mild-mannered Steve didn't go far enough. Not only is East blameless, but he made two exceptionally good plays.

The first key play was the spade queen. East was not being fancy—his play was necessary to avoid giving West a losing option. If East were to win the ace and return a spot card (say, the seven), might not West duck declarer's jack? After all, that would be a necessary play if declarer held QJ98, while East held A76 and a key outside card such as the club king.

East's second key play, returning a low spade rather than the ace, was also well-judged. If his partner held only four spades, with the cards switched slightly so that West's holding was KJ54 (leaving declarer with 1092), it would be natural for West to play small under East's ace. This blockage was prevented by East's having retained his ace.

As to Steve's minor point that West would have more been more likely to get it right if the spade six rather than the seven had been returned, I am unconvinced. A West who would play declarer to have ducked with AJ98 would be just as likely to play declarer for AJ987. Probably it simply did not occur to West that his partner could (correctly) play the queen from a long suit headed by the ace and queen. But Steve's suggestion is technically viable, and returning fifth best could surely do no harm.