



AN HONORS eBook FROM MASTER POINT PRESS

Nick Smith

Sublime Declarer Play

After the
Contested Auction

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Introduction

Nick, bridge player, disheartened, holding clubs (5)

The Times Cryptic Crossword Book 21 (puzzle 58)

Well, we'd all rather hold spades, wouldn't we?

You and your partner reach an optimistic slam. You can see two possible lines to make your contract:

- (a) A simple finesse (a 50% chance)
- (b) A dummy reversal, backwash squeeze and endplay (a 49% chance).

Which should you go for? If your answer is (a), this is not the book for you. Stick to your chartered accountancy exams and your collection of ceramic hedgehogs. Bridge is a game of glory or it is nothing. One great deception to bring home a no-play game is worth ten dull contracts that make through routine technique.

Against the odds: one of the many beauties of bridge is that it is never a game of pure maths. If we hold an 8-card trump-fit, the textbooks tell us we will run into a 5-0 break 3.9% of the time. This is rarely helpful. The 'true' odds depend on the auction. If someone holds a void in your suit, they must have at least one 5-card suit of their own and there is every likelihood they will have found a bid at some point. That, in turn, will be affected by the opportunities they had to bid at a low level, which player dealt, the vulnerability and so on.

Therefore, if it has been an uncontested auction, the odds on a 5-0 trump break are considerably lower than 3.9%. If, on the other hand, one opponent has (e.g.) made an 'unusual' 2NT overcall, showing 5-5 in the minors, the odds on a trump void are vastly increased. In either case, there is no escape from an intuitive judgement of probability. There are plenty of international players who, for exactly this reason, have never troubled to learn the tables of odds.

We learn to distinguish between the theoretically possible and the practically probable. In theory, your right-hand opponent could have any 13 of the 25 missing cards after the opening lead, however she has bid. She could have all thirteen spades and yet have passed throughout or chosen to open 1NT. The laws of the game do not prohibit such choices. But to have any chance of success, we are obliged to make assumptions based on every bid and pass that our opponents have contributed to the auction.

Perhaps they have opened 1NT, showing a balanced hand with 12-14 points. If they held a 3-2-4-4 shape and 13 points, we are entirely confident that is the bid they would make. But what about a 3-2-6-2 11-count? Perhaps they would open 1NT, perhaps 1♦. Maybe they have a rule to cover this, maybe it is a matter of suit quality or simply of whim.

For any given call made by an opponent, there is a practical spectrum of HCP (high-card points) held, determined by the *a priori* distributional odds (4-4-3-2 being the most likely possible shape and 13-0-0-0 the least likely) and the vagaries of your opponents' system. Your opponent has opened 1NT (12-14) – how likely is it that she will have each of the possible point-counts? Experience leads us to guess at these figures:

| | |
|------------|------|
| 10 points: | 0.1% |
| 11 points: | 10% |
| 12 points: | 26% |
| 13 points: | 38% |
| 14 points: | 21% |
| 15 points: | 4.8% |
| 16 points: | 0.1% |

This is a bell-shaped curve, of sorts. With quite a wide range of 13-counts, your opponent will open 1NT, even if the distribution is slightly non-standard. With 12 points, say, she may judge that the hand is only 'worth' 11 points and not worth opening at all. But it will be 12 points more often than it is 14 points. There are two main reasons for this. One is that the closer you get to the mean of 10 HCP, the more likely your holding. The second, more subjective, reason is that most players are inclined to

upgrade with the slightest justification, while downgrading is rather less common. 11 points is at least twice as likely as 15 points in practice.

Similar calculations may be made about the likelihood of different possible distributions. A good player keeps that spectrum of possibilities in mind (for all their opponents' calls) and tries to conceive a strategy, as declarer or defender, which works against the more likely of those possibilities. For instance, if your opponent has opened a 12-14 1NT, you will prefer a line of play which places her with a 3-2-4-4 13-count ahead of one that relies on (say) a 2-3-2-6 15-count, even though both remain very much possible in theory.

This book is an attempt to distil the wisdom garnered from 52 years of tournament-playing experience. There is one deal for each year I have been playing the game, one for each card in the pack. The basic challenge does not change – how to think clearly and logically while under considerable pressure.

Such clarity always seems much more attainable when you are dummy, squirming in your seat as partner butchers yet another contract. But as soon as it is your own turn to play the cards, a fog descends and you are barely capable of watching the cards that are played, never mind composing a coherent plan. How can you *think* better when you need to?

I find that it helps to divide the challenge into a number of separate phases and give each the attention it deserves. Every deal in this book is considered according to the following sequence:

1. First impressions
2. Inferences from the auction
3. A basic strategy
4. The first tricks
5. Whole hand visualisation
6. Execution in the end-game
7. Post-mortem

How do these phases impact on our thinking processes?

First impressions: the moment when dummy goes down on the table is one of huge excitement and disruption. How does what we see tally with

what we were expecting? Are we in the best contract? Have our opponents found the best lead? So many thoughts assail us and yet we are expected to keep a poker face and thank our partner politely.

I find it is best to convey one's gratitude before one understands the full horror of the contract that has been reached. I remember reaching 5♦ at the beginning of a Spring Fours match. I thanked partner profusely as soon as dummy went down. I then saw that there were three top losers but the defenders failed to cash them and I wound up with 11 tricks. My left-hand opponent, a well-known international, summoned the Tournament Director and claimed that I had not played fair. Apparently, I should have conveyed a sense of disappointment that a 'hopeless' contract had been reached. As it was, she assumed it was just a matter of playing for overtricks. The TD quickly dismissed her request for a ruling.

Thank your partner *before* you know what sort of mess you are in, allow yourself a few moments to ask some existential questions and then get down to the serious business of wondering how you are going to make this contract.

Inferences from the auction: too many players treat the two phases of bridge, the auction and the play, as separate events. Or they fail to take the time to interpret the auction fully. It is amazing what you can learn from your opponents' bids and passes. In every deal in this book, interpreting the auction is critical to your chances of success. Declarer's challenge is to get as close as possible to double-dummy bridge, if not at trick one then as early as possible in the play, using the clues from the auction and the defenders' initial play-choices.

A basic strategy: having assimilated all the information available to you, you try to devise a strategy that will see you through the first few tricks. Often the priorities are obvious – draw trumps, set up tricks in your long suit, take ruffs in the short-trump hand, or whatever. At other times, the priorities are far from obvious. A common mistake is to be over-active, committing yourself to a particular line of attack. Often the key is to oblige the defenders to make the first irrevocable decision, turning attack to defence, as it were.

The first tricks: having formulated a basic strategy or set of rough priorities, we must commit to playing some actual cards, ready to adapt

our plan in the light of fresh information or defensive choices. The first cards that the defenders play are likely to be the most informative, as they try to balance the needs of conveying information to one another and of making declarer's task as hard as possible. You will need not just to remember the cards played but also to evaluate the quality of distributional information that is reaching you. How does it tally with what you have learnt from the auction? Is our basic strategy working successfully or do we need a re-think?

Whole hand visualisation: if it's not possible at the outset, there generally comes a moment in any deal when it is valuable for declarer to visualise the entire hand, based on the auction and the play to the first few tricks. It is almost always worth taking the time to contemplate this layout and work out how to exploit it fully.

Execution in the end-game: sometimes the last few tricks play themselves but there are plenty of occasions, even after the full layout has been successfully visualised, when there are still critical choices to be made. The later it is, the fewer the excuses for a wrong turning!

Post-mortem: this is not, strictly speaking, an aspect of successful declarer play, but our natural instinct is to evaluate each of the deals we play and work out where we could have done better. This should generally be after the session is over rather than when we ought to be concentrating on the next deal!

East and West are traditionally described as 'the defence' or 'defenders', as if they were parking the bus in the penalty area at Anfield's Kop end. Textbooks refer to 'active' and 'passive' defence – rightly so, because there are key decisions to be made, both in selecting an opening lead and at other stages in the play. It is, perhaps, the single biggest card-playing skill that distinguishes experts from ordinary players – they judge when to 'defend' and when to attack.

It is curious that the same terminology is rarely applied to declarer play, although similar considerations apply. We are conditioned to think of declarer as the one who is proactively trying to make things happen, set up suits, engineer ruffs, whatever. But on many knife-edge deals, where both sides have weaponry across all four suits, where suits are 'frozen',

etc, this assumption is misplaced. Many of the deals in this book are cat-and-mouse affairs, with both sides focusing on 'defence', keen not to blink first, anxious not to give away unnecessary tricks. In football, it is sometimes said that the first line of attack is defence and we will see that it is often true in bridge too.

A few notes on the bidding and on pronouns: this is *not* a book about the niceties of bidding. On many of the featured deals, a sub-optimal contract is reached. On quite a few, it is unjustifiably optimistic. But that does not have any effect on the obligation to play the contract to best advantage.

South, as convention demands, is declarer on every deal in this book but East or West opens the bidding on the first 40 or so. Unless stated otherwise, East/West are playing a fairly 'standard' natural system, with 5-card majors, a strongish no-trump, a strong 2♣ and various options for weaker, distributional hands. You may assume that they will stick to their stated agreements and bid sensibly in that context. There will be no psychic bids or wild flights of fancy from East or West.

E/W's one-level openings will abide by the 'Rule of 19' not vulnerable, i.e. an opponent will open when her HCP plus the number of cards in her two longest suits totals 19, but not otherwise. Vulnerable, it's the Rule of 20, although a point fewer in strong club systems.

We live in an age when pronouns are fraught with danger. Most older books assume that all opponents (and partners) are masculine. In this text, by contrast, East and West are both deemed to be female ('she' and 'her'). Of course, they will think and play like players of either sex – it is a game where we all start equal and have equal potential. After the comparative lottery of the opening lead, our Easts and Wests will defend flawlessly and yet, if we find the right line, they will invariably be defeated. That fate is, of course, no reflection, on the quality of their play!

Partner, on the other hand, is always assumed to be masculine. Not only is his bidding generally over-optimistic but he is also impelled to make a range of facetious comments. As these are flaws that I have suffered from throughout my bridge-playing life, I feel it is only fair to offload them

onto some of your hypothetical partners here. Make sure you have the last laugh by making the daft contracts that partner has propelled you into!

A note on the sublime: this book, like all the ones I have written, is an attempt to express the strange beauty of bridge and its inexhaustible capacity to surprise. The same 52 cards turn up over and over again yet, like snowflakes, they are forever different and capable of transporting us outside ourselves into a state of ecstasy or wonder. This is the idea of the sublime that Longinus wrote about, a good 2000 years ago, in *Peri Hypsous* (Περὶ ὕψους) and which inspired many of the great Romantic poets. In *Bridge and the Romantics*, I adapted Shelley's treatise on this and related subjects. Even after 50 years at the bridge table, there are still new skills to be learned, new experiences to be had. With luck, many of the extraordinary deals in this book will leave you with the same sense of awe that I experienced.

Each deal is presented as a single-dummy problem. Take the time to consider all the evidence and make your plan. The deals are to be savoured like a fine wine, not knocked back carelessly. Enjoy!

#1 The easiest of slam-dunks?

| | | | | |
|-------|--------------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| ♠K63 | Both Vul, Dealer E | | | |
| ♥753 | <i>West</i> | <i>North</i> | <i>East</i> | <i>South</i> |
| ♦AK85 | | | 2♠ | Dble |
| ♣J73 | Pass | 3♦ | Pass | 6NT |
| | All Pass | | | |

N
W E
S

West leads the ♠10. What is the safest line to make your slam?

♠A4 Key card: ♣Q
♥AKJ92
♦QJ
♣AK82

First impressions: this is a deal from the 2021 Camrose Home Internationals, featuring many of the finest players in Britain. East showed a weak hand and six spades at a number of tables. At others, North-South had a clear run to the 'normal' contract of 6NT. Often 6NT was played from the North hand on the lead of the ♠Q, but the challenge is no different from either side of the table.

Declarer's first thought when dummy went down was generally: have we missed a grand slam here? If the heart suit plays for five tricks, as well it might, there will be thirteen easy tricks. Perhaps those declarers lost focus. As it turned out, three out of four Camrose declarers went off in 6NT. See if you can do better, with or without the spade bid to help you!

Inferences from the auction: East will generally have a 6-card spade suit for a vulnerable weak-two opening. With 3-card support, West *might* have raised to 3♠ anyway.

A basic strategy: the most obvious route to twelve tricks is via four heart tricks. Only if West holds ♥Q10xx(x) will you have a problem. You would like to test the hearts in such a way that you give yourself residual chances if there is an unfortunate split.

The early tricks: it is clear that you should win the spade lead in the South hand in order to preserve the ♠K as a potential entry to the North hand. It is surely a good idea to cash the ♥A and see what develops. Let's say both defenders follow low. It seems right to unblock the diamonds, so we cash the ♦QJ, both defenders following. Then we duck a heart. If the suit breaks 3-2, we claim twelve tricks. If East started with ♥Q10xx, we will get to dummy with the ♠K, cash the ♦AK, and claim 12 tricks on the finesse of ♥J.

Although this is the best line to ensure twelve tricks, it leaves few residual chances if East proves to have a small singleton heart.

A number of Camrose declarers played the ♥A at trick 2 (or 'T2', as we will abbreviate it) and stopped worrying about a missed grand slam when East discarded a spade on this trick! How should we re-calibrate our plans in the light of this development?

Whole hand visualisation: of course, it is a little easier if we know about East's 6-card spade suit. We may surmise that East is 6-0-4-3 or 6-0-3-4, although an outside 5-card suit is not to be discounted. This suggests West is likely to be 2-5-3-3 or 2-5-4-2. The expectation that West holds just two spades offers us plenty of hope that she can be stripped of exit cards and thrown in with only hearts left to lead. On the other hand, plenty of Easts would bid a weak 2 with a 5-card suit and a bit of shape, so the possibility that West has a 3-card spade suit (in, say, a 3-5-3-2 shape) cannot be entirely discounted.

We will need West to hold the ♣Q for any throw-in to work. One declarer, on discovering the bad news in hearts, unblocked the diamonds and crossed to the ♠K. When the ♦AK (discarding two hearts) and ♣AK produced only small cards on either side, he crossed his fingers and played a third club. Sure enough, West was obliged to win with the queen, and lead into the ♥KJ, with the ♣8 bringing up declarer's trick-total to 12.

| | |
|-----------|---------|
| | ♠K63 |
| | ♥753 |
| | ♦AK85 |
| | ♣J73 |
| ♠102 | ♠QJ9765 |
| ♥Q10864 N | ♥— |
| ♦1043 W E | ♦9762 |
| ♣Q64 S | ♣1095 |
| | ♠A4 |
| | ♥AKJ92 |
| | ♦QJ |
| | ♣AK82 |

Execution in the end-game:

this line was good enough to bring the slam home because the cards lay as shown here.

But was it the safest line? Say West is 3-5-3-2 with ♣Qx. On the successful declarer's line, the ♣Q falls on the second round of the suit and declarer (presumably) crosses back to the ♣J but West can reduce to ♥Q10 and a non-blocking spade. If declarer then tries to exit with a spade, East can ensure she wins the trick and

takes 6NT two off with further black winners.

To counter this possibility, declarer really should have tested the clubs before crossing to the North hand. If the queen drops from the West hand on the second round, declarer can be fairly sure that the end-position is as shown below.

| | |
|----------|-------|
| | ♠K6 |
| | ♥75 |
| | ♦AK |
| | ♣J |
| ♠xx | ♠QJx |
| ♥Q1086 N | ♥— |
| ♦x W E | ♦xx |
| ♣— S | ♣109 |
| | ♠4 |
| | ♥KJ92 |
| | ♦— |
| | ♣82 |

Now you cross to the ♣J and cash the ♦AK, throwing a club and a heart, and watch West's discards. If West keeps ♥Q10 doubleton and two spades, you duck a heart to West and claim the balance. And if West keeps three hearts, you know you must cash the ♠K before ducking a heart, ensuring a lead into the ♥KJ.

Post-mortem: none of this is rocket-science. Once East shows out on the ♥A, there really are no alternatives but to play for a throw-in. Yet only one out of four international

declarers made 6NT and did so, as we have seen, with an inferior line.

| | | | |
|--------|-----|---------|--|
| | | ♠AKQ | |
| | | ♥A10874 | |
| | | ♦AJ | |
| | | ♣AK6 | |
| ♠1072 | | ♠9 | |
| ♥52 | N | ♥Q963 | |
| ♦8653 | W E | ♦KQ102 | |
| ♣10943 | S | ♣J752 | |
| | | ♠J86543 | |
| | | ♥KJ | |
| | | ♦974 | |
| | | ♣Q8 | |

international standards. It's fine to draw two rounds of trumps but, when they break 3-1, you should turn to hearts, ruffing the third round with the ♠J. Back you go to the ♠Q to ruff the fourth heart, cash the ♣Q and claim.

| | | | |
|--------|-----|----------|--|
| | | ♠KJ84 | |
| | | ♥A104 | |
| | | ♦J6 | |
| | | ♣J543 | |
| ♠Q9762 | | ♠— | |
| ♥KJ987 | N | ♥652 | |
| ♦75 | W E | ♦983 | |
| ♣10 | S | ♣KQ98762 | |
| | | ♠A1053 | |
| | | ♥Q3 | |
| | | ♦AKQ1042 | |
| | | ♣A | |

and cross back to hand with a top diamond to finesse the ♠J. Cash the ♠K, discarding a diamond, and play on diamonds. West must ruff with the outstanding trump sooner or later but only has hearts to return, allowing

Here's another exhibit, this time from the 2022 Bermuda Bowl. Piotr Gawrys of Poland, one of the world's top players, was declarer in 7♠ after an uncontested auction. West led the ♦6. What's the best line?

Gawrys won the ♦A, drew trumps in three rounds, played the ♥K, the ♥A and ruffed a heart and then ... realised he could no longer make his contract. He was an entry short to ruff a fourth heart and get back to claim the fifth one.

It's not a tough deal by Or how about this one from the 2022 European Championships in Funchal?

A large number of North-Souths reached a contract of 6♠ (often doubled) after East had preempted in clubs. West led the ♣10 to South's ace and the ♠A at T2 revealed the bad trump-break. What now?

Making 6♠ from there should be relatively easy because there is only one position that gives you a chance. You might finesse the ♠8

you to make the ♥Q and the ♥A separately for 12 tricks. Granted, you need West to hold the ♥K and no more clubs but that was more than likely on the auction. Yet a comfortable majority of declarers across the Open, Women's, Seniors' and Mixed Championships put 6♠ on the floor, even though this sequence of play did not need to be particularly precise.

What can we conclude from this? That the wrong players are being picked for internationals? I don't think so. All the declarers who went off in 6NT on the first deal were more than capable of finding a winning line. On the second, Gawrys was, no doubt, horrified by his lapse. But international bridge is tough. Even experts feel tired and rushed, unable to think clearly at crucial moments. The most successful players at international level are not necessarily the ones who find obscure brilliancies in the post-mortem but the ones who are able to focus on the right basics at the right time.

Your best chance of reaching that level (aside from hiring a superstar to partner you!) is to learn to apply a certain discipline to your consideration of card-play problems. The purpose of this book is to help you find the right sequence of thoughts that will enable you to play your very best bridge under the most extreme pressure. If you can think your way through each of the relatively complex problems in this book, you should have little trouble with most of the deals you will encounter, at any level of the game.

PLAY LIKE A BERMUDA BOWL CHAMPION

It's not often that a bridge book comes along that takes dummy play into a new dimension, but *Sublime Declarer Play* does exactly that. The focus is on the competitive auction and the inferences that can be drawn from opponents' bidding choices. Moments of sublimity are the consequence of a series of logical steps rooted in that initial analysis. Tournament players at all levels from intermediate to expert will enjoy a new insight into the magic of the game.



NICK SMITH is a Grand Master and England international from Oxford, England. He is the author of four previous Master Point Press titles: *Bridge Literature*, *More Bridge Literature*, *Bridge and the Romantics* and, with Julian Pottage, *Bridge Behind Bars*. He is also the author of numerous novels and plays.

