

Rick's Tricks

ON MONDAY, SURE.... BUT CERTAINLY NOT ON TUESDAY

By Rick Roeder

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For those of you who did not know Justin Lall, I send my regrets. He was a bridge superstar but there are any number of superstars. He was brilliant, charismatic, incredibly funny but, alas, his time was up at age 36. He was bridge's version of Vincent Van Gogh, a tortured genius who had to battle periodic personal demons.

He was sufficiently beloved that a Memorial Knockout tournament was held in his behalf last November that attracted an uber-strong field. During this event, I encountered one of my most difficult bidding problems in recent memory.

You are red versus white in 4th chair, holding:

♠Q752 ♥KQ9xxxx ♦xx ♣void

LHO PARD RHO YOU

1♣ P 1♦ (0-7) ??

(Big Club)

What would you bid? Barring some systemic possibilities if you play Multi or Suction, certainly some number of hearts. How many? At the table, I decided to be a touch conservative and bid 2♥. There is much merit in initial aggression against this Big Club auction since they have absolutely no clue as to their partner's distribution. I decided to go low because I would not be unhappy if they settled in 4♠, knowing that there was zero chance they would accurately discern the spade position.

Lefty now chirped 2♠. Pard chimed in with a fit bid (showing heart support) of 4♣ and Righty bids 4♠.

All this new information gave me a migraine. Advil, Please!! My general disdain of the 5 level Pard's defense in clubs and my 4th trump all screamed at me to pass. My 7th heart, taking out insurance against a making 4 spades and the real possibility that Pard was spadeless screamed at me to bid 5♥. Unfortunately, the screams were of equal volume so I became paralyzed in uncertainty for what seemed like a very long time. (Thankfully, nowhere near as long as Bob

Etter's uncertainty in playing 1 No Trump in a KO match against me. After a 17-minute tank, the beloved Sacramento Grand Life Master declared, "I don't know how to play this hand.")

Still clueless, I bid 5♥, resigned to my fate that whatever I did felt like it would be wrong.

The ♠A was led as I perused this dummy.

♠8 ♥AJ10x ♦xxx ♣AQ10xx

Deflated! Pard had a spade. Rats!! Lefty took a lot of time before playing to trick 2 as I pondered the reason for his delay. As more time elapsed, I was glad I betrayed no sign of disappointment at seeing dummy.

I was thrilled at the appearance of the ♠K at Trick 2. +850. Should have been +1050, as I misplayed while still celebrating. What went wrong for the defense?

The Big Club bidder held:

♠AK9xx ♥void ♦AQxxx ♣Kxx

On the surface, one is inclined to blame the ♠K play at trick 2, but that could have been reasonable on some layouts. In my view, the criminal play was made by Righty not to play the ♠J from ♠J10x at Trick 1. This suit preference play would have BEGGED for a Diamond shift at trick 2.

Their misdefense did not deter me from wondering about what I should have bid in the following days. Still baffled, I sent a blast email to a number of my bridge friends, soliciting their input. Predictably, their opinions were quite mixed.

Toward the end of the week, I gained additional clarity. The decision still seemed close enough that certain seemingly extraneous factors should have been considered, such as, "state of the match" conditions. If well ahead, I would want to avoid a big loss. If well behind, I wanted to take an action which allows for the biggest possible gain. Those considerations pointed toward a bid of 5♥ as it was certainly possible that a double game swing existed.

Another consideration is the perceived level of your opponents compared to your team. If your team is "the lesser squad", creating as many chances for "jump balls" and big swings is sound strategy. If your team is the favorite, keeping the ball "in the middle of the fairway" makes sense.

If your squad is playing Meckwell, your best chance to win is to swing from the rafters. Scoff at those purists who say that bidding a grand slam should be a 65+% proposition. 40% may be good enough against those boys. Loosen your preempting standards, including some straight out of the Wild, Wild West. Even geniuses are troubled by preempts. If playing a better team, here is a card play example to consider. You are in an extremely normal 4♠ contract where you need to pick up the trump suit without loss:

DUMMY: K54 YOU: AJ1032

The book play is to cash the ♠K first, on the off chance that Lefty has a stiff Queen. Assuming no entry issues, I would suggest running the ♠J on the first round. You give up a small 2.5% chance to intelligently pick up a big swing.

Many of us blanch at the possibility of not following “technical norms”. I smile at Butch Cassidy’s retort to the Sundance Kid when they were cornered at the top of a steep bluff overlooking a river. Butch said that their only chance to escape was to make a long dive into the waters below. When the Kid sheepishly confessed that he did not know how to swim, Butch responded, “Don’t worry, Kid, the fall will probably kill you.” Amen! If you were slated to lose a match by 40 IMPs and instead lose by 80, the world has not changed. Further, you can take some pride that you went down swinging instead of passively accepting your fate.

This idea of “going against traditional orthodoxy” has gained traction in football in the past decade. Football fans have noticed the greater frequency of teams going for it on “fourth down and short” instead of punting the football and playing for field position, particularly if an underdog.

If I have the same bidding problem come up in the future, I will still be baffled. However, I will take a deeper look at extraneous factors that might help me achieve a greater degree of serenity in resolving a tough decision! ♣