

Rick's Tricks

Mocking Vacant Spaces

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A beginning bridge player is playing a trump contract: Dummy's trumps: A1032 with declarer holding KJ754. After an unrevealing opening lead, declarer cannot afford to lose a trump. What to do? This beginner had a great mentor in the form of Alfred Sheinwold's "Five Weeks to Winning Bridge," a legendary book that, over 60 years, has very well stood the test of time.

Being an apt student, "8 ever, 9 never" is sounding a clarion call in the beginner's head in regard to the best way to capture the pesky trump queen. After playing a trump to the ace and a small trump off dummy, the beginner has seen her RHO play the 6 and the 9. The clarion call proves irresistible! She hops up with the king and as is thrilled to see LHO unhappily surrender the lady.

Math geeks might be more inquisitive. Let's see if we can please them. At the point that the beginner has to make the pivotal trump play, declarer has seen two of RHO's cards. Thus, there are 11 remaining cards in RHO's hand where the trump queen might reside: RHO's remaining cards have been dubbed "vacant spaces." At declarer's decision point, LHO has just revealed one of her 13 cards. Thus, LHO has 12 remaining vacant spaces. Given the lack of other relevant information, LHO is a narrow 12-to-11 favorite to hold the trump queen based on "vacant spaces."

The "Law of Vacant Spaces" can be a powerful tool. Suppose declarer has the exact same trump guess as our beginner, but after a revealing auction:

Declarer	LHO	Dummy	RHO
1♥	3♠	4♥	(all pass).

The total number of spades held by declarer and dummy is four. Declarer assumes that the spade division is seven held by LHO and two held by RHO. Thus, LHO only has six vacant spaces to hold the ♥Q. RHO has 11 vacant spaces. Woe to those who sheepishly and steadfastly follow the mantra of "8 ever, 9 never." RHO is an 11-to-6 favorite to hold the ♥Q, absent other information. How can one respect "8 ever, 9 never" when the Law of Vacant Spaces is screaming at you: "Take a second round heart hook if the queen did not appear under the ace. Otherwise, you are the village idiot." Put another way, the almost 2-to-1 odds in favor of RHO holding the lady is statistically higher than the probability of your current marriage having a happy ending.

In fact, I do respect the "8 ever, 9 never" mantra for its unquestioned basic utility. The game of bridge is a paradox. One can learn all the basic rules in five weeks with apt study. However, the

rest of one's lifetime is spent mastering the exceptions to said rules. Mastering exceptions is a tall, tall order for all of us. I am a believer in having training wheels for tykes learning to ride a bike. The same philosophy should apply to basic bridge maxims. Maybe the Jefferson Airplane had bridge players in mind when the San Franciscans issued a sobering warning: "When the truth is found to be lies, don't you want "Somebody To Love?"

Now that I may have impressed upon you that the Law of Vacant Spaces reigns supreme over mantras such as "8 ever, 9 never," let's take a look at a hand where even the almighty rule of Vacant Spaces is given a dose of humility.

At white versus red in IMPs, you are in 3 No Trump:

Dummy

♠54

♥K1053

♦Q104

♣K852

Declarer

♠A8

♥AJ6

♦AKJ9

♣Q93

The auction:

You	LHO	Pard	RHO
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1♦	2♠	Dbl	3♠
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3NT (all pass)

While the 3 No Trump bid was reasonable, I cannot help but hear the voice of Jim Backstrom. Recently deceased, he was a staple of the San Diego expert community for decades. If we conducted a séance, Jim's wisdom would be as follows: "Be wary about winding up in 3 No Trump when your only stopper in a suit is the ace." During the séance, Jim would have complimented me for eschewing 3 No Trump in favor of a 4♥ call. The Backpacker would opine, "On a good day, you will catch more than 4♥ and on many other layouts, the Moysian may play well." RIP, Jim!!

Predictably, a spade is led, the queen. You hold up your ace on trick 1 with a resigned sense of futility to your trick 1 duck. Just as predictably, a spade is continued to Righty's king at trick two. You need four quick heart tricks to triumph.

You rationally decide that LHO has six spades, leaving RHO with three. Using the powerful weapon of the Law of Vacant Spaces, you deduce that LHO has only seven "slots" for the ♥Q while RHO has ten vacant spaces. Thus, you play on the premise that the RHO is more likely to have the queen. More often than not, you will successfully deduce the residence of the queen.

But what about your mission of needing four heart tricks? The Confederacy could brag about their military triumphs at Chickamauga, Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. Notwithstanding, the bigger picture was that the South lost the war. Do NOT lose sight of your larger mission!: to garner four heart tricks. Any further thoughts on how to tackle the heart suit?

If hearts are divided 3-3, you are on a guess as to who has the Lady. My approach in such situations: Decide which of your opponents you like the least. Make sure that your least-liked opponent does not score the queen!

But what if hearts are divided 4-2? The lack of the ♥9 (and, to a lesser degree, the ♥8) becomes a big issue. Even when the ♥Q is with Righty, you have won the battle but lost the war as the fourth heart trick is not available. Who is more likely to have the doubleton ♥Q? On this question, the Law of Vacant Spaces partially redeems itself. Since Lefty is more likely to have fewer hearts than Righty, the correct technical move is to immediately play a Heart to the ♥10 and say a prayer. On this hand, the Law of Vacant Spaces provides conflict. Regardless, the mission as to how best to score four heart tricks supercedes all else.

One of the Ten Commandments is “Thou shalt not worship false gods.” This is certainly true for “8 ever, 9 never” and, at times, even the exalted Law of Vacant Spaces. Even atheists will have to admit that some of the Ten Commandments made a hell of a lot of sense