

Rick's Tricks

DESPERADO

By Rick Roeder

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I looked forward to playing in the 3-day pair event in the 2021 Summer Online Nationals. As there were only 70 pairs in the Open, including many full-time pros, the event rated to be *Life In The Fast Lane*.

The following hand helped us qualify for the second day. Our opponents were esteemed, in one case for bridge, the other for poker. Mike Passell has 7 bazillion master points. Steve Zolotow, while an excellent bridge player, has a well-deserved reputation as one of America's premier poker players.

Take a look at our hands in my 2NT contract. My opening 2NT call was both the beginning and the end of the auction. Dummy's meager assets did not provide me a *Peaceful Easy Feeling*:

DUMMY

♠63

♥10763

♦652

♣Q1094

MY MITT

♠AQ8

♥Q9

♦AKJ97

♣A53

Mike's ♠10 lead ran to my Queen. How would you proceed at trick 2? Decide before reading on.

I would love to develop a trick or two in Clubs. The problem: If the opponents take an early Club trick and knock out my 2nd Spade stopper, I am in poor shape. Steve played the ♠5 at trick 1, so I had no clue as to the division of the Spade suit. If I knew Spades were breaking 4-4, playing a Club at trick 2 might be my best shot. However, the wily Mr. Passell would not automatically pop the King if I played a low Club at trick 2 or played Ace and a Club at tricks 2-3. If I got Clubs wrong, the hand rated to be a disaster as 3 Heart losers also loomed.

I thought about playing Diamonds at trick 2 as I had no sure entry to take a Diamond hook. In *The Long Run*, I knew the Diamond dame was not likely to drop under my Ace and King. However, one

attractive element in this line is maximizing my chances to come to 7 tricks. Being in a normal contract at matchpoints, such consideration swayed me to cash my high Diamond honors immediately. No luck. I persisted with a 3rd Diamond. Steve won the Queen as Mike pitched the ♥5. The ♠J came whistling back and I had another decision: Do I win the Ace or duck?

The probability of Spades breaking 5-3 has increased when the Jack is played. If Steve had remained with ♠Jxx, his likely Spade play would have been a low spot. The only advantage of ducking would be if Spades were 6-2 with the Spade 6 bagger holding neither high Heart honor. Pretty remote. I decided to retain my 3rd Spade as a later exit card. I cashed my good Diamonds. Mike discarded 2 clubs up the line (they play standard carding). Both to create some fog and to hang on to my tenuous Heart holding, I pitched 2 of dummy's clubs. Steve discarded the ♥4 and then the ♣6. Then, being the generous guy that I am, I exited a Spade. As expected, Spades did prove to break 5-3.

Mike cashed his 3 Spade winners. My first pitch was a club, my second was a Heart. 3 Hearts were pitched from dummy. Steve's first pitch was the ♥2 and his second pitch was the ♣8. Note that Steve did echo in Hearts, (very subtly) as he had earlier pitched the ♥4.

Mike went into the tank at trick 11, looking at the following:

	DUMMY
	♠---
	♥10
	♦---
	♣Q10
MIKE	
	♠---
	♥K8
	♦---
	♣J

Steve's carding suggests a Heart shift. However, Mike has conflicting information. Given that I never attacked Clubs and pitched Clubs from both my hand and the dummy at first opportunity, he had much pause for thought. Eventually, he decided that I would have started Clubs at trick 2 if my initial Club holding was Axx. He played the ♣J and I gratefully scooped up my 8th trick. *Fly Like An Eagle*, baby!

Zolotow pitched well. When Mike cashed the last Spade, Steve had to find a pitch holding:

♥AJ
♣K8

He accurately pitched the Club 8, stiffing his King. If instead, he had pitched the Heart Jack, there would have been no possibility of defeating the contract.

Did I misplay the hand? Perhaps. Look what happens if I play a low Club at trick 2. Suppose I insert the 10. If RHO wins the King and returns a Spade, I can take 10 tricks with successful Club and Diamond finesses. 10 tricks – Confucius says 10 tricks much better than 8. Stronger defense might result in Dummy's ♣10 being ducked. If I then take the winning Diamond finesse, 9 tricks. Against a weaker player, an immediate Club play would be much more attractive as I might get a tell. Alas, Mr. Passell does not give you tells.

One of bridge's intrigues is its psychological element. Once I decided not to touch Clubs and hoped for a 2nd Club trick in the end game, it was important for me to fully commit. One of the benefits of my play was the quick tempo at which I immediately discarded Clubs from both hands.

One other factor affected my trick 2 decision. One need not go for the gusto in the first day of a 3-day event. You don't need to be Leader of the Pack. Humming the Bee Gees' *Stayin' Alive* is the tune that should be playing in your head. I did not want to get a zero for a Club misguess at trick 2. Our score on the board: a respectable 65%.

I refuse to offer any hands from the 2nd day of the event. When I am getting drilled, I try to forget the hands as soon as possible. *Heartache Tonight!! One Of These Nights* where the opponents were close to double dummy and we were just a pair of dummies. Regardless, the ACBL makes you prepay for all 3 days so we had a Regional event to play on Day 3. We wanted to get the bad taste out of our mouth and were actually looking forward to Day 3 in the minor leagues. A true sign of bridge addiction? Probably. As for my love of the game, I am reminded of a telling lyric from *Hotel California*. "You can check out any time but you can never leave." ♣