

Rick's Tricks

DEALING WITH THEIR PESKY QUEENS

By Rick Roeder

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Among the most daunting tasks as declarer is to guess the location of a missing Queen (I am not referring to Freddie Mercury!). In 1793, it was a real pity for Marie Antoinette that she could not have been a missing Queen for an extended period of time. What separates the expert from others is the ability to divine a high percentage of such guesses.

You are declaring 2 spades in matchpoints at no vulnerability:

DUMMY	YOU
♠AJxx	♠K10xx
♥xx	♥10x
♦QJx	♦K10xx
♣KQxx	♣Axx

THE AUCTION:

PARD	RHO	YOU	LHO
1♣	Pass	1♠	Pass
2♠	Pass	Pass	Pass

Would you have passed two spades or invited? I chose to pass for two reasons. First, matchpoints is a game of plus scores where bidding iffy games in matchpoints is usually not a winning proposition (and definitely not if you are a better declarer than most and can pick up some matchpoints by playing the hand better than your competition). Second, our partnership will frequently raise on 3-card spade support with a ruffing value. Thus, I was not 100% sure we had the luxury of an 8-card fit. (By the way, if you will often raise to 2 spades on 3-card support, you should definitely play the Spiral convention. A 2 No Trump follow up would ask Pard if he has a 4th spade and if Pard is minimum or maximum). I have no criticism of bidding a Spiral 2 No Trump and likely would have done so in IMPs on the basis of being prime and holding 10's in my long suits.

You get the ♦6 lead. The spots are such that you cannot tell if this is a lead from shortness or length. Righty wins the ♦A and flips another red Ace on the table at trick 2. Lefty encourages and wins the ♥K at trick 3. Lefty fires back the ♦5 at trick 4.

Where is the Queen? A valuable 2nd overtrick is at stake. Inferring, RHO has already shown up with 10 HCP. I am assuming that RHO has the ♥Q as LHO almost certainly would have led a Heart from KQ. If RHO also held the trump Queen, he might have acted on some hands over Pard's 1♣ opener.

The second reason that I think it more likely that LHO holds the ♠Q is based on a form of restricted choice. It is possible that LHO might have found a trump lead with small trumps but would never have led a trump from Qxx or Qx.

So, you have deduced that you would like to play LHO for the trump Queen. However, this play is not without risk. Suppose you took a losing hook and Righty wins the Queen. There is still one outstanding trump. If RHO flips a diamond on the table and LHO ruffs, you will feel sick. I decided to finesse LHO and held my breath. Success!

The “Law of Vacant Spaces” sometimes allows us to intelligently override the adage of “8 ever, 9 never.”

Your RHO opens with a 3♥ preempt. You overcall 3♠ and wind up in 4♠. Dummy's assets include a robust sidesuit of ♦KJxxxx. After you pull trumps, you mull your own diamond holding of Axx. To maximize your chance of taking 6 diamond tricks, you have to scoff at the traditional adage and take a 2nd round diamond finesse. Once you know, the preemptor started with 7 hearts and, presumably a trump or two, there are fewer vacant “slots” for the preemptor to hold the key diamond Queen compared to the vacant slots available for preemptor's partner.

Here is a hand where it looks like you are on a diamond guess to make 3 No Trump against the BBO robots. Careful! Sometimes, looks are deceiving.

DUMMY	DECLARER
♠QJ	♠K8xx
♥Qx	♥Axx
♦AJ87xx	♦K10
♣109x	♣AJ8x

You have a simple 1NT-3NT auction and receive the ♥8 lead. You are disappointed when the ♥Q is covered with the King. You duck and are quite relieved that the robots do not continue Hearts. Instead, RHO plays ♠A and a spade (The robots rarely give attitude signals. In real life, if RHO discourages the ♠A shift, a heart would often come back at trick 3.) How do you tackle the diamond suit?

I suggest that the best way to play in either IMPS or matchpoints is to not stress too much on who has the Queen! Given dummy's lack of an outside entry, a strong trick 4 play is a diamond to the 10. Let's assume that the 10 loses to the Queen.

We would not have been sad. Happy “misguess”! The contract is now assured any time diamonds break 3-2. We only need 5 diamond tricks to go with our 4 other tricks. Ironically, the hand is much trickier if your ♦10 wins at trick 4. If the diamond Queen does not fall doubleton, you will almost assuredly be going down. There was merit to the robot’s spade shift at trick 2. Looking at Queen doubleton of diamonds, the robot thought a Spade shift might be necessary to prevail. One last thought if playing matchpoints: If your RHO started with ♦Qxx, this approach may put you a trick “ahead” of those who played the diamond suit in the usual manner.

Numerous situations exist where safety considerations are more paramount than guessing the location of a Queen.

One example: You are declaring 4 spades in an IMP game.

DUMMY	DECLARER
♠AJxx	♠K10xx
♥xxx	♥Kxx
♦AJ10x	♦KQ
♣Axx	♣Kxx

You receive a diamond lead. Your plays are automatic. At Trick 2, a spade to the Ace. At trick 3, a spade to the 10. If the 10 loses, you are cold unless there is a very unlikely parlay that the opening leader started with 6 diamonds, Qx of trumps and the Heart Ace. Your main mission is to prevent your RHO getting the lead and leading a heart.

Queen guesses can be vexing. A deceased New York City expert, Jim Linhart, allegedly had an advantage over the rest of us in this regard. Why? He was 6 foot, 10 inches tall. At that height, he could supposedly see everything. If only the rest of us could.