

BRIDGE BY THE LAKE

By Ken Masson



One of the first adages aspiring bridge players learn is “Eight Ever, Nine Never.” This refers to the best way to play suit combinations when you hold 8 or 9 cards in a suit missing the queen. The theory is that with just 8 cards you should always finesse for her majesty but when you hold 9 cards you should play for the drop. But like many things in bridge – as in life – there are exceptions and it would have been beneficial to the declarer of this month’s hand to be aware of them.

The bidding was competitive which always leads to some uncertainty as to what the final contract should be. East passed in first seat and South opened 1 heart. West took advantage of the vulnerability to make a weak jump overcall of 2 spades and this put North on the spot. With 11 high card points and four hearts North had to decide whether to make a conservative bid of 3

hearts or the more aggressive 4 hearts. Even though the queen of spades was of dubious value on the auction, North decided to take a shot at the heart game.

East pondered whether to enter the fray by bidding 4 spades which could have been a good non-vulnerable save against 4 hearts but decided that with 2 aces and the trump queen there was a reasonable chance of defeating South's contract, so he passed.

West led the jack of spades, which would not have been everyone's choice, but with East holding the Ace, no harm was done. When the jack held the trick, West continued with a spade which was ruffed by declarer. Without much further thought, South led a small trump to dummy's ace and another one back to his king, only to get the bad news that the "nine never" maxim had failed him this time. Even with careful play from then on, declarer lost a trick in each suit (he took the normal club finesse, losing to the doubleton queen).

What South had failed to take into consideration was the fact that West's bid of 2 spades altered the probability of where the queen of hearts might be. The theory of vacant spaces states that when the distribution of one or more suits is known, the probability that an opponent holds a particular card in any other suit is proportional to the number of vacant spaces remaining in his hand. Therefore, any missing card is more likely to be with the opponent who is known to hold fewer cards in another suit.

Thus, with West having shown a probable 6 card spade suit (leaving 3 spades in the East), there are 10 vacant spaces in the East hand versus only 7 in the West, making the odds in favor of finessing East for the queen of hearts.

Of course, if West had opened the bidding at the one level, or made a takeout double, it might have been necessary to place the queen of hearts with him to justify his bidding.

That's what makes this game endlessly fascinating!

Questions or comments: email: masson.ken@gmail.com

Bridge by the Lake - June 2011

Written by Ken Masson

♠ KJ10754
♥ 7
♦ J763
♣ Q8

♠ Q92
♥ AJ52
♦ 102
♣ A543

♠ A63
♥ Q64
♦ A94
♣ 10962

♠ 8
♥ K10983
♦ KQ85
♣ KJ7

Vulnerability: North South
Dealer: East

Bidding:

North	East	South	West
	Pass	1♥	2♣
4♥	Pass	Pass	Pass

Opening Lead: ♠ Jack