

CAUTIOUS BIDDER [102]

I hope many of you took the opportunity to watch the European Bridge Championships, held in Budapest over the past ten days. It has been a momentous tournament for several reasons - above all because it is the first major international bridge tournament to be held since the dramatic exposure of cheating at the highest levels of the game and the banning of three (and likely to be four) of the game's most successful pairs.

I had innocently assumed that all the top pairs were (more or less) ethical, not least because other top players do not easily have the wool pulled over their eyes. How wrong could I be. Apparently there have been whispers about some pairs for years, but only now, thanks to the courageous whistle-blowing of Boye Brogeland of Norway, supported by a few other top bridge professionals and assisted by the availability of video recording, have the perpetrators been nailed. One thing we've learned over the past twelve months is that at the top of the game some pairs will try to cheat. We've also learned that screens don't prevent cheating – in fact they can facilitate it.

With the known cheats removed from the game it was to be hoped that these would be the 'cleanest' European championships for many years, enabling true champions to emerge. And they would be true champions, because the other thing to bear in mind when watching the European Championships is that this is the pinnacle of the game. Admittedly it does not feature the top American professionals, but in terms of overall standard the Europeans are tougher than the Bermuda Bowl [World Championships], the qualifying conditions for which ensure that some relatively weak bridge nations are represented. Thirty-seven nations featured in the 'Open' section of these championships and at least a third of them had legitimate hopes of finishing amongst the top six, thereby securing entry to next year's Bermuda Bowl.

The Wales Open team was always likely to struggle in this company, but in fact the team (Patrick Jourdain and Gary Jones; Julian Pottage and Tony Ratcliff; Richard Plackett and Simon Richards; with NPC Alan Stephenson) performed with credit, especially given the fact that they contained two new partnerships (one formed specifically for this event), and a third pair (Patrick and Gary) who were entitled to expect that they might have been given the rather less daunting assignment of the Seniors competition. The team averaged 8 Victory Points per match (out of a maximum of 20) and finished in 33rd place on 289 VPs. England finished 10th; Ireland 12th; and Scotland 35th.

To give you some idea of what they were up against, here is a hand that I watched on BBO. It features the Italian maestro Lorenzo Lauria playing for Italy against England. (As an amusing aside, I first came across Lauria in London some twenty-five years ago, and he struck me then as a veteran. He's still going strong, and to confirm my suspicion that he must by now be pushing ninety, I looked him up on Wikipedia. It turns out he's eleven days older than me.)

Dealer North; E/W vul

	♠Q432	
	♥KQ5	
	♦Q754	
	♣54	
♠A107		♠8
♥A76		♥J1043
♦AK83		♦J2
♣1062		♣AKQJ83
	♠KJ965	
	♥982	
	♦1096	
	♣97	

On this hand Lauria and his partner Alfredo Versace faced the top English pair of Gold and Bakhshi. The Italians were already well on top by this stage. The English pair sat N/S and on this hand they caused as much difficulty as they could, bidding and supporting spades. But the Italian superstars brushed them aside, bidding smoothly to Six Clubs, to be played by Lauria, sitting East.

Bakhshi, South, led a spade. What do you think of Lauria's chances? The commentators on BBO thought he had none (and it's true that had Bakhshi guessed to lead a heart, he would have had none). Even with the normal spade lead, the contract looked hopeless. Only ten tricks on top, and whilst it is routine for a player of Lauria's calibre to eke out an extra trick, an extra two tricks was surely asking too much.

This is what happened.

1. Ace of spades
2. ruff a spade
3. Ace of clubs
4. club to the 10
5. ruff a spade
6. Jack of hearts, ducked to North's King

This was now the position:

	♠Q	
	♥Q5	
	♦Q754	
	♣	
♠		♠
♥A7		♥1043
♦AK83		♦J2
♣6		♣QJ
	♠KJ	
	♥98	
	♦1096	
	♣	

What should David Gold in the North seat return? He gave the matter plenty of thought, and the answer, if you study it long enough (and with the benefit of seeing all four hands), is a spade. Yes, a ruff and discard gives declarer an extra trick, but he is still a trick short. He can ruff the spade exit in his own hand, discarding a heart from dummy, and in due course establish the 10 of hearts in his hand as a winner, but he needs to ruff a diamond first and as a result he cannot get back to hand a second time to enjoy his heart winner.

Not easy to see, even double dummy, and Gold at the end of a tough match and an even tougher championships for England overall, didn't see it. A heart was obviously hopeless, so he returned a diamond – and Lauria had him.

7. diamond exit won in hand with the Jack
8. heart to the Ace in dummy (an essential component of the pending squeeze)
9. club back to hand, Gold throwing his last spade
10. final club played from hand; and Gold, knowing he couldn't afford to throw a diamond, jettisoned the Queen of hearts..... CLAIM!

Genius at work.

Italy's emphatic win over England in this, the penultimate round of the tournament, put paid to England's chances of qualification for the Bermuda Bowl and was also instrumental in securing that vital sixth place for Italy.

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