

CAUTIOUS BIDDER [126]

It can be instructive, when you and your partner have plainly failed to reach the optimum contract on a hand, to explore at what point in the auction things began to go awry. Generally of course it will be your partner's fault, but hopefully one can engage in a bit of dispassionate analysis before reaching the inevitable conclusion.

I played in the Midland Counties Congress Swiss Teams on Sunday, partnering Filippo Cavallari. Filippo is a newcomer to the Welsh bridge scene. He's Italian, so to him Welsh bridge is a model of calm rationality and concerted collective endeavour.

This was Board 3 of the event.

South dealt; E/W vul

	♠2	
	♥J109	
	♦KQJ107	
	♣10752	
♠K10974		♠AJ6
♥7654		♥Q82
♦986		♦A5432
♣Q		♣43
	♠Q853	
	♥AK3	
	♦void	
	♣AKJ986	

At the table where Filippo and I sat North/South the bidding was as follows.

<u>S</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>E</u>
1C	P	1D	P
2S	P	3C	P
3H	3N	P	P
P			

We were playing a strong no trump, 5 card majors, 2 over 1 game force, and 'better minor'. As you can see, 3NT is not the best spot – a fact very much brought home to me when East brightly began with the Ace of spades, followed by Jack and another. So two down on a board where Five Clubs is 'cold' and Six Clubs has excellent chances.

I don't think our bidding was ridiculous, and most other North/South pairs arrived in the same contract, but it obviously wasn't right. What might we have done differently? I might have judged to bid 4C over Filippo's bid of the fourth suit bid, rather than that shaky 3N, but of course the danger lay not with hearts, as I had feared, but in the spade department. Might Filippo himself have advanced to 4C over 3N? Possibly, but slam looked a long way off, whilst if game is the limit of our aspirations then 3NT seemed a practical shot.

Only two of the fifty-two North/South pairs bid the slam, one of them doubled by a greedy East. How would you play Six Clubs if you were in it? You might think you need either the

heart finesse or the ruffing finesse in diamonds, but that isn't quite right. Even if the heart finesse succeeds you still have to find a home for three losing spades, and you may not be able to ruff all of them. However, when the Queen of clubs falls on the first round of the suit, playing to ruff three spades looks plausible.

Alternatively of course you could advance the King of diamonds. Given that South is the one likely to be playing the hand, the diamond void will be concealed. In that case, who in the East seat would withhold the Ace if he held it? Not many players that I can think of! But if you imagine a lay-out where East has the Ace of diamonds but not the Queen of hearts, it would be quite some play were East calmly to withhold the Ace. Would not declarer, in that case, fall back on the (losing) heart finesse? He surely would, but can East reasonably infer that declarer has no diamonds? He might, if the opponents have bid to slam, but it would take some nerve to duck.

Sadly, the story isn't that good. East had both key cards, so whatever declarer did was going to turn out well.

At the other table in our match the contract was also 3NT, but played by South. As at our table, declarer had bid spades en route, so, understandably, Liz Atkinson led a heart. I'd have done the same. Where is Simon Gottschalk when you need him? How can the rest of us be expected to play this game when doing the 'normal' thing turns out to be catastrophically wrong? It was the only lead to give declarer a sure nine tricks.

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