

Bridge from the twilight zone: The tale of the singleton two of spades

By Pietro Campanile

Ladies and Gentlemen, make yourselves comfortable for the story I am about to narrate is likely to change the way you will look again at a pack of cards.

Michael Barel, one of our leading players, has a deceptively youngish look for his age, considering that the events that befell him and that I am about to relate could easily have made him age 20 years overnight.

Michael started off his international career as a junior and afterwards he immediately gained the qualification to represent Israel at the 1996 Rhodes Olympics, with his partner Aric Perlmutter. Little did he know that the beautiful surroundings of the Greek island were to be the starting scene of a nightmare that would follow him for the next five years.

Curtain up on the match between unfancied Tunisia and Israel in the qualifying round robin.

After a disappointing series of flattish hands in the first half, this board came up:

N dealer, EW vul

♠ QJ10643			
♥ K4			
♦ 9			
♣ J973			
♠ A975		♠ K8	
♥ QJ107		♥ A953	
♦ AK832		♦ QJ104	
♣ -		♣ AQ2	
	♠ 2		
	♥ 862		
	♦ 765		
	♣ K108654		

After Perlmutter opened a multi 2♦ in North, the Tunisian East-West bid quickly to 6♥, played from the East seat.

Barel naturally led his singleton ♠2 to the ♠5, the ♠J and the ♠K. Now declarer, realizing that there was some danger of a spade ruff but failing to appreciate that a heart finesse would have been a completely safe play within that scenario, decided on a

rather different type of 'safety' play and continued with ♥A and a heart, to the amazement of North who must have been sure that his ♥K would have a very short life expectancy with QJ10x in dummy. Barel dutifully echoed in hearts but this delicate signal was probably lost on his partner who must have still been looking in disbelief at his ♥K holding the trick. Perlmutter eventually looked up and started thinking and thinking and thinking, while in the meantime his partner was in agony waiting for his ruff to come. Aric spent a few very long minutes looking alternatively at declarer and at the ♠A97 in dummy. He was clearly worried that if Barel had run out of trumps and could not ruff the return of the ♠Q, declarer would establish a third spade winner for a diamond discard after the ruffing finesse against his ♠J. Eventually he came to a decision and played back a ...club! 6♥ made for an 8 IMPs loss which came back to haunt Barel and his team who missed qualification by 1.5 VP. Curtain down.



Years go by, thousands of deals are played and forgotten but that board stayed fresh in Barel's mind as he battled and defeated all comers to successfully gain the right to represent Israel at the 2001 European Championships in Tenerife.

To further exorcise the ghost of the singleton spade, our hero made sure to relate the "funny" story to his new partner, Yoram Aviram, on the flight there, especially since the venue's name, Tenerife, had some affinity with the Hebrew for "Give me a ruff" (in slang: "tenli ruff").

The tournament had its ups and downs, but the Israeli team managed a powerful surge in the last rounds to get back in contention for a qualifying spot to the Bermuda Bowl.

Curtain up on the match between Israel and Belgium, two rounds from the end of the tournament.

After a disappointing first half where they finished trailing by 20 IMPs, board 17 came up, North dealt with both sides being vulnerable.

Barel, sitting West, held:

♠ 2
♥ 10932
♦ 932
♣ K10853

He must have felt a little tingle when he noticed a certain singleton spade in his hand, but it all got a lot worse when the bidding started to take a dreadfully familiar course:

West	North	East	South
Barel		Aviram	
	1♥	2♠	3♦
Pass	3♠	Pass	5♦
Pass	6♦	All Pass	

With a horrible feeling of déjà-vu, Barel led his ♠2 taken perforce by dummy's ♠A as the following dummy appeared.

♠ A	
♥ KQJ85	
♦ 87	
♣ AQ976	
♠ 2	
♥ 10932	
♦ 932	
♣ K10853	
	N W E S

Declarer played a diamond to the ♦J, Aviram playing low, a club to the ♣Q, pitched a spade on the ♣A and played the last diamond from dummy taken with the ♦A by Aviram who then started thinking. Disbelief, amazement, panic: all those emotions were playing a macabre dance in our hero's mind. "Could it happen again? That same cursed singleton ♠2 clouding the thoughts of my partner giving away another slam and the qualification with it? My ruff!! I want my ruff! Give me my ruff!!!" This agony took several long minutes and finally Aviram, perhaps mindful of the stern warning which had ended the story narrated in the plane, played... the ♠K, the ♠J and then at last Barel got his ruff, 5 years too late maybe, but still enough for a gain of 14 Imps leading to a couple of more good results and a 20-10 win. Israel qualified for the Bermuda bowl, by 2 VPs. Maybe 2 is not such a bad number after all!