Improve your bridge with me

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When I am asked how to get better at bridge, I often quote that very well known line that a famous musician going to perform in a concert used when his driver, obviously new at his job, wanted advice on how to get to his destination, the Carnegie Hall: "Practice! Practice! Practice!".

Naturally practice works best if combined with the help of a kind soul willing to patiently show us the many errors and imprecisions that we are all inevitably guilty of when we have not yet mastered the basics of the game. Like in many other sports it is relatively easy to get better when we first start; eventually our rate of improvement will get slower and slower as we go on.

After a while it will become particularly tricky to make the quality leap from intermediate to advanced: that is not because the learning method we just explained does not work anymore but its successful application will now depend on finding an expert player willing to play with us and invest his time getting us to understand the finer points of the game: a much more difficult undertaking given the natural tendency of most experts to seek equally gifted partners to play with.

The idea of this column is to help to solve this problem by providing a virtual mentor for players to rely on when tackling everyday problems in hand evaluation, bidding, defense and play of the hand.

The bidding system used in all the hands will be a no-frills standard Israeli with 5 card majors, better minor and 15-17 NT.

Let us start with this interesting hand:

All Vul - S dealer

You sit South and you are dealt

♠ K7
♥ Q932
♦ A4
♣ KQ765

After you open 1♣, West interferes with 1♥ and your partner bids 2♦. East passes.

Is 2♦ forcing? What is your reply?

The change of suit by responder is always forcing even after an overcall. The correct reply is now 2NT.

Your partner raises you to 3NT and after everyone passes West leads the ♥6.

That is what you see:

♠ Q653
♥ A7
♦ KQJ109
♣ 109

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        N
      W   E
        S
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♠ K7
♥ Q932
♦ A4
♣ KQ765

What should you do now? Do you count your winners or your losers?

Since it is a NT contract we should concern only with counting our winners.

How many winners do you have?

We have 5 winners in diamonds and 2 in hearts. You play low from dummy and you take East's ♥J with your ♥Q.

Where can you find the two missing tricks needed to make the contract?

In theory we should be able to develop one trick in clubs and one in spades.

Can you see a problem with this plan?

Yes, of course. We only have one more heart stop and West has probably both missing aces since he interfered with such a poor suit. He will be able to promote his tricks in hearts before we can set up our 9th trick.
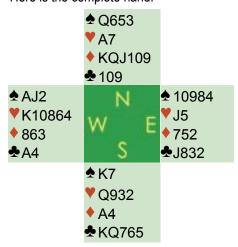
Is there any other chance?

No, finessing the ♣J cannot work since even if the finesse is on we do not have good enough communications to cash all the tricks we need. The spades however will give us a chance to make our contract if we can figure out how to play them in order to set up our two extra tricks.

Can you see how?

We have seen that the problem is that we cannot give the hand to West twice. What can West do, however, if we start by playing the ♠7 from hand? If he jumps in with his ♠A, he will set up both the ♠Q and the ♠K and we are home and dry. If he plays low, we can win the ♠Q and then play a club to set up our 9th trick with our heart stop still in place. The most that the opponents can do now is to cash a couple of spades and then surrender.

Here is the complete hand:

♠ Q653
♥ A7
♦ KQJ109
♣ 109

♠ AJ2
♥ K10864
♦ 863
♣ A4

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        N
      W   E
        S
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♠ 10984
♥ J5
♦ 752
♣ J832

♠ K7
♥ Q932
♦ A4
♣ KQ765

This ingenious way of playing a suit which puts the opponents to such an insoluble dilemma is known as "Morton's Coup", taking the name from the unscrupulous chancellor of King Henry VII, who was ruthless in extracting taxes from wealthy London merchants for the royal treasury. His approach was that if the merchants lived ostentatiously, they obviously had sufficient income to spare for the king. Alternatively, if they lived frugally, they must have substantial savings and could therefore afford to contribute to the king's coffers. In either case they were fixed by "Morton's Fork": damned if you do, damned if you don't!