

The expert game

By Rikard Greenberg House cat



It was a dark and stormy night, thunders and lightning striking repeatedly in a crescendo which barely allowed me to hear what was going on around me. The old, decrepit floor boards creaked under my paws with a noise all the more sinister because of the ghostly surroundings. I finally found Prissy. She was tied up to a chair next to my eternal foe, the evil Felix, surrounded by his minions. He glanced with disdain at my hateful eyes and asked: "Took you long enough to find me. So shall we make a game of it? Winner takes all, Prissy, your life or mine." I did not even bother to reply, I gave him my "Siberian chilling stare" and I sat down. Prissy was to be my partner, while one of Felix's stooges sat opposite him.

In this deadly critical time luck did not desert me as I slowly picked up an amazing collection:

♠ AKQJ10
♥ AK
♦ AKQ
♣ AKQ

I turned around to face Felix, sporting my best "devil may care" look and asked him: "So just this hand, right? Whoever gets a plus wins everything". When he confirmed the deal, I murmured softly my opening bid: "7NT." Prissy looked at me as if I were crazy. "Did you.. ahem...say 7NT???" I calmly nodded. To my surprise Felix doubled, I redoubled with relish and asked him to lead.

He quickly did so, dummy went down with the expected Yarborough and only then I noticed that the lead was a strange green card with the features of an ugly looking cat.

Puzzled, I looked at it for some time and only barely heard Prissy's asking: "Having no Felixes partner?"

That's when I usually wake up screaming.

Cold sweat running all over me, shaking with fear at the thought of my impending loss, this nightmare has been haunting me for the whole fortnight leading to the National Pairs Final. Well at least it should soon be over. In three hours time I will be sitting with my sweet Prissy amongst this country best bridge playing felines ready to make a fool of myself. My sweet darling will probably be so embarrassed by our poor results that she will never lay an eye on me again.

I have been trying to cushion the blow, to explain to her that, yes, we did very well up to now, but that we are really bungling amateurs and that there are cats who are playing bridge professionally, who breathe bridge day and night, against whom all we can hope for is to play our best and learn from our mistakes. Such cogent points would merely spark her gorgeous laughter and be dismissed with: "Come, come, Rik Rik, don't play modest with me, I know that you are the best player in the country by far, we will show these pro...professionals that they are the ones who need to take lessons!"

Hopeless, right?

I tried to convince myself that there might a little bit of truth in what she said, after all I am not a bad player and maybe with a bit of luck and some help from the opponents there might be a chance to scrape a face-saving average score. But I had to get to know better my competition so I started to frequent regularly the bridge evenings at the "Aristocats", trying to finally catch a glimpse of these famous experts I kept reading about in most of Hana's well stocked bridge library.

Finally one day I heard that Sly Sylvester would be visiting the club to autograph copies of his new book and to play in the evening duplicate.

I managed to convince Tipshon to play (I know, I know but one cannot be too

choosy in selecting last minute partners) and, after a few tins of tuna changed hands, we got a place at Sly's table.

The first hand was a 3NT contract in which Sly's partner, a grossly overweight angora, managed to take minimum tricks. I held back expecting a stream of reproaches but what I heard instead was: "Beautifully played, darling, it was only their excellent defense that stopped getting us a top. Keep it up."

I looked at him in amazement. Why did he not tell the silly angora how atrociously she had played? Isn't that what an expert player is supposed to do? Show people what they do wrong?

I shook my head in disbelief and picked up my hand:

♠ K976
♥ 653
♦ 1097
♣ 864

Truly exciting stuff, I thought to myself.

The bidding was very quick:

Dlr S – All Vul

West	North	East	South
Me	Angora	Tipshon	Sly
			2♣
Pass	2♦	Pass	3NT
Pass	4NT	Pass	6NT
Pass	Pass	Pass	

What to do, what to do... I led the ♦10 and this is what I could see:

♠ QJ84
♥ 84
♦ KJ5
♣ 9752

♠ K976
♥ 653
♦ 1097
♣ 864

N
W S E

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Sly let the $\heartsuit 10$ run to his $\heartsuit A$ and cashed AKQJ of clubs, my partner pitching a heart and a diamond. On the last club I discarded the $\heartsuit 3$ without too much of a thought, I was clearly going to make my $\spadesuit K$ and whatever else we had going for us would definitely not come from my hand. Declarer played a spade up, which I ducked. The $\spadesuit J$ won the trick and Sly continued with a spade to the $\spadesuit A$ and a spade out to my $\spadesuit K$, partner pitching another heart. I played back the $\heartsuit 9$ covered with the $\heartsuit K$ in dummy and the $\spadesuit Q$ was cashed. Tipshon now seemed to have some problems finding a discard, he squirmed and groaned and looked at me helplessly before finally pitching the $\heartsuit Q$. Sly quickly rattled off the Ace and King of hearts. When they fell the $\heartsuit J$ and the $\heartsuit 10$, he turned smiling to me and uncovering his last card, the $\heartsuit 2$, for his twelfth trick, told me: "Funny game, bridge. I bet you would never have guessed that the most important card in your hand was that $\heartsuit 3$ you discarded so quickly on my clubs." I was dumbstruck, then as I took in what he just said, I stared at him in awe: this genius had managed to set up a squeeze to make good the $\heartsuit 2$, the smallest pip he had in his hand!! When he played the $\spadesuit Q$ from dummy Tipshon had been left with $\heartsuit QJ10$ and $\heartsuit Q$, no wonder he had trouble deciding what to pitch!

This was the complete hand:

	\spadesuit QJ84	
	\heartsuit 84	
	\diamondsuit KJ5	
	\clubsuit 9752	
\spadesuit K976	N W E S	\spadesuit 102
\heartsuit 653		\heartsuit QJ1097
\diamondsuit 1097		\diamondsuit Q842
\clubsuit 864		\clubsuit 103
	\spadesuit A53	
	\heartsuit AK2	
	\diamondsuit A63	
	\clubsuit AKQJ	

How could I ever think of matching such talent? I was totally dejected and must have looked it when Sly continued: "Don't take it like that, old boy, do study the hand and learn from it, I have a feeling that one day you might be able to do just as well!" I don't know whether he meant what he said, but what I do know is that he managed to sell one more copy of his book!

Improve your bridge with me

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This combination may look the same to you but it is not:

	Dummy	
	A1032	
West		East
5		Q876
	Declarer	
	KJ94	

You still have the AKJ109 but they are split which reduces their power somewhat. For example, if you were to lead the jack in this situation and West was to play low in such a way that you knew East had the queen, you would no longer be able to avoid losing a trick. Play it out and you will see. You must go up with the ace and now after having wasted two honors you are dead if East covers the ten.

Therefore the only way you could afford to play the jack is if you knew from the bidding, perhaps, that the suit was divided 3-2 in which case you could afford to overtake the jack with the ace.

Let's look at a hand now:

\spadesuit K1052
\heartsuit Q73
\diamondsuit QJ98
\clubsuit K4
N W E S
\spadesuit AJ43
\heartsuit J65
\diamondsuit AK43
\clubsuit A3

The bidding:

West	North	East	South
			1NT
Pass	2 \clubsuit	Pass	2 \spadesuit
Pass	4 \spadesuit	Pass	Pass
Pass			

Opening lead: $\clubsuit Q$

We have eight trumps, missing the queen. What should we do? Which way should we finesse?

Let's take a look at the whole hand. We probably have three heart losers (if we have to lead the suit) and a possible trump loser. Why not force the opponents to lead hearts and forget about who has the queen of spades?

The correct play is to cash two rounds of spades and if the queen does not drop cash our club, and diamond winners. If a diamond is ruffed the opponent will have to play hearts or give us a ruff and sluff. Either way our troubles are over. In no event is it necessary to finesse for the queen of spades. If we had finessed unsuccessfully, a spade might be returned and now we would have to tackle hearts and probably go down on the hand.

Point to remember: When there is a suit that we wish the opponents to play for us, it often pays not to finesse trumps and, instead, use the trump suit as the throw-in suit. This play usually requires that at least one trump be left in both the declarer's hand and the dummy after the throw in play.



with Beltan Tonuk

Which of the following is more likely to happen?

Having 37 HCP

OR

Having all of the 13 cards in any suit

The probabilities are the same for both. To have 37 HCP you need AKQ in all suits and the 13th card can be any Jack. Therefore, there are only 4 permutations when that may happen, exactly the same chances of having all 13 cards in any suit.

ANSWER: