**Week 55**

This week a couple of interesting card play problems.

I am sometimes asked what makes a very good declarer and I think there are 2 key skills

1 A detailed knowledge of card play positions in terms of the percentage actions.

2 An ability to reconstruct the unseen hands which provides the vision to see the whole hand.

Try the following two problems

First you reach a poor 6h on the following hand

AQx

QT9x

Axx

KQx

KJx

AKJx

Jxx

Axx

the lead is CJ. It appears that we have an almost certain two diamond losers here what can be done?

This is a situation where technique and vision are key as declarer.

There are 2 lay outs where we can succeed .The first is when East holds KQx or KQxx(x) in diamonds since we can draw trumps  ( they are 3-2 ) cash our black suit winners ending in dummy and lead a low diamond from dummy in the following 4 card ending.

x

Axx

x

Jxx

The other option is to play for one hand to hold Kx or Qx in diamonds and draw trumps cash all the black suit winners and then play Ace other diamond the idea being to throw the defence on play forcing a ruff and discard. The defence can counter this when east has one of these holdings by throwing the honour under the ace thereby avoiding the impending endplay. Cashing the DA very early in the play is a good precursor with this line since it then requires alert defence to unblock for East.

Our second play problem finds us in 4s

98

QJTx

J9

AQxxx

AQJTxxxx

A

Qxx

x

The lead is a low heart to which east follows low and you win perforce.

When this problem has been given to the overwhelming majority of players they now lead a diamond to the 9 at trick 2.

This loses to the ten and a trump is returned and with Kx offside in spades and the club finesse also wrong the contract goes one off.

It is a lack of appreciation of the defence's problem here by declarer .Try a club to the ace and the D9 from dummy .East holds AT8xx in diamonds and if they rise with the ace to play a spade we make a 2nd diamond trick by force whereas if they cover with the ten partner wins the Queen with the king but is unable to play a spade from Kx so we can safely negotiate the diamond ruff in dummy for our 10th trick.

An incredibly simple play but difficult to see because players are not putting themselves in the position of the defenders nor imagining what might go wrong.

**Week 54**

This week we have a play problem which came up in a recent league match and was well played by both declarers.

Txx
Axx
Axx
QJTx

AKx
Qxx
QJx
Axxx

You reach 3nt after LHO has over called 1s and the lead is SQ. How to continue?
You must win with the ten in dummy. You clearly wish to take the club finesse for a possible 4 tricks but the entries to dummy are a problem.

You try the DQ keen to get a cover from the left and lo and behold you wish is granted (it would have been better defence to duck but not easy) so you win and try the CQ which holds so you try the finesse again and LHO discards a diamond.

So you have 5 tricks in the minors and 3 in the majors and so you require one more trick and the main chance is to find the HK well placed so that the HQ scores. Is this likely though?

Remember the bidding LHO over called 1spade and so far  has shown up with SQ and SJ and DK that means they had bid on a 6 or 7 count if the HK is well placed for you so the odds are the overcaller holds the HK.

Can we find a way of endplaying our LHO to force them to play a heart?
So if we cash the other diamond winner and the 3rd club and then play top spade  and exit with a spade we have an end play against LHO
They held

QJ9xx
Kxx
KTxx
X

So the throw in and end play is needed with the HK badly placed .
The key to hand was the bidding since we could deduce that the HK was wrong and play accordingly. Remember although intervention disrupts the opposition bidding it makes life easier for declarer since it often provides valuable information about the location of the missing high cards.

**Week 53**

Which of the following hands do you prefer?

Jxx

Kxxx

AKx

Jxx

Xx

Axx

AJTxx

QTx

We will return to the above hands later on but the subject today is the subtle art of upgrading and down grading hands. I will give you two pairs of hands

 QJTx

Xx

AKQx

Xxx

A9x

AQx

Xx

AKQxx

 A superb slam with the combined 31 points especially if played by the hand with AQx in hearts.

 Then

 9xxx

KQx

Jxx

Xxx

AJxx

Axx

AKx

Kxx

A combined 25 points but game is hopeless and if you uncover your spade fit a minus score is guaranteed.

 So what conclusions may we draw from the above in our valuation of balanced hands?

 There are three useful additional tests to assist in valuation besides the pure point count

 1 Do you have a 5 card suit? Any balanced hand with a 5 card suit of reasonable quality is worth an extra point so for example the 19 count with AKQxx in clubs should upgrade to 20. I like to upgrade any balanced hand which is maximum in points and includes a reasonable 5 card suit but down grade any minimum hand without a five card suit which is 4 3 3 3.

 2 Do you have good intermediates nines and tens which give the hand body? A very good example is holdings including the ten such as AJTx or KJTx both are undervalued by the point count.

 3 Do you have joined up or isolated honours? If you hold contiguous holdings (like the 48 states of the USA not Alaska or Hawaii) then your hand is better so KQx is a better hand than Kxx  and Qxx in different suits.

 A 4th factor is shape. The worst shape in Bridge is 4 3 3 3 so this shape should be downgraded so with such a hand and 15 points open 1nt playing weak no-trumps.

Returning to the two hands we gave at the start the second hand is better than the first despite their respective point counts.