

Board of the Week 16

By Dick Chapman

In my one e-mail exchange with Eddie Kantar, I asked permission to use one of his deals in a mini-lesson. He said I could use anything he published, as he was retired and didn't mind his work being re-taught. The following hand looks like something he would present. It involves multiple lines of play, one of his favorite subjects. But in reality it came from actual play in my online foursome (which I have enjoyed for 23 years). Here's the deal:

	♠9863 ♥A ♦9752 ♣AJ109		
♠ ♥ ♦ ♣	D: S V: B	♠ ♥ ♦ ♣	
	♠AK2 ♥1085 ♦AKQ ♣K754		
South	West	North	East
1♣	Pass	1♠	Pass
2NT	Pass	3NT	All pass

In most printed deals, you see the dealer and vulnerability. What you do not see, but should in many cases, is the form of scoring. Today it's a pairs game scored at imps.

2NT is a gamble but you have to bid something with those 19 points. 3NT is a gamble but nothing else looked right. Of course you get a heart lead. As Kantar might have said, "I recommend you win this trick." Now what? Think before reading further.

You have 8 top winners. If you lose the lead you are going down. You could get lucky and drop the club queen doubleton. You could take a 50% club finesse in one direction or the other. Any other thoughts?

At the table, Declarer went to hand with a diamond and took a club finesse through West. It worked, and Declarer racked up 4 clubs, 4 diamonds, 2 spades, and 1 heart for 11 tricks. How Declarer knew to come to hand and go back towards dummy's AJ is beyond me. I do know that I want this declarer standing next to me at the casino.

Did you spot something in the statement of the tricks won? Let me repeat: 4 clubs, 4 diamonds, 2 spades, and 1 heart. Wait, what? FOUR diamonds?

Here is the layout: (next column)

	♠9863 ♥A ♦9752 ♣AJ109	
♠Q74 ♥J9763 ♦J86 ♣Q8	D: S V: B	♠J105 ♥KQ42 ♦1043 ♣632
	♠AK2 ♥1085 ♦AKQ ♣K754	

At imps scoring, you want to take the safest line to make the contract. Overtricks are nice, but safety is more important. Do you see a better line of play?

Declarer should test diamonds first. If they break 3-3 (as they did in this hand), there is no need to take the club finesse. Just run winners: 2 spades, 1 heart, 4 diamonds, 2 clubs. Cash out and move to the next board. Yes, you pay 2 imps to those who got lucky and made 660. You collect 12 or more imps from anyone who finessed the wrong way and went down. At imps, be safe!

A 3-3 diamond break is about 36%. In the other 64% of the cases, you have to take a finesse. Let's say you win 50% of your finesses (more, since none of mine work, ha-ha), so that's 36% + (50% x 64%) for a total of ~68% chance of making.

So what would you do in a matchpoint pairs game? I would still play it safe. At the club level, you don't have to make brilliant (or lucky) plays to win. All you have to do is reduce or eliminate silly errors. Besides, if you find diamonds dividing 3-3, you still have a chance for 11 tricks: play 2 top clubs; if the queen drops (as it does today), there you are, with no finesse. Save your heroics for other boards.

Let's say you don't have three top diamonds and you must take a club finesse. One method is to put the jack of clubs on the table at trick 2 and attempt to get some table feel. You do this at your own peril! But it's legal and ethical to attempt to find the queen through a flicker of hesitation. No flicker? Overtake with the king and go back toward the Ace-ten. A defensive note: if you have a finessable queen, you have to be smooth. It's fairly easy to do this when you see J10xx in dummy, but get in the habit of planning your defense during the auction and at trick 1 of every board. If you always study dummy before playing to trick 1, you don't send unethical signals to partner and you don't give a tell to declarer. When subsequent tricks are played, it's easier to play in tempo.

See you at the club. And start reading Kantar's books. We are going to miss his brilliant (and funny) writing.