The King Is Dead

by Rich Waugh

This may be the best known deal in the history of world championships. It is from the finals of the 1975 Bermuda Bowl. The Italians played the Americans and were leading by 12 IMPs going to the last five hands.

Board 22
East Deals
E-W Vul

	♠ Q J 8 ♥ A J 9 6 5 ♦ K 8 2 ♣ A Q	
♠ 7 6 5 2 ♥ K 4 3 2 ♦ J 5 3 ♣ K 10	N W E S	♠ 4 3 ♥ Q 10 8 7 ♦ Q 10 6 4 ♣ 7 5 4
	♠ A K 10 9 ♥ — ♦ A 9 7 ♣ J 9 8 6 3 2	

The great Italian player Giorgio Belladonna was sitting South, and Benito Garozzo, North. On a less than ideal and lengthy auction, Belladonna ended up in 7♣, not a good contract. Belladonna was astonished when he saw dummy's club holding.

Eddie Kantar, was sitting West. In one of his many books, he relates the story in a chapter called "The Short Life of the King of Clubs."

As Kantar explains it, he knew the match was close, and before dummy came down, he was optimistic. Here he sat, with the ♣K safely (he thought) tucked behind the original club bidder. He was going to be a world champion! And then the dummy hit the table.

Belladonna, of course, played the hand the only way he could, hoping for the doubleton ♣K on his left. He won the opening lead, led a club to the ♣Q and held his breath as Kantar's partner, Billy Eisenberg, played low. The ♣A brought down the ♣K and brought home the contract. When the ♣K dropped, Belladonna, a devout Catholic, made the sign of the cross and smiled.

At the other table, the Americans with the North-South hands, played six notrump, making. The Italians won the world championship. Down one in 7♣ would have cost 17 international match points and the championship.

When the Americans compared scores and discovered they had lost thanks to this sickening hand, team member Bob Hamman quipped, "This calls for a human sacrifice." Then he chucked the ♣K off the balcony!

So what do you think? Just bad luck? Certainly even if declarer had seven clubs to the ♣J, he wasn't going to play for a singleton ♣K offside, so what if, with nothing to lose, Kantar had played the ♣K on the first round of the suit? If Belladonna thought it was a singleton he could have played for a specific lie of the cards to try to pick up the four clubs to the ♣10 that East supposedly started with, a line of play that would fail on the actual lie of the cards.

Many years ago, Belladonna was asked that very question. What if Kantar had played the ♣K first. Replied Belladonna, "The Americans would have been world champions."

There's always the chance to make your own luck.