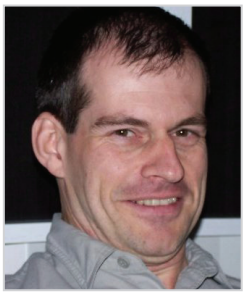
State Individual 2016

BY JULIAN FOSTER



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Recently I bought *"Last Call in the Menagerie"*, the last collection of Victor Mollo's fabulous stories. The majority of the stories in this book seemed to feature the Rueful Rabbit who, no matter what he does, is always protected by his guardian angel. At the moment it seems I have a similar angel looking over me when it comes to the Individual!

Individuals are usually fairly small events which you enter alone and play with multiple partners who will frequently range widely in skill level. There is obviously a huge amount of luck involved, not only around who you play which boards with, but what your partners do! You have far less control over what happens than usual and of course no-one has time to agree any complex system. The scoring is matchpoints.

Session one

The first example of my guardian angel was the very first board. I was playing with a lady I had never met before but who said she was relatively novice. We had a routine auction to 3NT which she declared. The hands were:

Declarer - Dummy

	♠ A53 ♥ JT3 ♦ K92 ♣ KJ97	
♠ K7 ♥ 942 ♦ AJ643 ♣ AQ6		

A spade was led, she ducked the first (probably not best given the risk of a ♥ switch) and then won the ♠ continuation in dummy. You have 8 tricks and have avoided a heart lead or switch. Your obvious source of more tricks is diamonds. So what do you do? The normal way to play the suit is a simple finesse playing the K and then low to the J. With very little hesitation, instead my partner ran the ♦J. Normally that would be inferior. This time, however, the suit was laid out this way:

	♦ AJ653	
♦ T8	N W E S	♦ Q75
	♦ K92	

The "normal" line loses the finesse to the Q and may go off if the opponents now find the heart switch. Leading the J (or A then J) is the only way to make 5 tricks in the suit as the 108 get squashed! This play resulted in 11 tricks and a virtual top. Why did she do this? I have absolutely no idea!

Board 10 was interesting:

Board 10
Dealer E | Vul All

	♠ 6 ♥ J2 ♦ Q654 ♣ AQT864	
♠ JT983 ♥ A965 ♦ JT8 ♣ 3	N W E S	♠ AQ52 ♥ T743 ♦ K73 ♣ J7
	♠ K74 ♥ KQ8 ♦ A92 ♣ K952	

W	N	E	S
		P	1NT
P	2S	P	3C
P	P	P	

NS against us bid 1NT – 2♠ – 3♣ – P. I was quite surprised when I saw dummy as trying 3NT seems pretty reasonable. 3♣ made 10 tricks and it appeared that 3NT would go down on the ♠J lead as there are only 8 tricks. So I mentally thought it was a bad board as most people would be doing that. But 3NT is in fact cold! After the ♠ lead declarer runs 6 rounds of clubs and poor W has to find 5 discards. If W pitches a ♠ the defence can no longer cash enough spades to beat 3NT so declarer can simply set up his 9th trick by playing ♥s. But if W pitches 5 red cards they will come down to ♥A and ♦J. Now declarer runs the ♦Q from dummy to pin that J. The ♦9 will become the 9th trick.

When I partnered Pauline Gumby she took an aggressive action which caused us to reach a good sacrifice.

Board 13
Dealer N | Vul All

	♠ AKQ5432 ♥ QT ♦ A9 ♣ 74	
♠ 7 ♥ J8642 ♦ T65 ♣ KQ65	N W E S	♠ T ♥ 53 ♦ KQJ432 ♣ AT98
	♠ J986 ♥ AK97 ♦ 87 ♣ J32	

W	N	E	S
	1S	2D	3S
X	4S	5C	X
P	P	P	

Our auction proceeded 1♠ 2♦ 3♠ X 4♠ 5♣ X end. Pauline's takeout double of 3♠ as west is quite aggressive but caused me to bid 5♣. This only went 2 off for -500 and a complete top when everyone else was making 650 in 4♠. My guardian angel ensured diamonds were 2-2. Had they been 3-1 I would have gone for 800 and scored a bottom instead of a top. Such are the fine margins of matchpoints!

Warren Lazer played board 18 well.

Board 18
Dealer E | Vul N-S

	♠ T52 ♥ A54 ♦ AT9 ♣ J653	
♠ 86 ♥ J8 ♦ Q8732 ♣ KQ84	N W E S	♠ QJ974 ♥ T9 ♦ J65 ♣ T97
	♠ AK3 ♥ KQ7632 ♦ K4 ♣ A2	

Most tables reached 4♥ played by S. 12 tricks are fairly easy on a ♦ lead or the ♣K lead. But Warren received a ♠ lead. He won, drew trumps and played ♣A and another. W won and continued ♠s. Now, however, Warren just ran all his trumps and reached this position:

	♠ ♥ ♦ AT9 ♣ J	
♠ ♥ ♦ Q87 ♣ K	N W E S	♠ Q ♥ ♦ J65 ♣
	♠ 3 ♥ 2 ♦ K4 ♣	

When he led the last ♥, W had to keep the ♣K so discarded a ♦. Warren now discarded the ♣J and it was E's turn to be in trouble. Discarding the ♠Q would set the 3 up so he too discarded a ♦. Now the ♦ suit ran and the ♦9 was the 12th trick. A textbook double squeeze.

Session two

Early in the 2nd session all 4 players at my table probably took an action they regretted!

Board 3
Dealer S | Vul E-W

	♠ T94 ♥ AKJT ♦ T7 ♣ AKJ4	
♠ KQJ8653 ♥ Q62 ♦ ♣ 986	N W — E S	♠ 7 ♥ 53 ♦ KQ6543 ♣ T752
	♠ A2 ♥ 9874 ♦ AJ982 ♣ Q3	

W	N	E	S
			P
1S (?)	X (?)	1NT (?)	2D (?)
2S	P	P	3H

Our auction went P 1♠(?) X(?) 1NT(?) 2♦(?) 2♠ P P 3♥ all pass.

South passed as dealer (these days many people might choose to open). My partner opened 1♠ (most people would surely choose to pre-empt), Pauline Gumby doubled (not ideal with only 2 diamonds but it seems reasonable to do something), I bid 1NT (but probably should pass). Pauline was no doubt regretting her X when South bid 2♦ (this is a big underbid – see note below for why). It was my turn to regret my bid when partner bid 2♠ (although she would probably do this anyway whether or not I had bid). After 2 passes, south caught up a bit (but not enough) by bidding 3♥ which became the final contract. They therefore still missed game although avoided playing in a very silly 2♦ contract!

Why is South's 2♦ a big underbid? Because you have almost an opening hand and partner has doubled 1♠. You need to tell partner that. You are no longer forced to bid after my 1NT so your 2♦ is a "free bid" but it still only shows a hand that wants to play there opposite a regular takeout double – here you are actually closer to a game force (note the difference if I had passed – in that case south might have had to respond 2♦ to the double on absolutely nothing; accordingly bidding 2♦ on this hand would then be an even greater underbid).

My guardian angel did let me down spectacularly on this one though:

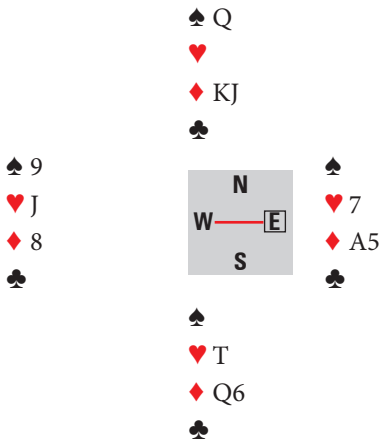
Board 6
Dealer E | Vul E-W

	♠ AQT3 ♥ 4 ♦ KJT973 ♣ 65	
♠ 942 ♥ J965 ♦ 8 ♣ Q8432	N W — E S	♠ K6 ♥ AKQ7 ♦ A542 ♣ AKJ
	♠ J875 ♥ T832 ♦ Q6 ♣ T97	

W	N	E	S
		2C	P
3C	3S	6NT	

I was South. We bid 2♣ P 3♣ 3♠ 6NT. West apologised as he put dummy down having realised his 3♣ bid was showing much more than he actually had. Why my partner bid 3♠ and not 3♦ I have no idea. Nevertheless I led a ♠ to the A and another. Warren Lazer as East now ran his ♣s and I had to make 2 discards. Rightly or wrongly I chose to discard both my remaining ♠s as I thought 10xxx in ♥s might still be important and didn't want to discard a ♦ from Qx. Partner could throw ♦s easily enough. Now Warren ran 4 more heart tricks and partner had to make 3 more discards.

The end position came down to this:



When Warren played ♥J partner had one more discard to make. Unfortunately he chose to discard his ♠Q so Warren could now cash the ♠9 for his 12th trick! Partner's argument was *"I had to guard my ♦K"*.

This disaster actually contains a couple of important principles to help discard better:

a) Guard what you can see and trust partner to look after the rest. In the endgame here, partner has seen me discard ♠s. Therefore he has to keep the ♠Q to beat the 9. That means he just has to hope I can help him in ♦s and must come down to singleton K. If I can't help in diamonds then it's too bad – either he has been genuinely squeezed or I am the one who has made a mistake.

b) Work together. Defenders often need to guard one suit each and usually one partner has to make tricky discard decisions before the other. Here it was me. I had chosen to give up ♠s and keep ♦Qx. Once I had done that, partner needs to follow that line of defence. It didn't actually matter on this hand which of us kept a spade winner and 1 diamond and which kept 2 diamonds – provided we didn't both do the same! Here we would also have been fine had I kept a ♠ and bared my ♦Q, partner keeping ♦Kx.

Note that I can work out that I need partner to have ♦K (as otherwise the contract has 12 top tricks), and partner can also work out I need to have the ♦Q (otherwise the contract will also be cold via the ♦ finesse).

George Finikiotis found a very nice play when we played together. We defended 4♠ by W.

The key side suit is diamonds and it was laid out like this:

George was N and when he was in he found the switch of the ♦10. This is an example of an advanced play known as a *"surround play"*. When declarer played low, I could do likewise to force the A and set up 2 ♦ tricks. But declarer is no better off covering. After ♦10 J K A, George remains with a Q8 tenace sitting over declarer's 93. The 10 effectively "surrounds" the 9 rendering it neutral. Had George led the 8, I would have had to play the K to stop the 9 scoring. Now the J sits over the Q and we only get one trick. If he leads the Q to the A, the 108 do remain over the 9 but the suit becomes "frozen" (that is neither side can lead it without giving a trick away).

More luck followed in this round. You hold:

Board 19
Dealer S | Vul E-W

♠ A973
♥ AK
♦ AK3
♣ K753

W	N	E	S
			P
P	1H	X	P
?			

It goes P P 1♥ to you. You double and it goes P 2♦ P back to you. Now what? Playing with my regular partner I might now bid 2NT (we play a 1NT overcall as 15-18 so X then NT is about 19-21). That allows partner to pass if they have nothing. Here, however, playing with someone much less experienced I decided to just take the pressure off and bid 3NT. Had I been Karapet (read Mollo books if you don't understand this reference!) partner would put down a Yarborough and I would have probably gone -200. Instead, today the guardian angel gave me a dummy of: ♠ - ♥J964 ♦Q108764 ♣1086. Inexplicably after the ♥5 lead on which I played the 6 from dummy, north holding

Q10873 played the Q at trick 1 (the 7 would have done considering you can see every card between the 5 and the Q). This meant I now scored 6 diamonds, ♠A and 3 hearts (instead of 2) for +630.

Board 20
Dealer W | Vul E-W

♠ A87
♥ Q86
♦ KT82
♣ Q62

W	N	E	S
1H	P	?	

Partner opened 1♥ (5 card major). What do you respond? The standard system card we were all playing didn't actually specify major suit raises very clearly at all. There didn't seem to be any bid to show an invitational heart raise! What's more 2NT was described as a natural balanced invite. So I chose to do that (I admit this was one hand I did perhaps consciously "hog" a little as I could obviously have raised ♥s – having said that, my hand did look very no-trump suitable). Partner passed and I thought I had finally got what I deserved when he put down:

♠ KT52
♥ AT954
♦ Q94
♣ K

The defence duly started with a ♣ to the K and A and knocked out my ♣Q. Clearly 2NT is a poor spot and 3♥ would have been vastly better. Anyway all I could really do was try and set up my ♥s and hope that some other people were in the same position as me or that there was some miracle blockage in clubs. I tried ♥Q which was covered so I was now able to win A and knock out the ♥J. At this point the defence (whose clubs were 4-5) can cash 2 more clubs and the ♦A to beat 2NT by 1. This will be a horrible result for us because 3♥ is almost certainly making (losing a trick in each suit). But my guardian angel obviously got into the mind of my LHO because instead of doing that he continued ♦A and another. Now I made an overtrick!

The penultimate round I was once again playing against Warren Lazer. The first hand presented me with a mild ethical dilemma. You hold ♠103 ♥J8732 ♦AQ104 ♣AQ. Everyone is vul. Partner deals and opens 1♦. You bid 1♥ and LHO jumps to 2♠ which is passed back to you. What would you do? I think I would normally double in case partner wants to penalise 2♠. If he doesn't I can raise his ♦s later. However at the table my partner had thought for a fair while over 2♠ before passing.

There is a lot of misunderstanding about hesitations during auctions. You sometimes hear players claim that you are *"not allowed"* to bid after your partner has hesitated. That is completely wrong. If you have a bid that is clear cut, you are perfectly within your rights to make that bid whether partner has thought for 10 seconds or 10 minutes.

What you are not allowed to do is to make a bid that might reasonably have been suggested by the hesitation. Even though I would normally reopen with a double here I thought that partner's pause over 2♠ changed things. I felt it could well imply he has ♠s (making a reopening double more attractive). Hence I felt I could no longer double.

But this is a good example of why the "not allowed to bid" claim is nonsense. As soon as partner opened 1♦ I knew I would be forcing to game as I am looking at 13 points with ♦ support. The pause over 2♠ has not changed that. Accordingly it is perfectly reasonable to still force to game. I chose to bid 3♠. Partner bid 3NT and made 10 tricks (he actually had Axx A xxxxx K10xx so didn't really have any reason to pause over 2♠ at all!)

On the 2nd board Warren found a perfectly reasonable double of my 4♥ contract but, the day going the way it was, I turned out to be cold for 10 tricks. Our 3rd board then showed how important the vulnerability is at matchpoints:

Board 22
Dealer E | Vul E-W

	♠ 7 ♥ J95 ♦ AQJ76 ♣ J873	
♠ J865 ♥ 643 ♦ KT4 ♣ AQ6	N W — E S	♠ AKT942 ♥ 7 ♦ 952 ♣ T42
	♠ Q3 ♥ AKQT82 ♦ 83 ♣ K95	

W	N	E	S
		2S	3H
3S	4H	P	P
4S	X		

Everything was fine up to the final 4♠ bid by Warren's partner. This is a poor bid. Vul against not is not the time to be sacrificing at matchpoints. Just 2 off will be -500 and worth more to the opponents than their game. West has said enough when they bid 3♠, they should simply pass 4♥ on the next round.

I think many players sacrifice too much. For a sacrifice (let's assume against a game) to be successful at matchpoints, all three of these conditions have to be satisfied:

a) Your contract has to be going for less than the value of their game (that means 1 off when Vul v NV, 2 off at equal vulnerability, 3 off at NV v Vul);
b) Their game has to be making;
c) They have to be bidding their game at other tables (this is often the one people forget – going -300 against their -620 still won't score any matchpoints if everyone else is scoring -170! You are better off defending and hoping their game goes off.)

Here (c) was looking OK but (a) is dubious - the risk of going 2 off is quite high. (b) is dubious too - 4♥ could easily have been going off (e.g. if partner had 2 clubs not 3 then 4♥ would be beaten on ♠ to A, ♣ through and a ♣ ruff).

Partner led ♥A, I played ♥J which I hoped he would interpret as suit preference asking for a ♦ switch. He duly played ♦8 and I won the J. At this point I could have cashed ♦A and given partner a ♦ ruff but there seemed no rush to do that (he didn't absolutely have to have 2 diamonds anyway, he might have been switching from 98x in which case this defence would look pretty stupid). The only thing a ♦ loser could be discarded on is a ♣ and I had 4 of those myself so that seemed unlikely. So I just tried another ♥. Warren ruffed, drew trumps then tried a ♣ finesse and the A (hoping S had Kx as he could then throw me in on the 3rd round of ♣s to force me to give a ruff/discard or give the ♦K a trick). But that was no good so we duly collected 1♥, 3♦ and 1♣ for 2 off, +500 and a top.

My final round was actually a disaster but I was already too far ahead of the field to be caught by then. Congratulations to all the prize winners and thanks to Matthew McManus for directing, Liz Fanos for convening on the day and George Finikiotis for acting as a stand-in to make up the numbers to a round number of tables.