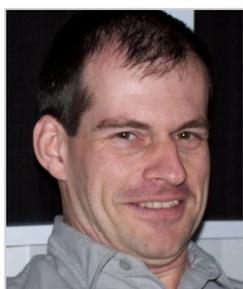


ANC Butler Pairs

A wild ride!

by JULIAN FOSTER



*Julian Foster
NSWBA Chairman*

The ANC Butler pairs championship was a bit of a roller-coaster ride for us this year. Not only due to the largest number of freak distributional hands I think I have ever seen, but some wild scores as well! The qualifying was a pleasant change from the tired old semi-random Swiss format. Instead, it was held over 4 sessions playing 3 boards against every other pair (and one pair twice). With separate NS and EW fields, your aim was to finish in the top 10 — a much fairer method.

We started with two small plus sessions to be lying 12th, but session 3 turned into the set from hell, which saw us get everything wrong, come rock bottom last with -53 IMPs, and plummet to 26th place overall. At that point we were starting to discuss which of the consolation events we would play in. But one should never give up at this game! Session 4 was the complete opposite – everything we did worked, all our opponents seemed to choose our table to have their accidents and we ended up with an astonishing +108 IMPs to rise like Lazarus to 7th place! The very last board was typical:

I was dealer and held ♠93 ♥AQJ63 ♦K1095 ♣KJ. After an uncontested auction 1♥-1♠-2♦-4♣ (splinter) it seemed my ♣KJ had become virtually worthless, so you would think I should try to sign off with 5♦. However, the way everything had been going I tried a more encouraging 4♦, over which partner promptly bid Blackwood and put me in 6♦.

Dummy had ♠AK642 ♥K8 ♦AJ876 ♣7, so slam broadly depended on finding the ♦Q (with some extra chances if the ♣A is not cashed).

But I didn't give you the lead... for some inexplicable reason LHO chose to lead his singleton trump, picking up his partner's Qxx, and I could now make all 13 tricks for +940. Had the same hand happened in session 3, no doubt our opponents would have cashed the ♣A and I would then have got the trumps wrong!

Throughout the Qualifying and the Final, there seemed to be an unusually high number of extremely distributional hands. One of the largest freaks was in the Qualifying, when I held:

♠J9 ♥AKQ986 ♦AQ6 ♣Q6

RHO passed, I opened 1♥ and partner responded 1♠. Being too good for a non-forcing 3♥ I invented a 2♦ rebid and heard 2♠ from partner. I bid 4♠ which ended the auction. Partner's hand? Not one you will see every day! In fact most of us will probably never see a hand like it again.

♠Q75432 ♥- ♦- ♣K1087432

4♠ went a quiet 1 off at our table but, as you might expect, there was a huge range of weird scores — ranging all the way up to 7NTx!

The Final is a long hard grind over 4 days, with a full round robin of 12 board matches against all 19 other pairs. The field was pretty strong and that showed up in the datums. Normally, playing Butler IMPs in an average or weak field you want to hold the cards, as bidding a cold vulnerable game will gain you several imps (the datum is always lower than game as several pairs always miss it or go off in it). That's why it is the format of the game I like least. Here, though, that didn't happen – most of the time such boards were flat.

We started poorly, getting several expensive slam decisions wrong, and were entrenched in the bottom half, dropping down to 18th after match 6 before our roller-coaster turned again and we started to climb back up.

Another of the distributional freak hands helped:

Dealer N | Vul N-S

<p>♠ AT986543 ♥ K4 ♦ A ♣ 94</p>	<p>♠ K ♥ T9876 ♦ KQT952 ♣ 2</p>	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; text-align: center; width: 40px; height: 40px;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td> </td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		<p>♠ 2 ♥ AQJ3 ♦ J876 ♣ T763</p>
	N											
W		E										
	S											
	<p>♠ QJ7 ♥ 52 ♦ 32 ♣ AKQJ85</p>											

W	N	E	S
	P	P	1C
4S	4NT	P	5S
P	6C	X	P
P	6D	X	//

8
11 8
13

We sat EW and the bidding was as shown above. Presumably north meant 4NT as two suits but South thought it was Blackwood for clubs. The resulting carnage was -1700. To NS's immense credit, neither said a word and merely got on with the next hand. I am sure we all know pairs who would be screaming at each other for the rest of the session!

We play a weak NT which can create some swings as it's not so common in Australia. Yes, it can get doubled and go for a large penalty, but in the real world, I find that almost never happens. At the same time it has two great advantages. The first is its frequency. 11-14 balanced hands come up far more often than 15-17. In one match it came up 3 hands running!

On the first, opponents had a mix-up. One doubled meaning it as hearts and another but their partner thought it was penalties. The result was 2 doubled overtricks and +580. Although we do make 4♠ for +620 we have 11 points opposite 11 so the field was not bidding it.

On the second, it was doubled again (this time they both knew it was penalties!) Although I could have made it, the line I chose went 1 off for a small part-score swing out.

The 3rd hand showed the second (and less appreciated) advantage of the weak NT- its pre-emptive effect:

Dealer E | Vul N-S

<p>♠ 8543 ♥ Q6 ♦ T83 ♣ T942</p>	<p>♠ K2 ♥ 8532 ♦ A542 ♣ KJ3</p>	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; text-align: center; width: 40px; height: 40px;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td> </td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		<p>♠ QJ6 ♥ KJ9 ♦ 97 ♣ AQ876</p>
	N											
W		E										
	S											
	<p>♠ AT97 ♥ AT74 ♦ KQJ6 ♣ 5</p>											

W	N	E	S
		1NT	P
P	//		

11
2 13
14

NS are vulnerable and East as dealer opens 1NT (11-14). As West I was fully expecting to hear a double for the third time running but, to my pleasant surprise it was passed out. It drifted 2 off but minus 100 was a great score with most other tables making game with the NS cards.

NS make both 4♥ and 3NT but which of them should act over 1NT? It is very tough — either could be walking into a bloodbath as West could easily be sitting with most of the values their partner has. Standard auctions start 1♣ X so the heart fit and game values are easily found.

Even the ultimate winners Mike Ware and Pete Hollands were not immune from disasters – this was another freak hand that caused chaos!

Dealer E | Vul N-S

♠ 82	♠ AK94										
♥ 9762	♥ KT8543										
♦	♦ 5										
♣ KQJT932	♣ 75										
		♠ T3									
	<table style="border-collapse: collapse; text-align: center; width: 40px;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td> </td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♥ AQJ
	N										
W		E									
	S										
		♦ AKQT96									
		♣ A6									
	♠ QJ765										
	♥										
	♦ J87432										
	♣ 84										

W	N	E	S
		2NT	P
4C	P	4H	P
6C	P	6D	P
6H	X	P	P
7C	P	P	X

11
 2 13
 14

4♣ was meant as a slam try in clubs but East thought it showed hearts. We could have taken 7♣ 4 off for +800 but partner cashed both ♠AK before giving me a heart ruff so we only got +500. Despite their immensely powerful hands, the highest contract EW can make is 3♣! With a combined 14 points NS can do better — they make 3♠!

That match was particularly wild. In 12 boards as South, besides this 5062 hand I also held a 1165, a 1273 and a 6610. Not content with that I then found myself looking at a 2090 shape!!

♠106 ♥- ♦AKQJ98752 ♣52 After 1♣ on my right I just bid an immediate 5♦ which was doubled for 1 off. Although EW can make 5♥ it was impossible to bid sensibly. ♥